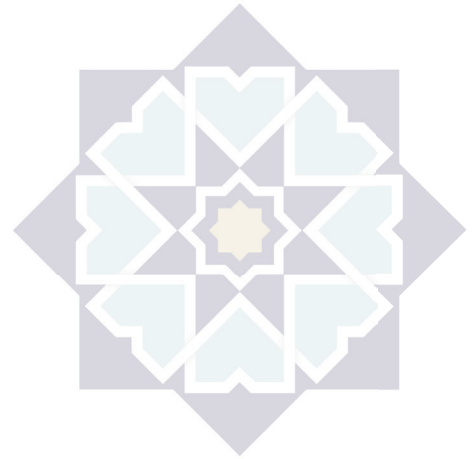


CSPS Dialogue Series

No. 1, December 2022



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How does it feel to be a problem?

| Sindre Bangstad



CSPS
CENTRE FOR STUDIES OF
PLURAL SOCIETIES



Muslims in European Citizenry: How does it feel to be a problem?

Prof Sindre Bangstad is a Stanley J. Kelley Jr. Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Teaching of Anthropology at Princeton University, USA, and author of *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia* (Zed Books, 2014). He can be reached out at sb9325@princeton.edu

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“How does it feel to be a problem?”, the great US sociologist and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1903) famously asked in *The Souls of Black Folk*. According to distinguished historians of racism such as Francisco Bethencourt (2013) and George M. Fredrickson (2002), the first demonstrable iteration of racism in Europe occurred in the context of the Catholic Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula (present day Spain and Portugal) in the 13th and 14th century, known as *La Reconquista*, and involved the targeting of Muslim and Jewish *moriscos* and *conversos* who under threat of torture or expulsion had converted to Catholicism in the course of the Catholic reconquest of the Almoravid empire of *al-Andalus* and their descendants for centuries to come. These *moriscos* and *conversos*, and their descendants through the patriline were for centuries barred from public and religious office, were forced to wear public markers of their status as second-class citizens, and had to live in segregated residential quarters.

Now, what is noteworthy for our purposes here in this specific case, is that there was no concept of biological race in existence in the Spanish language at the time: *la raza* or race was a feudal concept which referred to hereditary nobility or caste, if you so prefer. Which is not to say that the racism and discrimination against Muslim *moriscos* and Jewish *conversos* was purely cultural and non-biological at this particular historical conjuncture. For the key concept motivating and legitimating this racist and discriminatory treatment of Muslim and Jewish



descendants was after all *limpieza de sangre* or “purity of blood.” In which only “Christian blood” - what on earth that may actually be, for those of us who abide by science rather than racial mythologies, was sufficiently “pure” to be trustworthy. It is not as if the *moriscos* and *conversos* accepted this state of affairs without resistance: look closely at the histories of Muslim and Jewish migrations in and around the Mediterranean basin (North Africa, Turkey, Palestine, Israel and Egypt), and you will soon enough discover that hundreds of thousands resisted this racist regime by fleeing from the remains of *al-Andalus*. Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates (2015), the great African-American author and public intellectual writes in his book *Between The World And Me*, that:

“Race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the preeminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society and that they signify deeper attributes, which are indelible - this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.”

The case of the racism and discrimination against the *moriscos* and the *conversos* which followed in the wake of the Catholic Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula demonstrates that racism is historically antecedent to the concept of race, and indeed need not presuppose a biological concept of race at all. For in the Spanish language, it was not until centuries later, and in the context of the drive towards scientific (or pseudo-scientific, if truth be told) classification of humans that emerged in the context of the Enlightenment and colonial exploration and exploitation that followed from the 16th century onwards that the concept of race became tethered to ideas about human biology. We forget this at our peril: race and racism are ideas about human difference and the implications of those differences that always have been and always will be made and unmade by humans. Race is socially constructed, but unfortunately have very real social and material consequences



for those who are *racialized*. By which we as scholars mean to refer to the process of assigning “race-like” characteristics that are seen as unchanging, essentialized and unchangable to certain groups of people. We can actually trace the very process through which the erstwhile Iberian Muslims of *al-Andalus* came to be racialized through some of the most iconic Spanish representations of the Catholic Reconquista centuries later. For *al-Andalus* was part of the North African Almoravid dynasty, and its rulers by and large North African and for the most part relatively fair-skinned. But they eventually came to be racialized through the visual representations of the battles of the Reconquista, and cast as dark-skinned Africans.

