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Elshayyal, Khadijah. Muslim Identity Politics: Islam, Activism and Equality in Britain. London: I. B. Tauris, 2018.

Gennaro Errichiello

Loughborough University (UK), g.errichiello@lboro.ac.uk

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Elshayyal, Khadijah. *Muslim Identity Politics: Islam, Activism and Equality in Britain*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2018.

Khadijah Elshayyal's book offers insight on the historical development of formal Muslim identity politics in Britain from the latter half of the 20th century. As the author acknowledges, this topic has not received much scholarly attention. By combining a desk-based approach with qualitative research with Muslim spokespersons, stakeholders and members of the Islamic communities, Elshayyal shed light on the development of the Muslim identity politics in Britain.

The book consists of eight chapters, an appendix with tables, and a very useful chronology of the development of the British Muslim identity politics. Chapter 1, which introduces the reader to the main topics, the methodological approach and the structure of the book, focuses on the development of the British Muslim identity politics by distinguishing three main periods. The first comprises the decades between the 1960s and the 1980s, "which was marked by a preoccupation with identity preservation among immigrant communities" (p. 3). Next, the period from the end of the 1980s to 1997 was characterised by the eruption on the world scene of the Rushdie Affair (1988/9) and "the subsequent formalisation of Muslim identity politics" (p. 3). Finally, the period from 1997 up to the present is considered important because of the formation of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the Runnymede Trust's report on Islamophobia and the New Labour Party period. The development of the British Muslim Identity politics is discussed through the lens of freedom of expression. For Elshayyal, this theme is of primary importance for two reasons. Firstly, freedom of expression was a central theme in the events of the late 1980s (namely the Rushdie Affair), which propelled British Muslim communities to forge a path towards formal identity politics on a coordinated, national scale. Secondly, it is a theme that brings out very interesting points of historical, cultural and geopolitical contrast and comparison between the immigrant Muslim communities to Great Britain, and the public political culture of Great Britain itself. (p. 3)

Chapter 2 represents the analytical framework of the book in which the author discusses different themes, such as free speech and equality in Western political thought and their definitions and meanings in Muslim religious and political history. In particular, free speech strictly relates to blasphemy, which came out when the Rushdie Affair broke out. Elshayyal, by quoting some Western Muslim thinkers, such as Usama Hasan, Tariq Ramadan and Talal Asad, argues that even though they are from different theological and socio-cultural stances, these three thinkers have emphasised the need to talk "*at* one another rather than *with* each other (p. 29, original emphasis). The theme of equality is as important as free speech. Recognition is seen as the most prominent goal to achieve for minority and disadvantaged groups; as such, it allows them to "fully function and truly realise themselves and their aspirations" (p. 35). Recognition is thus conceived of as an anthropological attribute which entails treating all humans as equals; however, misrecognition is evident in discriminatory attitudes and hierarchical social structures that characterise some societies around the world.

In Chapter 3, the author traces the origins of the British Muslim identity politics in order to emphasise the complexities and intricacies of such an identity. As she argues, the existence of a self-ascribed, politically and socially active British Muslim identity dates back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and ... the nature and form of their politics was remarkably varied, following no single pattern and reflecting the diversity of each of their origins, affiliations and relationships both in Britain and abroad. (p. 48)

Elshayyal acknowledges that with the establishment and consolidation of Muslim families, especially in the 1970s in Britain, education has represented a terrain on which the debate on multiculturalism has become prominent, and the issue of coexistence and cultural

diversity has become of primary importance, because Muslim families “were significantly concerned with the notion of preserving and promoting Muslim identity” (p. 61).

