

Islamophobia: for a radical left response

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Since the rise of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, Islamophobia has played a central role in Dutch politics. Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party have now emerged as a threat to all progressive forces. There is no point in trying to change the subject and hoping the danger will pass; Islamophobia has to be confronted head-on. But intelligently – knee-jerk defences of anything a Muslim says or does will definitely not help.

To be clear: in the Netherlands today Islamophobia is the main form taken by racism. It has nothing to do with criticism of Islam as a religion. If Wilders and his followers say that not one more Muslim should be allowed into the country, they don't mean that Moroccan and Turkish Christians and atheists are welcome. 'Muslim' is for them simply a convenient epithet for 'those other people'.

And it has proved to be an extremely effective epithet. Without Islamophobia, Fortuyn would never have succeeded in becoming the champion of resistance to the coalition of the Labour Party and the liberal parties that governed the Netherlands from 1994 to 2002. Without the assassination of filmmaker Theo van Gogh, just after the big trade-union demonstration on Amsterdam's Museum Square in 2004, it would have been harder to make the unions accept a poor compromise on the issue of early retirement. Without his rabid attacks on Muslims, Wilders would never have managed to become the main voice of resistance to the EU. There is almost nothing the left can achieve in this country any more without settling accounts with Islamophobia.

At the same time we have to acknowledge that Islamic fundamentalism exists and is a problem – although the danger it poses to the Netherlands is being ridiculously exaggerated. The millions of Dutch people who say they are afraid an Islamic state will be established in Europe have completely lost their sense of proportion. Fundamentalism doesn't even have much support among people of Muslim immigrant origin. Every survey shows that Dutch Muslims are hardly any more religious than Dutch Christians, that the rate of mosque attendance is low and declining, and that the number of ex-Muslims and non-practising Muslims is increasing.

However terrible Islamic fundamentalism may be for its individual victims – above all women – it is a fallacy to treat right-wing Islamophobes and Islamic fundamentalists as equivalent threats in the Netherlands today. Both qualitatively and quantitatively, the Dutch far right is the greater danger. No fundamentalist imam is ever going to become Dutch prime minister; unfortunately we can't be sure that the same is true of Wilders!

The left may even sometimes join in a demonstration – in solidarity with Palestine, for example – where Islamic fundamentalists are also present. We shouldn't be afraid to do that, though we should take care that our slogans don't get mixed up with theirs. But we should avoid demonstrating alongside Wilders supporters at any price.

The 'Muslim threat' is in fact the equivalent in the Netherlands today of what the 'Communist threat' was about 50 years ago: a bogeyman that serves as a pretext for a right-wing, repressive political climate.

Hegemony

What we mustn't lose sight of, however, is the fact that left wing and Islamic currents are competing for hegemony among radicalizing youth of non-Dutch origin. Even though people of Muslim origin will never become a majority of the Dutch population, they are a growing proportion of young people, of the population of the big cities and of the working class. If the left is to climb out of the deep pit it's in now and win a majority of society – and that must remain our goal – we need a base under people of non-Dutch origin as well as among people of Dutch origin.

Unfortunately the left is not doing well among young people of Muslim origin. Left-wing immigrant currents like DIDF (Federation of Turkish Workers in the Netherlands) and KMAN (Committee of Moroccan Workers in the Netherlands) are significantly weaker than they were 20 years ago. These groups did not play a prominent role in the protests against the Israeli attack on Gaza, for example. An Islamic current like the PPMS, by contrast, did.

There are people on the left who don't think this is so terrible. Those young Muslims are against the government, against Wilders and against Zionism, just as we are, they say, so we can perfectly well be allies. But that's sophistry. Our differences with fundamentalists about women's and LGBT emancipation are not secondary issues. No just society is possible if over half the population is denied equal rights or if people aren't free to love as they choose.

And there are other areas where we have unbridgeable differences with fundamentalists. Islamic politics offers no future to people in the Netherlands. An Islamic state is impossible in this country (fortunately); a return to the 'pillarized' politics in which Dutch politics and society were divided along religious lines is a recipe for division and stagnation; and a Salafist withdrawal from secular democracy would rob a big share of the Netherlands' working and poorest people of their political voice and their social rights.

In short, a politics based on religion leads nowhere...

Ramadan

... as the controversy in Rotterdam around Tariq Ramadan made clear.