The brilliant Cultural Studies scholar that was the late Stuart Henry McPhail Hall (1932-2014) referred to race as a *floating or sliding signifier* (Hall 2017). By which he meant to imply that race has through the centuries represented a fundamental mode of thinking about human difference, but one which unfortunately seem ever-changing and ever-adaptable to new circumstances. “The past is never past,” declared the great US novelist William Faulkner, and the Catholic Reconquista has of course been widely re-activated as a frame of reference and a mode of understanding the present among all kinds of European and American white supremacists and racists in our dark times.

The idea being that Muslim immigrants, and their descendants, are but historical intruders – or even invaders – on a European and American continent which “properly belongs to us” - in other words, to those racialized as white.

As scientists, we do of course know perfectly well that human history is essentially the history of human migrations, of mixing and co-existence, but that history, and the long and rich histories of Muslim presence in various parts of the European continent (think Bosnia, think Spain here) can always be suppressed by the racial fantasizers of the present, with all their existential fears of what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has referred to as *small numbers* and illusions about the purity of coded whiteness.



To my mind, it hardly seems a co-incidence that people of Muslim background have more than any other group in present Europe faced a process of a thoroughgoing *racialization*, as my distinguished colleagues Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood (2009) were among the first to point out over a decade ago now. For in Europe, we are in fundamental ways back where we started in the Iberian peninsula all those centuries ago. What the Hungarian scholar G.M. Tomas (2000) in a remarkably prescient essay for the Boston Review referred to as *post-fascism*, is all over us: from Hungary and Russia via Sweden to Italy parties and political formations which adheres to fascist ideas and/or have fascist genealogies are back in power. Recall here that fascism is at its heart an ultra-nationalist and profoundly patriarchal ideology which declares the nation to be a sacred entity under all sorts of existential threats from internal and external enemies, and one which if necessary must be salvaged and protected through apocalyptic means.

When we say with Tomas' that it is post-fascist, we also mean to refer the fact that it is not an iteration fascism which appears in the same guise as historical fascism in Europe in the period 1920-1945, but one which certainly mimicks it. The danger that this poses for us all – but our fellow citizens, brothers and sisters - of Muslim background in particular

(given that Islamophobia is, as my friend and colleague Farid Hafez never tires of pointing out, the great unifying theme for the contemporary European Right, see Hafez 2014)) is not only that it both declares racism to be but a “natural” and perfectly “legitimate” human re-sentiment, but that it is also fundamentally corrosive of any idea of human universality and any presumption of equal human rights to life and dignity. Which as you will of course be perfectly well aware of is so central not only to the UN Human Rights Declaration, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Indian Constitution. *A pessimism of the intellect, and an optimism of the wills* Antonio Gramsci called it: this is where we are, and fight



it we must, in ways small and large, through the peaceful and democratic means at the disposal for those of us committed to what may great and illustrious friend Prof Paul Gilroy has, in harking back to the great sage that was Aime Cesaire, referred to as a *planetary humanism* [*made to the measure of the world*].

Norway with its five million inhabitants (17.8% of whom are presently of immigrant background or descendants of immigrants, and 4.2% estimated to be of Muslim background) be small but it does offer a small prism for thinking through Islamophobia in its wider and transnational contexts in the present. But by way of introduction to this part of my talk, let me simply note that I am an anthropologist by training, and that I started my career as an anthropologist undertaking ethnographic fieldwork among Muslims in Cape Town, South Africa. Anti-racism is for me fundamental to what I do and how I think, and I am unapologetic about the fact that I am an anti-racist scholar.

Students and scholars who are familiar with my work internationally, they are likely to be familiar with my monograph *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia* (Bangstad, 2014), written in the aftermath of and in response to the worst terrorist attacks in modern Norwegian history. Which occurred on July 22, 2011, when a then thirty-four year old white Norwegian male right-wing extremist and white supremacist first set off a self-made fertilizer bomb at Government Headquarters in the Norwegian capital of Oslo which killed eight people, and maimed dozens others, and destroyed Government Headquarters in Norway. Dressed in a fake police uniform, he then proceeded by car to the small and idyllic island of Utøya, some 60 kilometers from Oslo, where he in the course of a shooting spree which lasted for over an hour murdered sixty-nine people, mostly completely defenseless Norwegian teenagers attending a summer youth camp organized by the social democratic and government-aligned Labour Party Youth Organization, with shots to their heads. The median age of his victims was 18, and his youngest victim was only 13. Not for the first, nor for the last time, Norwegians learned that *racism kills*.



Some people will no doubt assert that only a few of his victims happened to be Muslims, but that is frankly beside the point: having immersed himself in the dark netherworld of online hatred of Muslims for several years leading up to the attack,

the perpetrator had convinced himself that Norway and Europe was being overrun by Muslims, and that it was only a matter of time before the European continent would be turned into some kind of Islamic state or caliphate.

