

The Daoud Affair: How Western intellectuals turn themselves into the enemies of an entire class of liberal writers from Muslim backgrounds

Wednesday 23 March 2016, by [BERMAN Paul](#), [WALZER Michael](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2016).

Last month the Algerian novelist and journalist Kamel Daoud astonished the readers of *Le Monde* in Paris by threatening to renounce journalism, not because he is afraid of Islamists at home in Algeria, though a fatwa has been issued against him, but for another reason, which is still more dismaying. He has been severely condemned by people from the Western intellectual class, and silence seems to him an appropriate response.

The denunciations of Daoud are a distressing development. And they are doubly distressing because they conform to a pattern that has become familiar. It goes like this: A writer with liberal ideas emerges from a background in the Muslim countries, or perhaps lives there now. The writer proposes criticisms of Islam as it is practiced, or of sexual repression under Islamic domination (a major theme), or of the Islamist movement. The criticisms seem blasphemous to the Islamists and the reactionary imams, who respond in their characteristic fashion. In the Western countries, intellectuals who mostly think of themselves as progressive make their own inquiry into the writer and his or her ideas. They hope to find oblique and reticent criticisms of a sort that they themselves produce. But they find something else—criticisms that are angrier and more vehement, or more sweeping, or more direct.

The Western intellectuals, some of them, recoil in consternation. And, as if liberated from their reticence, they issue their own condemnation of the offending writer, not on grounds of blasphemy but on grounds that purport to be left-wing. The Western intellectuals accuse the liberal from the Muslim world of being a racist against Muslims, or an Islamophobe, or a “native informant” and a tool of imperialism. Sometimes they accuse the liberal from the Muslim world of stupidity, too, or lack of talent. This was Salman Rushdie’s experience in the years after he came out with *The Satanic Verses*, back in 1988, which he has described in his memoir *Joseph Anton*. The experience of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, originally from Somalia, offers probably the most widely discussed example after Rushdie’s. But the pattern of Western condemnation can be observed in many other cases as well, directed at liberal writers of different kinds and views—the authors of political essays, memoirs, literary criticism, journalism, and novels, from backgrounds in countries as diverse as Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Kamel Daoud’s Algerian colleague, the novelist Boualem Sansal, last year’s winner of a prize from the French Academy, has come under this kind of condemnation. And now the pattern has reemerged in regard to Daoud himself.

Daoud stands high [1] on the world scene because of his novel, *The Meursault Investigation* [2], which adds a philosophical dimension to the affair. The book is an homage to Albert Camus, and a rebuke. In 1942 Camus published a novel titled *The Stranger*, which tells the story of a French Algerian named Meursault, who gratuitously murders a nameless and silent Arab on the beach. Daoud in *The Meursault Investigation* tells the story of the murdered man’s younger brother, who

contemplates what it means to be rendered nameless and silent by one's oppressor. In France, Daoud's reply to Camus won the Goncourt Prize for a First Novel in 2015, among other prizes. In the United States, it received two of the greatest blessings that American journalism can bestow on a writer not from the United States. The New Yorker published an excerpt. And the New York Times Magazine published a full-length admiring profile [3].

These triumphs created a demand for Daoud's journalism, as well. For 20 years he has written for the Algerian newspaper *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, but, in the wake of his novel's success, his journalism began to appear prominently in *Le Monde* and other European newspapers. He was invited to write for the *New York Times*. And he responded to these opportunities in the way that any alert and appreciative reader of his novel might have expected.

He offered insights into the Islamic State. He attacked Saudi Arabia [4], with a side jab aimed at the extreme right in France. But he also looked at the mass assault on women that took place in Cologne on New Year's Eve by a mob that is thought to have included men from the Arab world. He dismissed a right-wing impulse in Europe to regard immigrants as barbarians. And he dismissed a left-wing, high-minded naïveté about the event. He pointed to a cultural problem. In the *New York Times* he wrote [5]: "One of the great miseries plaguing much of the so-called Arab world, and the Muslim world more generally, is its sick relationship with women." More: "The pathological relationship that some Arab countries have with women is bursting onto the scene in Europe." In *Le Monde* he wrote that Europe, in accepting new immigrants and refugees, was going to have to help them accept new values, too—"to share, to impose, to defend, to make understood." And now his troubles began.

