

## Book Review

### **Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia**

Sindre BANGSTAD

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£16.99 (pbk), 286 pp.

At its heart, Sindre Bangstad's new work, *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*, examines the weight of words. Words have the power to unite, to forgive, to heal; to build bridges between various societal groups and foster foundations of respect at a basic human level. But for some, such as mass-murderer and extreme right-wing ideologue Anders Behring Breivik, words can politically divide, emotionally scar, and propagate a hatred of others that can incite the most heinous of crimes. Bangstad makes a compelling case that Breivik's politically-motivated terror attacks on 22 July 2011 – which left seventy-seven people dead – were strongly influenced by the mainstreaming of racist and discriminatory speech that has gained an uncomfortable acceptance within a segment of not only Norway's population in the last few decades, but western societies in general. *The Rise of Islamophobia* successfully argues that the negative public discourses promoted by the populist far-right to denigrate and dehumanise Muslims are “a *necessary*, if not *sufficient* explanatory factor in the kind of terror that Norway faced on 22/7” (p. xiv). Bangstad's study is significant in arguing that only by understanding the wide-spread influence of Breivik's “ideological fellow travellers”(p.173) – those that used words rather than actions to promote hate, and quickly distanced themselves from Breivik after 22/7 – can “the prophets of intolerance and hate” (p.xvi) be overcome within multicultural societies.

It was a pleasant surprise to realise that Bangstad's work is not focused primarily on Breivik himself, his early life, the events of 22/7 nor his subsequent trial, which has been covered in

other writings. The book is not, as the author himself contends, a contribution to terrorism studies, and is instead written by a social anthropologist “from the perspective of an anthropology which is engaged with and committed to human rights and the furthering of a multicultural (but alas not multiculturalist) society which is anchored in equal rights to dignity for all citizens regardless of personal faith or life stance” (p. xiii). This allows the work much freedom in examining the direction of Norwegian societal discourses regarding Islam and Muslims in recent decades, but also the problematic relationship between hate-speech and freedom of expression in challenging “the persistence of intolerance and discrimination relating to minorities in Norway and Europe” (p. xv).

*The Rise of Islamophobia* is separated into five chapters that work well as a whole. The book opens with a memorial to Breivik’s victims – the tragic loss exacerbated by the young ages of those killed – which sets the tone for a work that seeks to understand the words behind such senseless actions. Chapter 1, ‘Human Terror’, provides a suitable level of context regarding the 22/7 attack while also introducing other key themes to be weaved throughout the ensuing chapters, namely Islamophobic discourses, the rise of the far-right in Norwegian politics and freedom of expression. Chapter 2, ‘Muslims in Norway’, provides a historical background to mass immigration of Muslims to Norway since the 1960s, and also gives a strong, case-based analysis of their current situation. Chapter 3 returns to examine Breivik’s sprawling, cut-and-paste-laden manifesto *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, revealing key ideological influences and tracing his interactions on far-right and Islamophobe websites, message boards and blogs where he became ensconced in the virulent writings of the like-minded. Chapter 4 brings such pre-supposed ‘underground’ ideologies into focus through a discussion of Islamophobia’s entrenchment in the political mainstream by the extreme right-wing discourses of Norway’s Progress Party since the late 1980s. Chapter 5 then cleverly moves to discuss the main authors of the ‘Eurabia’ genre as a source of somewhat legitimized

and pseudo-scholarly inspiration for Breivik's ideas, especially "the systematic hatred and fear of Muslims that the genre is designed to generate" (p. 174). The final chapter then ties these strands together with a discussion concerning absolutist conceptions of freedom of expression and the potential violence that discriminatory words and discourses can incite in the name of free speech, but are in actuality in the name of hate. As Bangstad ends, "the greatest threats to equality of citizenship and liberal democracy in Norway, Scandinavia and western Europe in our time stem neither from the extreme right wing nor from radical Islamists" but instead "remain those emanating from the exclusionary and sanitizing of extreme right-wing discourses and rhetorical tropes by the populist right wing" in these regions (p. 219).

The work is generally well-written and the author has much scholarly experience researching public discourses regarding Norwegian Muslims even prior to 22/7. As such, his work is authoritative, yet personal. Bangstad is an empathic writer who is clearly emotionally vested in the issues that he discusses, yet this is not a weakness, and instead gives the work a sense of humanity that would be missing from a clinical study, bleached of emotion and care for his subjects. The sections critiquing Breivik's *2083* and those of the 'Eurabia' genre is done with great care as he seeks to adequately explain and understand them through rational means rather than discount their unfounded material without robust analysis, and this lends the reader a much stronger position as the work progresses.

Overall, Bangstad is commended for revealing the pernicious societal undercurrents that risk further incitement to violence in western European nations. The work helps to strongly discount any remaining conceptions of Breivik as a 'lone wolf terrorist', and that while he may, for now, be "alone in the extremity of his actions, his ideology is far more widely shared" (p. 25). The work would be beneficial for those seeking to understand the rise of far-right and racist dialogues in contemporary Europe, the mainstreaming of such discriminatory discourses and their spread in an age of internet and social media, immigration and ensuing social and

economic unrest and, most importantly, shifting perceptions of freedom of expression in denigrating our fellow human beings.

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