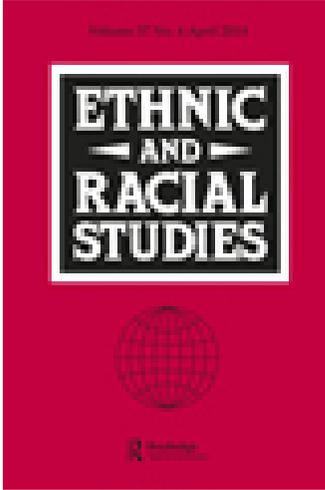


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Weil ihre Kultur so ist... : Narrative des antimuslimischen Rassismus

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BOOK REVIEW

Weil ihre Kultur so ist... : Narrative des antimuslimischen Rassismus, by Yasemin Shooman, Bielefeld, Transcript, 2014, 256 pp., €29.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-8376-2866-1

Yasemin Shooman is one of few scholars living and writing in Germany whose academic contributions and public engagement has accounted for and problematized manifestations of anti-Muslim racism in the German context. Firmly associated with the Third Reich, the term racism tends to be either conflated with the national-socialist regimes' attitudes and crimes, or attributed to contemporary right-wing extremist movements' *physical* violence. Shooman's book *Weil ihre Kultur so ist: Narrative des antimuslimischen Rassismus (It's because of their Culture: Narratives of Anti-Muslim Racism)* reminds us that an encompassing self-critical public debate about more subtle manifestations of racist stereotyping and its reproduction through everyday practices within German public life is yet to be had.

The book demonstrates that contemporary manifestations of racism are not confined to a biologist understanding of race, as it is often assumed in public discourses. Just as race is an oppressive social and political construction and constitutes the *effect of* as opposed to the *condition of* racism, cultural inferiorization draws on biologist and cultural generalizations and thereby creates artificial collectives. Shooman describes anti-Muslim racism as a process of racialization of embraced or ascribed religion, culture, ethnicity, gender and class, which articulates itself in narratives that imply oppressive, undignified and often dehumanizing cultural inferiority. From a socially dominant position, features are ascribed to Muslims whereby a body of knowledge is constructed that renders them identifiable as members of a homogenous and quasi-natural collective that stands in binary opposition to Christian-Atheist Germans or Europeans. It is this body of collective public knowledge within German society that Shooman is interested in and that she analyses in greater detail in her book; she reconstructs recurring narratives, historically traces prevalent discursive formations within Christian and German archives of knowledge; and explores their functionality and social effects. The account that she offers shows why and how a great deal of currently salient knowledge about Muslims and Islam in the public domain is not just underpinned by prejudice or 'anxiety of the unfamiliar', but constitutes racialized stereotyping.

Each chapter is dedicated to a distinct collection of topoi, tropes or discursive formations, as well as a different domain of public life within which collective knowledge about Muslims and Islam is expressed and reproduced. Each of the areas under analysis offers specific conditions for the articulation of claims and observations, and each facilitates distinct modalities of expression. Shooman revisits highly decorated bestsellers written by so-called experts, key witnesses or native informants,

including Betty Mahmoody's 'Not without my Daughter' or Necla Kelek's 'The Foreign Bride', mainstream print media and television news production, letters that have been surprisingly often signed with the author's full name and posted to Islamic associations (and a secular ethnic community organization), as well as expressions within the more anonymous sphere of the internet, including commentary sections or blogs such as 'Politically Incorrect' and related fora that are dedicated to the articulation of 'fears of the Islamization' of Germany or Europe. It is striking how the author critically deconstructs biologist and dehumanizing stereotyping underpinning each of the numerous citations she offers – many of which turn the readers' stomach upside down – and yet remains extraordinarily polite towards the subjects who articulate such atrocities. For instance, Shooman does not refer to the authors of the 667 abusive letters that she revisited as a 'man' or 'woman', but as 'ein Herr' or 'eine Dame' (which are somewhat equivalent to a Lady and a Sir). While this anecdotal observation shows that the author analyses anti-Muslim racism as structural, it is also indicative of the fact that many of those who feel the urge to personally write to Muslim community representatives and let them know that 'even if you are not very intelligent, you should be able to tell that you are not wanted here' or openly call them parasites and so on, often self-identify as well educated and of high social standing (such as teachers, chief executives, etc.). It is such mainstream everyday hostility and racist prejudice that still remain largely unchallenged within the German public; for instance, the recent parliamentary inquiry into the criminal justice system's failure to prosecute the racist murders of the National Social Underground did not diagnose institutional racism within the German police, despite considerable evidence pointing in that direction.

While this book is not the first to analyse the recreation and reproduction of anti-Muslim racism within mainstream media or within blogs dedicated to demonizing Islam and Muslims in Europe, the connection that it establishes between the two is pertinent; Shooman's account demonstrates a close proximity between discourses endorsed by anti-Muslim blogs and some of the narratives reproduced in mainstream media and within established political circles. What is more, there is little awareness that this collectively shared body of knowledge serves to legitimize structural social inequalities and everyday discriminatory practices. One of the examples offered here is worth quoting at full length: A mainstream television show broadcast the case of a dentist, who placed the following notice in his surgery: 'A strict ban of hijabs worn by Islamic (sic!) women and girls applies in this surgery. Islamic (sic!) families with more than 5 children will not be treated. Basic knowledge of the German language is obligatory' (translation AL, 80). The exorbitance and unlawfulness of this statement remained unchallenged during the following discussion. The television presenter uncritically reproduced the conspiracy theory of the 'infiltration through disproportional birth rates', evaluating the sign itself as 'perhaps going too far', but acknowledging the courage of the dentist 'who did not want to remain silent and act'. (80). Drawing on rich and detailed sources, Shooman shows how depictions of Muslims tend to oscillate between inferior and passive victims who deserve pity (mostly women), and paternalistic demands that they should surrender to superior German values and regulations (mostly men) – and unmasks the need for self-assurance and an enlightened and impeccable occidental self-image behind these projections.

I share Shooman's concluding observation that further research is needed to explore the discriminatory effects of anti-Muslim stereotypes in diverse areas of social life and her book has certainly made a significant contribution to paving the way for further research in this area. The book not only offers an account of contemporary history that is ahead of its time in its national context, the analysis also provides key insights into mainstream attitudes at a time when thousands of people weekly take to the streets of Dresden (whose Muslim population is below 1%) to protest against the alleged 'Islamization' of Germany.

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