From the moment the city signed its contract hiring Ramadan as a consultant on immigrant affairs, failure was guaranteed. Because in doing so the city government was simply turning the Islamophobic positions of the previous administration, dominated by the right-wing Liveable Rotterdam party, upside down. Both Liveable Rotterdam and its centre-left successors viewed Rotterdammers of Moroccan and Turkish origin above all as Muslims. For Liveable Rotterdam they are as such suspect; for the Labour Party and Green Left they have to be 'integrated' as Muslims.

You don't have to be an enemy of Tariq Ramadan, still less of his religion, to conclude that someone who doesn't speak Dutch and has no profound knowledge of the Netherlands is not qualified to help people become fully equal citizens of a Dutch city.

The upshot is that virtually every political current in Rotterdam has managed to alienate Rotterdammers of Muslim origin. The Labour Party and Green Left managed to do it by acting as if Ramadan represented all those Rotterdammers, and then sacking Ramadan in a humiliating way when they became convinced that he was an electoral liability. The fact that these two parties of neoliberal business-as-usual still win many votes among immigrants is a reflection of the lack of self-respect among political figures and organizations representing people of non-Dutch origin. As for the SP, which as the only anti-neoliberal party has more to offer, it has been repeatedly equated in this affair with Liveable Rotterdam.

This image of the SP is in part the fault of the media. A year ago, when Ramadan's contract was

renewed, the SP city council delegation made clear that they didn't give much weight to the charges of sexism and homophobia against Ramadan; they simply didn't think his fee was a useful investment of taxpayers' money. And again when Ramadan was sacked, the SP said it didn't think that his connection with the Iranian government-funded PressTV was so terrible. By ignoring the SP's statements, the media gave a distorted picture of the political landscape.

The SP can however be reproached with not expressing more repugnance at the Islamophobia of Liveable Rotterdam and the right-wing liberal VVD and at the opportunism of the centre-left parties in city government. Unfortunately, the SP's low profile against Islamophobia is not surprising from a party that expresses such vehement objections to 'ethnic politics'. It was also simply negligent of the SP not to say that sacking Ramadan from his chair at the Erasmus University (which he was given at the same time the city hired him as a consultant) was an impermissible assault on academic freedom.

The Erasmus University faculty members who took a public stand against the university's breach of its contract deserve high praise, all the more because they made clear that they did not necessarily share Ramadan's opinions. Would that all of Ramadan's defenders on the left had been as sensible. Even if the man has been treated unjustly, that is no reason to treat him as a progressive hero. Yes, he's smart, eloquent, elegant, an effective critic of Israel and of the war in Afghanistan, a proponent of Muslim participation in democratic politics, and a legitimate interlocutor within the global justice movement – but he's not part of the left.

A glance at his website shows that in France in 2007, despite his justified criticisms of the presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy, he had hardly anything good to say about any of the candidates of the left (and he commented on them all). The only candidate he expressed admiration for was the centrist François Bayrou. Moreover, Ramadan's criticisms of Sarkozy didn't stop him from later dedicating one of his books to the right-wing politician. And we don't even need to mention his negative opinions on homosexuality.

Lessons

This tragic business shows that the left is still at a loss in dealing with Dutch people of Muslim origin. It is time to go back to first principles.

There needs to be room on the left for people of every religion and no religion, for people who do and don't wear crosses, for women who do or don't wear headscarves. And the left should be more open to spirituality in general – an area in which we have something to learn from believers. With the general atomization of society, the Dutch left has too often forgotten that transforming society requires sacrifices and a willingness to put oneself at the service of one's fellow human beings. People who have a spiritual motivation for their political commitment should be able to be open about it.

In that case, however, believers and non-believers need to have a common basis for discussion and action. Once arguments like 'I believe because God says it' or 'I do it because God commands it' – about abortion, poverty or anything else – are admitted in politics, rational debate becomes impossible. Discussions on the left should be about interests, values, facts and analyses, not about theology.

This doesn't mean that the left should be a space of uniformity, in which we are all citizens and perhaps workers and nothing else. The left needs to be as diverse as society at large – and we have a long way to go in this respect. Like women and men, people of non-Dutch origin and people of Dutch origin, gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, queers and many others, believers should be at home on the

left.

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P.S.

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