For the perpetrator, who in his promotional cut-and-paste tract distributed to thousands of people prior to his attacks was keen to underline that he was “not racist” and even had “friends of immigrant background”(imaginary, as it would soon turn out), before turning to a full-throttle endorsement of a long line of Norwegian, Nordic and international Nazi murderers and Serbian genocidaires from the genocide in Bosnia in the course of his very first police interrogations after he was eventually arrested in a clearing in the woods on the island as darkness fell over the corpses of his many murder victims, Muslims were a deeply threatening and homogeneous mass hellbent on taking over Europe. And his terrorist attacks were meant to signal the onset of a continent-wide civil war which would result in the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from Norway and wider Europe.

But those were not Islamophobic terror attacks, some will counter. But when the perpetrator of the terrorist attacks on July 22, 2011 chose Norwegian social democrats as his targets, it was not necessarily because the attacks essentially had to do with them rather than with Norwegian Muslims. For in his target selection, fully documented in his ill-written cut and paste tract, he makes it abundantly clear that he had first toyed with the idea of a direct attack on Norwegian Muslims during the annual Eid celebrations in Oslo. But feared that this would as a terrorist strategy ultimately be counterproductive, in that it might turn out to generate public sympathy for Norwegian Muslims. In any case, in the perpetrators imaginaries, it was Norwegian social democrats – including the womanizing senior Norwegian social



democratic diplomat who had practically abandoned him and his mother when he was but a small child (and yes, there would be ample material for Freudian psychoanalysts here) – who were ultimately responsible for having let the first Muslim immigrants to Norway (male migrant laborers from countries like Pakistan, Turkey, Morocco and even India) into the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The terrorist perpetrator's Islamophobia was by no means exclusively Norwegian: the most central ideological influence on his thought (if we are to dignify such rambingly inconsistent and fantastical ideas with the epithet thought) was the Swiss-Israeli Eurabia author known under the pen name Bat Ye'or or 'Daughter of the Nile' (Bangstad, 2019).

Whose real name is Gisele Littman, born to wealthy Italian-Jewish parents in Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt in 1933, and among the many Egyptian Jews who left or were expelled from Egypt after the 1952 Officers Coup that brought Gamal Abdel-Nasser to power in 1954.

Littman, an auto-didact scholar who never completed her academic studies, had long-standing links to the Israeli far-right. Much like her friends and allies on the Israeli far-right, she adored and made friends with the Christian-Maronite militia known as the Kataib which under the leadership of the slain Bashir Gemayel allied itself with the Israeli military forces during the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war in the 1980s, and who were responsible for the massacre of thousands of Palestinian women and children in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut in 1982. She also adored and was personally close to the Serbian ultra-nationalist genocidaires who under the leadership of the war criminals Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic were responsible for some of the worst Serbian war crimes during the war in Bosnia in the 1990s.



Her Eurabia theory, in which she posited that the European Union and leading European politicians had ever since the 1970s secretly conspired with the political leaders of Muslim countries in North Africa in order to turn Europe into an Islamic dominion, is nothing but a profoundly racist far-right conspiracy theory. But the basic idea is not new and not original at all: it is the long-standing European idea, so absolutely central to European racism and white supremacy for centuries, that Europe and Europeans are existentially threatened by having religious and/or racialized minorities in their midst.

The perpetrator of the July 22, 2011 terrorist attacks had come to these ideas through reading the online fantasies of one of Bat Yeor's most loyal followers, the Norwegian racist and far-right blogger Fjordman, whose real name is the rather pedestrian Norwegian name Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen. As anyone familiar with his cut-and-paste tract is bound to know, the perpetrator was also quite taken in with Hindu supremacy and the Hindutva movement in India: there are more than 200 references to India in the tract, and the perpetrator certainly saw the Hindutva movement as a potential global ally against Muslims.

A Muslim is a Muslim is a Muslim: in the racial imaginaries of Islamophobes, individual, ethnic or sectarian distinctions and/or differences among Muslims with which any anthropologist who has ever worked in Muslim communities are well aware of matters for naught. And demographic facts matter for naught: people of Muslim background represent an estimated 4.2% of the Norwegian population (3.6% in 2011): this estimate includes a significant number who are not practicing Muslims at all. And as females of Muslim background and of a second and third generation born and raised in Norway increasingly obtain higher education, and marry males with higher education, the number of children that they end up having is fast approximating median levels for Norwegian females. But it is a fact that Norwegian demographers who



pointed out these facts back in 2011 received death threats for so doing. Being no demographer myself, but simply a scholar who tries his best to respond to e-mails, I vividly recall an e-mail correspondence with a Norwegian IT professional with a PhD in informatics who was absolutely determined that he would manage to convince me that Muslims would go from 4.2% to over 50% of the Norwegian population within 2030. As an anthropologist, my mathematical skills means that I may not quite be the go-to-person for demographic projections into the future, but even I have enough basic maths to understand what absolute rubbish this was.

