

BOOK REVIEW

Pointing The Finger, Islam and Muslims in the British Media

Edited by JULIAN PETLEY and ROBIN RICHARDSON (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011), xxii + 300 pp. Price PB £19.99. EAN 978-1851688128.

As the Leveson Inquiry into the conduct of the British press unveils a series of ethically troubling practices, most people who have reflected critically on the press reportage and wider ‘framing’ of Islam and Muslims may well have anticipated some of its key findings. Over a number of years the editors of this volume have been doing precisely this, and have brought together a strong collection of contributors to broaden out and support their analysis. Indeed, a great strength of the book is that, in addition to scholarly interventions, we have first hand accounts from journalists themselves. The chapter by Hugh Muir and Laura Smith (‘Keeping Your Integrity – and Your Job: Voices from the Newsroom’) in particular stands out for this reader and is worth dwelling on briefly.

In the critique of press discourse on Muslims we often overlook how Muslims too might be participants in the creation of this discourse. The anonymized accounts in their own words show how practising Muslim journalists negotiate, resist, or indeed become complicit in, sensationalist portrayals of Muslims. Amongst the most interesting features of the chapter are the ways in which the presumed ‘insider knowledge’ can be professionally restrictive in channeling Muslim journalists into ‘Muslim’ (i.e. security) stories, and how perilous resisting this becomes. As one Muslim journalist put it: ‘I would get phone calls and be sent on every Muslim story [...] Then one day I snapped and blew up. The news editor went really red and embarrassed and didn’t want to discuss it. I think he was very worried about being seen as racist. So overnight I was stripped of that access. [...] It felt like punishment for speaking up’ (pp. 231–2). While another recalls, ‘I remember wanting to do a story about a Muslim organisation and how it was being demonised. [...] But it wasn’t sexy enough because it was not about extremism. The focus at the time was on allocating blame and getting to the bottom of where extremism was happening’ (p. 241).

These examples make manifest at least one prevailing direction of interest in Muslim stories, namely that they are often driven by a searching desire to discipline Muslims, to teach them a lesson or to put them in their place. For example, Julian Petley’s excellent chapter (‘“A Question of Leadership”: Who Speaks for British Muslims’) discussing the BBC journalist Jon Ware’s campaigning documentary against the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), and subsequent press discussion of this, teases out how Muslim political engagement is subjected to a different threshold of tests and moral certainty to that of other

groups. Petley's analysis in particular hones in on the role of selective and partly reconstituted quotations put from Jon Ware to MCB spokespeople in some 'Grand Inquisitor' like fashion, and how implausible Ware's salacious charges become when these quotations are presented in their fullness. One may well conclude that if investigative journalists from the BBC cannot uphold decent standards of reportage then there is little hope for the mainstream press. Indeed, as shown in our study of various journalists' approaches to Islamophobia, there is a tendency within the tabloid press to view fair, impartial reporting as something best left to 'the Beeb': N. Meer and T. Modood, 'Refutations of Racism in the "Muslim Question"', *Patterns of Prejudice* 43/3-4 (2009): 332-51.

Two further chapters on 'Images of Islam in the UK' (by Justin Mason, Paul Mason and Kerry Moore) and 'Muslim women and veiled threats' (Gholam Khiabany and Milly Williamson) offer scholarly contrasts between quantitatively and qualitatively informed readings of discursive tropes (the former is more wide-ranging and the latter more narrowly rich). Of course the balance of the volume is certainly more toward the general rather than the academic reader, though there is much that is of value to the latter. This is perhaps a reflection also of Robin Richardson's continuing public engagement on questions of race and discrimination. Indeed, Richardson has been at the centre of some of the main public policy commissions and inquiries on race in Britain (the Steven Lawrence Inquiry, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain, the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, among others).

It is probably a little churlish then to suggest what the collection might be missing. Nonetheless, there is now quite a robust body of material theorizing Islamophobia with a much greater depth than the thinking that informed the Runnymede Trust Report (1997), and which is much more precise than the Orientalism literature allows. It would therefore have been interesting to see this applied more in the introduction or conclusion. Moreover, the audibility of Muslims has also increased as more Muslims have informed the mainstream press, on their own terms or through developments in the proliferation of alternative public spheres, and this too is underemphasized in the collection. This is important because it encourages a more accurate portrayal of the dynamic features of Muslim visibility in public life. Nonetheless, there is much that is of value here and the collection as a whole makes an important contribution and deserves to be read widely.

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