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# "As far as I am concerned, they can all die". On delinking fears of migration, terrorism and Islam.

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Public fears concerning migration, terrorism and Islam are real. It is up to us as scholars to ensure that the connections between all three that increasingly take place in public and political debate are delinked. A blog on the power of discourse in tempering crimmigration.

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My mum always tells me that I should be aware of my sharp tongue, and that it is not necessary to always want to have the last word. Yet last night, while taking an airport taxi back to Leiden after having taught a course on 'Contemporary Challenges to Human Rights' at the [Åbo Akademi in Turku](#), Finland, I found myself lost for words. As I was getting into the taxi, the taxi driver asked me if I had been travelling for work and if so, what I had been doing. I told him I had given several lectures on counterterrorism and border control. Before being able to finish my sentence explaining a bit further what these lectures were all about, the driver turned to me and said: "You know, as far as I am concerned, they can all die". I looked back, not completely understanding what he meant – or at least, deep inside hoping that I was misunderstanding his genocidal thoughts, and asked him: "who are you talking about?" "All these Muslims of course", was his reply. Different thoughts shot through my mind while I was assessing the situation: was he serious, was he trying to provoke me, was it worth arguing with him? After having talked extensively about the process of 'othering', 'exclusion' and 'social sorting' while in Turku, especially of Muslims, I felt obligated to start a conversation with the man, although shocked by his extreme point of view. So I decided to approach the situation as if it was an unstructured interview, in which I – of course well informed by the literature on the aforementioned processes - would try to figure out what exactly was driving his hatred.

Because that's what it was, this man was not just concerned; he was furious and ready to act upon it.

It did not take much to get him to talk. When I asked him why he was feeling so strongly about Muslims, an interesting, yet disturbing, 'analysis' followed. He started by saying that while he did detest Muslims, he definitely could not be portrayed as a racist, as his wife was not Dutch and because he liked people from other countries "that are known to be honest and work hard". My feeble attempt to explain to him that the fact that he tolerated people from 'other' countries did not stand in the way of him being discriminatory of Muslims, paused his rant for a couple of seconds after which he continued: "I guess I am okay with that then, as I do find Islam dangerous as it is the very source of terrorism and a threat to everything being Dutch stands for". Being Dutch, according to him, meant first and foremost speaking Dutch, respecting Dutch law and "not abusing our welfare system". He then added that he also found it problematic that Dutch public schools and companies were also paying attention to Islamic holidays as well as serving halal meat in 'traditionally Dutch' meals. I asked him what frightened him most about these things. He started to laugh and said that "there was more to it" than just not being in favour of multiculturalism. "Just come and see it for yourself. In my neighbourhood, in my apartment building, the dominant language is Arabic. I never know what they're saying or what they're doing. They, young men and women with headscarves, are just hanging around, not working, getting more babies. That makes me wonder if they're here for no other reason than to abuse our welfare system and to get in trouble – they're clearly not working – and to eventually take over. Because that's what Islam says. For that reason I have forbidden my children to engage with, let alone befriend, Muslims." When asking him how he knew all this and whether he had engaged with his neighbours to communicate his concerns or perhaps ask them some questions, he shrugged and said "I just know. And it's not just me who feels like this. All my friends do." His 'solution' was to forbid Islam – leaving out the minor detail of the constitutional right to freedom of religion – as its values and underpinnings would be irreconcilable with Western values and traditions. Take away the Dutch nationality of those in possession of dual nationality (which would affect Dutch-Moroccans) to then deport all non-Dutch nationals. He added "They all should have been deported when the work was done anyway", referring to the so-called 'guest workers' or 'foreign workers' that were brought to the Netherlands by the Dutch government in the late sixties to work in the new industrial sector. When I told him that these 'guest workers' were at the time encouraged by the government to maintain their own cultures and the pressure to assimilate was low, even after it became clear they would stay in the Netherlands permanently with their families, and that the Netherlands for a long time took pride in the fact that many people came to their country because of its relative tolerance towards other cultures and religions, he asked me: "So, what's your point? That was before they started to blow themselves up". We ended the taxi ride with a discussion on generalising his fears of terrorism, which seemed to be driven by a deeply felt responsibility to take care of his family, to *all* Muslims and thus not being able to see that there are different readings of the – of any – sacred texts and that terrorists take advantage of the ignorance of people by stating that their actions are driven by Islam, not just by their extreme interpretation of it. When he pulled up in front of my house, he turned to me and thanked me for taking the time to listen to his concerns and for not judging him. "I know I sound extreme, it's just that I get so angry when I read about these attacks and that I feel helpless. That's not a good feeling." I told him that we share that feeling, but that we don't share the reaction to the feeling. I also told him that I knew many Muslims who share that feeling and who are increasingly feeling trapped by extremists committing horrible deeds in the name of their faith. "You might be right, I mean, you are well-educated and a good listener", was his response.

