I find Matti Bunzl’s observations (this issue) perceptive and persuasive. My comments in response mostly have to do with how one characterizes stances toward Muslims in Europe and draw almost entirely on my familiarity with current French debates.

Islamophobia

The term Islamophobia is far from neutral. Its use raises two problems. First, distinguishing anti-Arab racism from “fear of Islam” is difficult. French attitudes toward Muslims are not new; they are deeply rooted in Algerian colonization (1830 onward) and the Algerian War (1954–62) and in the continuing violence in North Africa, Lebanon, and elsewhere. These attitudes involve a mix of condescension toward Islam, postwar hatreds, and ordinary racism. (Do not ignore racism: Black Africans have a harder time in France than North Africans, for example, regardless of religion.) Many French mix together Arab, North African, and Muslim without knowing precisely what these terms mean. Perhaps more precise would be to remark on the relatively recent (dating from the 1980s) fear among the French of “Islamism” as a process by which groups and neighborhoods take themselves out of the republic. The French did not need Samuel Huntington to feel as they do, and the whole complex of anti-Islamic sentiments is far older than one might think by reading Bunzl’s piece.

Second, the term Islamophobie is used in France to attack those who, for example, support the recent law against wearing an Islamic head scarf to a public school. Whatever one might think about that law, most French people, and many Muslims, support it. They have diverse reasons, all the way from seeking to protect schoolgirls from pressure to wear the scarves to a belief that any religious signs sap the school’s function of creating republican citizens to what one might well call “Islamophobia.” But because the term has come to be used in this overly broad way and is highly polemical, using it as an analytical term is a bit dicey.
Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism

Bunzl very perceptively notes the ways in which antiglobalization movements often also are anti-Zionist but denounce anti-Semitism. An intense and apparently endless debate is ongoing in France about whether any anti-Zionist position inevitably contains elements of anti-Semitism. In any case, the issue is really no longer Israel’s right to exist but the right to criticize Israel.

In France today, distinct groups carry out critiques of Israel, but they do not agree on anything else. Many on the middle left strongly criticize Israeli policies toward Palestinians and on some issues also agree with what Bunzl calls “extreme left-wing anticolonialism, anticapitalism, and antiglobalism.” They voted no on the new European constitution, for example, on universalistic grounds of social justice. They constitute one category of actors, and one would be wrong to call them “anti-Semitic.” Bunzl does not, but some of his phrases, including his title, might lead the careless reader to think otherwise.

A quite distinct category includes young men and women—many of whom are children of parents from North Africa and who live in isolated conditions in poor suburbs—who mouth anti-Semitic phrases and schoolchildren who yell “dirty Jew” at other children. This sort of anti-Semitism is part of a broader category of racism and lack of civility that includes anti-Arab and antiblack statements and actions. These kinds of behaviors contribute to the rise in counts of “anti-Semitic incidents” because even playground fights can lead to court cases on grounds of racial hatred. Sometimes much more violent acts occur, as well.

Finally, one finds the old-style anti-Semitism, well described here and elsewhere by Bunzl, which in France is strongest, or at least most apparent, in Alsace, where there has been no public process of facing the guilt of the Nazi years. According to a recent report by France’s Renseignements Généraux (the country’s FBI, but better) many of the neo-Nazi groups have shifted from Jews to Arabs as their main targets—perhaps because there are more of them around.

As Michel Wieviorka (2005) found in a study of current anti-Semitism, no links connect these three groups. To use anti-Semitism to cover all three (as many French intellectuals do) runs the risk of tarring left-wing critics with a right-wing brush as well as of mistaking the various causes of the distinct forms of anti-Semitism.

Opposition to Turkey entering the European Union

Bunzl is right that many who oppose admitting Turkey to the European Union do so because it is a majority-Muslim country, and not only because of its human rights abuses and other social problems. But the question remains, is arguing that Europe should be limited to a set of nations with a shared heritage necessarily anti-Islamic? Regardless of what one thinks about that argument, I am not convinced that anyone who makes it (e.g., Valéry Giscard d’Estaing) is ipso facto an Islamophobe. The question of the boundaries of the European Union is an institutional as well as a civilizational question. That said, the civilizational issue is real, perhaps even more so than suggested here. I suspect, for example, that many in France would agree with the sentiments expressed in Jörg Haider’s pamphlet!

[Islam, anti-Semitism, Europe]

Reference cited


John Bowen
Department of Anthropology
Washington University in St. Louis
St. Louis, MO 63130-4899
jbowen@wustl.edu