A group of 19 professors in France drew up a statement accusing Daoud of a series of ideological crimes, consisting of "orientalist clichés," "essentialism," "psychologization," "colonialist paternalism," an "anti-humanist" viewpoint, and other such errors, amounting to racism and Islamophobia. *Le Monde* published their accusations. A second denunciation came his way, this time in private. It was a letter from the author of the *New York Times Magazine* profile, the American literary journalist Adam Shatz. In his letter Shatz professed affection for Daoud. He claimed not to be making any accusations at all. He wrote, "I'm not saying you're doing it on purpose, or even that you're playing the game of the 'imperialists.' I'm not accusing you of anything. Except perhaps of not thinking, and of falling into strange and potentially dangerous traps"—which amounted to saying what the 19 professors had said, with the additional accusation of stupidity.

Daoud published the American journalist's letter in *Le Monde*, just to make clear what he was up against—though he did it with an elegant show of friendliness. He explained that he, and not his detractors, lives in Algeria and understands its reality. He noted the Stalinist tone of the attacks on him. He insisted on the validity of his own emotions. He refused to accept the political logic that would require him to lapse into silence about what he believes. And then, in what appeared to be a plain and spiteful fury at his detractors, he declared that he is anyway going to do what the detractors have, in effect, demanded. He is going to silence his journalism: a gesture whose emotional punch comes from *The Meursault Investigation*, with its theme of silence. Or, at minimum, Daoud threatened to be silent—though naturally the calls for him to continue speaking up have already begun, and doubtless he will have to respond.

The two of us who are writing this commentary call attention to a second pattern in these condemnations, which dates to the days of Soviet Communism. Everyone who remembers the history of the 20th century will recall that, during the entire period from the 1920s to the 1980s, one brave and articulate dissident after another in the Soviet bloc succeeded in communicating a message to the Western public about the nature of Communist oppression—valuable messages because the dissidents could describe with first-hand accuracy the Soviet regime and its satellite states.

And, time after time, a significant slice of Western intellectuals responded by crying: “Oh, you mustn’t say such things! You will encourage the reactionaries!” Or they said: “You must be a reactionary yourself. A tool of imperialism.” The intellectuals who responded in these ways were sometimes Communists, pledged to loyalty to the Soviet Union, and sometimes they were fellow-travelers, who defended the Soviet Union without having made any pledges. But sometimes they were merely people who worried about their own societies—who worried that criticism of the Soviet Union was bound to benefit right-wing fanatics in the West. These people considered that, in denouncing the Soviet dissidents, they were protecting the possibility for lucid and progressive conversation in their own countries.

But that was a mistake. By denouncing the dissidents, Western intellectuals succeeded in obfuscating the Soviet reality. And they lent the weight of their own prestige to the Soviet regime, which meant that, instead of being the enemies of oppression, they ended up as the allies of oppression. The progressive intellectuals were not foolish to worry about right-wing fanaticism in their own countries, but they needed to recognize that sometimes political arguments have to be complicated. They needed to learn how to defend the Soviet dissidents even while attacking right-wing fanatics in the West. They needed to make two arguments at the same time.

Too many progressive intellectuals today are falling into the pattern of those fallacies of long ago. They are right to worry about anti-Muslim bigotries in the Western countries. But in turning themselves into the enemies of an entire class of liberal writers from Muslim backgrounds, they are achieving the opposite of what they intend. They mean to oppose racism. But they end up drawing invidious distinctions between people like themselves, who ought to be free to issue angry criticisms of their own cultures and societies, and the intellectuals of the Muslim countries, who ought to bite their tongues. They mean to defend lucidity, but they obfuscate realities by drowning out the news that is brought to us by the liberal writers. They mean to inhibit the growth of irrational hatreds in the West. But they end up adding to the hatreds that are directed at the liberal writers. They mean to display sympathy for the Arab and Muslim world, and they end up castigating its most talented writers. They mean to promote progress, and they end up adding their weight to the Islamist condemnations. Daoud, with his eloquent protest, has revealed the ironies. We applaud him, and we applaud the newspapers that have published him—and we hope that, having made his point, he will quickly return to the business of making people think.

Paul Berman and Michael Walzer

P.S.

* Tablet. March 21, 2016 • 12:00 AM:

<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/198606/the-daoud-affair>

* Paul Berman is the critic-at-large of Tablet magazine.

Michael Walzer is professor (emeritus) at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He is the author of *Just and Unjust Wars* and *The Paradox of Liberation*, among other books, and the former co-editor of *Dissent* magazine.

Footnotes

- [1] <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/191181/reflections-on-pen-protesters>
- [2] <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/191489/the-meursault-investigation>
- [3] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/magazine/stranger-still.html?_r=0
- [4] ESSF (article 37516), [Saudi Arabia, an ISIS That Has Made It - "The West wages war on one, but shakes hands with the other"](#).
- [5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/the-sexual-misery-of-the-arab-world.html>