In Chapter 4, Elshayyal discusses the evolution of Muslim identity politics in the 1980s and the 1990s. The main argument of this chapter is the awareness of the existence of social and cultural issues affecting primarily British Muslims. In other words, in this chapter the author focuses on the “institutionalisation of national communal advocacy and representative organisations” (p. 11). This period is important because it underlines the efforts made by the different Muslim communities on a national level to coordinate their efforts in order to raise awareness in Britain to have their rights and needs vocalised “politically or in other aspects of the public sphere” (p. 11). The starting point of this discussion is the Rushdie Affair and its aftermath in light of an existing blasphemy law that protected from discrimination and hate speech only the Church of England. The consequences of the Rushdie Affair were mobilizations and protests against the author and his book (*The Satanic Verses*) but also an increasing awareness of discrimination, lack of recognition and the existence of Equality Gap in relation to other religions. In particular, this awareness was taken over by the MCB, which represented the first and foremost prominent Islamic organisation in Britain because of its links with the New Labour government that was in power in 1997.

Chapter 5 offers a vivid representation of the increasing development of Muslim identity politics and communal agency as a consequence of terrorist attacks. In particular, Elshayyal focuses on the period between September 2001 and July 2005 because it “was characterised by a sharp increase in the level of Muslim political agency and the intensity of community organising” (p. 108). As she argues, prior to the 9/11 events, Muslim religious identity was disclosed through an increasing adoption of traditional religious and cultural dress. The 1990s was a “period of religious discovery and self-assertion for young British Muslims” (p. 110). The period after the 9/11 terrorist attacks was characterised by a “bold resurgence of the Islamophobic far-right. Racist groups were able to play on genuine fears and paranoia in the wake of the 9/11 events and build-up hostility that was directed squarely at Islam and Muslims in the UK” (p. 122). This period prompted the government to adopt restrictions on immigration “and a more stringent approach to the integration of minority communities and newcomers to the country” (p. 131).

Chapter 6 focuses on the effects of the bomb attacks in London on 7 July 2005. Elshayyal discusses how the perpetrators of the attacks were the “result” of British society, and (maybe the failure of) its multiculturalism. Radicalisation became an issue that affected and involved young British Muslims. As she argues, the “new realities posed by the threat of terrorism on home soil to the sense of everyday safety and security meant that fresh (some previously unaskable) questions were being asked” (p. 13). In order to deal with these events, the Labour government decided to adopt what she defines as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ approaches. The former consisted of tightening the anti-terror legislation, and the latter consisted of “community engagement which endeavoured to ‘win over (Muslim) hearts and minds’ in the fight against terror” (p. 13). In particular, the MCB became the official interlocutor of the government as “MCB officials were regular guests at Downing Street, parliament and the various government departments” (p. 171).

Chapter 7 is a detailed discussion of the evolution and challenges of Muslim identity politics in Britain after the 13 years of Labour governments (1997-2010). Elshayyal focuses on “shifts and changes in state approaches to multiculturalism—specifically in state relations with religious minority advocacy groups, which themselves are responding to changing landscapes in politics, and within the communities they seek to represent” (p. 14). In light of the 7/7 attacks in London, multiculturalism has been under scrutiny, “as many have questioned whether it has been to blame for encouraging ‘separateness’ among Britain’s

minority communities, thus undermining the scope for loyalty and ultimately creating conditions for the growth of radicalisation and extremism” (p. 178). This perspective, which was mainly based upon promoting and enhancing “Britishness” and a shared national identity, has been embraced by the Labour government in the last years and adopted explicitly by the following Conservative governments, especially in the forms of community engagement, which meant conversing with those Muslims who share British values. In such a way, as Elshayyal argues, the (Cameron’s) government “was explicitly promulgating a definition of what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Islam was” (p. 181).

In Chapter 8, Elshayyal offers a summary of the main points discussed and analysed in the whole book. In particular, she revisits the notion of the equality gap “as a tool to understand the basis for British Muslim identity politics, arguing that a number of substantive developments, particularly since the 2000s, have considerably narrowed the initial extent of the gap” (p. 15). In conclusion, as of 2010, global “politics, terrorism at home, the resurgence of the far-right and the rise of divisive populism have all played important parts in igniting fears around immigration and feeding into a ‘crisis of multiculturalism’” (p. 201). For Elshayyal, Muslim identity politics “faces new challenges [which] call for an adjustment in the way that identity politics is conducted” (p. 202).

Gennaro Errichiello
Loughborough University (UK)
G.Errichiello@lboro.ac.uk