It would be easy to dismiss this taxi driver as crazy and extreme, but this would not be fair and even ignorant on my behalf. This man was vocalising what growing numbers of people throughout Europe feel and fear. In 2017 [the Chatham House Royal Institute of International Affairs](#) published the results of an online survey, asking respondents their views on the statement that "all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped". Of the 10 European countries surveyed, an average of 55 percent of respondents agreed with the statement. 25 percent neither agreed nor disagreed, while only one in five respondents felt Muslim immigration should continue. Poland was the country most in favour of a ban on Muslim immigration with 71 percent of respondents agreeing with the statement. Austria was close behind with 65 percent. An [Ipsos Mori Poll](#) in 2016, further found that Europeans tend to massively overestimate the number of Muslims living in their country as well as the rate in which this number is increasing. As my taxi driver was very open about his opinion, and thinking about how fast we were discussing very personal views, I feel as if he wanted to be challenged on his thoughts and ideas. Having said this, that might very well be wishful thinking on my part, as all throughout Europe openly anti-immigrant, anti-Islam nationalist right-wing parties are on the rise that – although VERY openly voicing their ideas – are not interested in being challenged. Examples are Britain First, Golden Dawn, Pegida and the Pan-European [identitarian movement](#) with established branches in France, Italy, Austria, Germany and Belgium, often collaborating with already existing national extreme-right groups. The rhetoric and discourse used and pushed by these groups is exclusionary, aimed at driving a wedge between what are considered to be 'patriots' – often white nationals – and the multicultural other, but especially the Muslim, in order to preserve the ethno-national identity of countries. The identitarians claim to be ready to fight against the threat of "[self-destruction through a multicultural zeitgeist](#)". Many of these organisations and movements claim to stand up to the left-wing, elitist, hegemony that has been dominant for too long and is to blame for the current state of society. Without wanting to insinuate that my taxi driver was part of one of these organisations or movements, his ideas and perceptions were in line with theirs. By using the internet and in particular by using social media and by being very present at public rallies, these groups are contributing to the creation of social images in which crime, migration and terrorism are all linked and in which the lines and differences between being a refugee, a terrorist or a Muslim are blurring. In doing so, they are creating a fertile breeding ground for the classification and hierarchisation of refugees along lines of religion, race and gender, with male, Muslim men who actively travelled to Europe instead of waiting in a camp to be rescued by Western saviours, being seen as the most dangerous and most unwelcome. But preferably, no Muslims at all, not even the [good ones](#).

Looking at these developments, there can be no other conclusion than to be very concerned about the misinformation and misconceptions concerning key global issues and features of the population as a result of which people are starting to feel as if they are strangers in their own country in line with [Hochschild's](#) (2016) analysis of the rise of the right in the United States. What Hochschild's analysis shows is the importance of staying in communication with those who are starting to feel estranged from their own country, instead of turning our backs on them and mocking them for their beliefs, fears and ideas. Whereas it might be easier, more comfortable and take less energy not to engage with those with whom we profoundly disagree, we need to do the complete opposite. As scholars and public intellectuals we have the responsibility to delink some of the false narratives that are out there, and we need to do it in such a way that we are not dismissing the fears and concerns of our conversation partners as being ignorant or dumb. We should be listening to these concerns, acknowledge that terrorism and migration are challenges societies worldwide *are* facing, and by providing objective facts and figures we should be educating people in order to debunk the alleged links between crime, terrorism, migration and Islam. We also should invest in building relations with policymakers and offer them our advice and expertise

in finding ways to deal with the difficult dilemma they are facing: How to respond to fears and anxieties, knowing that the underlying phenomena - terrorism, migration - are hard to be controlled by any government interference. In line with Garland's Culture of Control (2001) there seems to be a tendency for politicians to then 'act out' by calling for harsh and punitive measures, by engaging in 'othering' and by tapping into the very emotions and fears one should try to take out of these discussions. Though I have written about the necessity to engage in public and political debates [before](#), I am going to echo that call once more. But with an important addition: Don't just resist but listen and engage in order to understand the alienation that is felt throughout society, not just by migrants, Muslims or refugees. Whereas many scholars who are researching issues of migration and borders always stress the necessity of not just writing or talking *about* migrants or refugees, but instead also making sure that they speak *with* and actively engage them in the research and discussions, the same holds for writing or talking about those on the other side of the spectrum. Whether it be the right-wing supporter or just a concerned citizen who has seen his or her neighbourhood or country change: we need to talk to them and engage with them, not just write about them as this will equally contribute to the process of othering and stand in the way of any constructive (ex)change.



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