The Eurabia conspiracy theory has since been overtaken by the Great Replacement conspiracy theory which has inspired white supremacist and right-wing extremist terrorist attacks from Christchurch in New Zealand, El Paso in Texas and Baerum in Norway in 2019 and onto Buffalo in New York in 2022. But the latest incarnation of the fear of small numbers really is but the same racist and conspiratorial nonsense in a new wrapping.

But the very idea that Muslims are in Norway in order to by mysterious means take over Norway and Europe are eleven years on still very widespread in Norway, with national representative surveys from the Holocaust Centre in Oslo Norway from 2017 indicating that over 30% of respondents in the Norwegian population actually hold variants of such views (Hoffmann & Moe, 2020). This unfortunately also means that we are by no means talking about a far-right fringe phenomenon here. In the same surveys, Muslims also feature as the co-citizens towards whom respondents express the most negative attitudes, and are least likely to want to have as neighbours, friends or family members. Worst off are Muslims who are both black and Muslim, in other words of Somali, Gambian or Senegalese background.

Countermobilizations: The Norwegian anti-racist movement has historically been both secular and leftist: some of the pioneers



were well-educated socialists of Pakistani elite background, who for all sorts of reason having to do with the brutalities of the Islamization by means of military dictatorship in Pakistani under Zia ul-Haq in the 1970s and 80s were quite antagonistic towards Islam and people of Muslim faith. I am among those Norwegian anti-racists who have worked both in a professional and activist capacity in order to make the argument that Muslims are, and must be, an integral part of the anti-racist struggle that we are in. And I do think that there has been notable successes in making that argument, not the least due to a new generation of anti-racist activists, who not only have been blessed by growing up in an increasingly multicultural and multireligious Norway which is to a large extent new and unprecedented for people of my generation of white men and women pushing their fifties.

People of Muslim background, young women and men, are also fast making their mark in all sorts of educational and professional fields, in politics, the arts, academia, sports, in NGOs and in the legal and medical fields. In doing so, they make the Muslim presence in Norway and Europe, and the idea that Muslims are co-citizens parttaking in the creation of a future convivial Norway and Europe, much more palatable.

Before I end, I want to share with you the fact that the most popular music in Norway this year, the song that Norwegian children, including my two young daughters, have been screaming at the top of their lungs this summer, is cryptically entitled *Paf.no*. The chorus line, that all those Norwegian children of all colours and creed have been screaming at the top of their lungs, goes *Allah, Allah, Ya Baba* (NRK.no, 2022). The song is by a duo of Hindu and Muslim background from Oslo East known as *Karpe*. The two lead members of *Karpe* are Magdi Omar Ytreeide Abdelmaguid and Chirag Rashmikant Patel, both born in 1984 and of Norwegian-Egyptian and Norwegian-Indian parentage respectively. If you search it up on YouTube, and listen to it, you will no doubt also note that the



song is inspired by an extremely popular Tunisian and Sufi Muslim devotional song. And so this articulates a Norway and a Europe in which an oppositional multiculturalism and multireligiosity and the message that Muslims in and of Europe are here to stay permanently, however resented in certain corners, is made real, tangible and popular.

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Sindre Bangstad is a social anthropologist based in Norway and the incoming Stanley Kelley Jr. Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Teaching of Anthropology at Princeton University, New Jersey, US. He has undertaken ethnographic fieldwork among Muslims in Cape Town, South Africa and among Muslim youth in

Oslo, Norway. Bangstad has been a Research Professor at KIFO (Institute For Church, Religion and Worldview Research) in Oslo, Norway, since 2019, and an Associate Researcher at Plattform/Arkivet in Kristiansand, Norway, since 2021. Bangstad's research interests include Islam and Muslims, secularism, hate speech, free speech, racism and the far-right.



CSPS
CENTRE FOR STUDIES OF
PLURAL SOCIETIES

60, Pocket 2, Jasola Vihar, New Delhi - 110025

+91-11 42440125, +91-9870416419

pluralsocieties@gmail.com

www.cspcindia.org

