

Review Article: Jean Birnbaum on the French left's failure to tackle the irruption of Islamic belief in politics and war

Monday 4 April 2016, by [COATES Andrew](#) (Date first published: March 2016).

Review of *Un Silence Religieux. La Gauche Face au Djihadisme*. Jean Birnbaum. Seuil 2015.

Contents

- [From Foucault to Harman](#)
- [Marxism and Religion](#)
- [Shoulder to Shoulder](#)

"Quand on voudra s'occuper utilement du bonheur des hommes, c'est par les dieux du Ciel que la réforme doit commencer."

When we wish to carry out some useful work for human happiness, reform will have to begin with the gods in the heavens.

D' Holbach. *Système de la nature*. 1777. [[1](#)]

The Brussels killings, have "nothing to do with Islam" said the Belgian Muslim on *Sky News* on Saturday. Amongst the disarray that follows each atrocity, the dignified quiet of mourning, there is this statement, "It has nothing to do with Islam" – Jean Birnbaum cites the official, the specialist, the columnist, and the academic in France, as across the world. *Charlie Hebdo*, the Hyper-Cacher, the Bataclan, and now Brussels; the slaughters in the Middle East, North Africa, Nigeria, and so many elsewheres, have nothing to do with Islam. These are, we are informed, acts of terrorism, with 'causes', about which the interested will find a very long, very weighty, list. But one is stubbed out: religion, left in silence. Rien-à-voirisme, that is, "nothing to with-ism" is the response. Jihadism has nothing to do with Jihad.

The massacre in Lahore leaves us enveloped in the deepest of silences, the most profound sadness. But we have to listen. Jean Birnbaum asks, by what right does anybody have to deny the religious claims of the Jihadists? If members of Daesh are ever brought to the Hague Tribunal and judged for Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity will the religious doctrines that order their lives and by which they destroy those of others, be ruled inadmissible evidence?

Birnbaum's *Un Silence Religieux* is not an essay on the failings of politicians grappling with the need to avoid scapegoating religious minorities. It is not about the generous feelings of people who wish to show respect for the beliefs of Muslims. It is not against those who point out the faulty syllogisms of the hate mongers who assert that 'all' Muslims are Islamist Jihadist sympathisers because...they too are Muslims. It is not, to cite a daily reiteration of his point, about the BBC's official "rien-à-voirisme" labelling the Islamic State "so-called".

Un Silence Religieux, the Gauche Face au Djihadisme is a dissection of the French left's failure to

tackle the fact of the irruption of Islamic belief in politics and war. His charge is that the majority fail to deal with the power of religious faith, its “autonomous force” in the lives of the Jihadists, reinforced in rituals and in murder. That Islam far from being consigned to the past, is a “universalism” with its own political impact – Islamism – is hard to accept, he argues, for a French left that is incapable of taking religion seriously.

If French left-wingers, intellectuals and activists, are more likely to dismiss faith as reactionary than, say, the English-speaking left, there remain those who take the that there is a form of “rebellion” at work in Islamism, a – distorted – projection of social causes. For every reflection on the Middle East and Islamism itself, another immediately jumps out: on Europe’s Islamists, on Europe’s states, on the French Republic, and the Salafism of the housing estates. That is to follow Olivier Roy, an “Islamisation of radicalisation”, (l’islamisation de la radicalité) a ‘nihilist’ and ‘generational revolt by those uninterested in written doctrine. (*Le Monde*. 30.11.15). To look for the sources in the failings of the French Republic, Western foreign policy, to look everywhere but in religion, In short, to explain away the fact of faith, that “day after day” by prayer and ceremonies guides the Jihadists, animated by the “*récits mythiques et les formes symboliques*” that “*orientent leur esprit*” (Page 31).

For Birnbaum this “community of fate” is the only ideal in the world for which young people by tens of thousands are willing to risk their lives, “*le combat en faveur du rétablissement du ‘califat’.*” (Page 186) That claim, for all the elegance, clarity and passions he puts into this landmark essay, as they say, *se discute* – that is, it is very very debatable.

Un Silence Religieux traces the French left’s refusal to come to terms with the force of religion in the anti-colonialist history of North Africa. The minority of the country that stood in support of the struggle for Algerian independence and against the vicious repression of the French state was also marked by a tendency to remain silent about problems posed by the nationalist movement. Above all they treated the central role of Islam as “folklore”, the result of colonial underdevelopment that would disappear in the universalism and third-world socialism of the new society.

Four years after independence, in 1966, Pierre Maillot, closely involved in the conflict and its aftermath, sent an article criticising the Algerian programme of Arabisation and Islamisation to the ‘personalist’ left journal, *Esprit*. They accepted its truth, but judged it “inopportune” to publish.

Readers of the (colonial) Algerian raised Camus’ condemnation of all forms of blind terrorism, and those familiar with the section of the French left that backed the FLN’s opponents, led by Messali Hadj, and the small circulation writings of those who quickly denounced the new regime’s bureaucratic and repressive turn are familiar with some of the issues. But, as Claude Lanzmann recalls, having been overwhelmed by the necessity to defend the fight for independence against French repression and torture, the majority of the anti-colonial left was not about to denounce the efforts of the independent nation to create a new society.

One result, as Birnbaum states, was that nobody singled out the project that Maillot and a few others tried in vain to signal, the “arabo-islamisme” of the majority of those fighting against the occupiers, and the FLN’s determination to make Islam the centre of national life. Those critical of the new government concentrated their fire on these issues, and the emerging bureaucracy In *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Jean François Lyotard warned in 1963 immediately after independence of the economic difficulties facing an underdeveloped country and a regime empty of democratic political life which began with populist slogans, including Ben Bella’s simultaneous railing against “cosmopolitanism” and calls for an Islam freed from “superstition”. Even the anti-totalitarian Claude Lefort, warning in the same year of the dangers of One-Party rule, considered the issue of secularism and Islamism to be a diversion from the economic – agricultural – and social problems of the country. [2]

Birnbaum argues that the legacy of this stand has indelibly marked the French left. The view that Islam is a religion of the “dominated” served to explain away the dominance of religious themes in the anti-imperialist Algerian struggle, to make it seem as if it was vehicle of revolt, and to conceal the autonomous importance of religious fervour. This had a long afterlife. In the 1980s Ahmed Ben Bella, the emblematic figure of the revolution deposed by the 1965 Boumédiène coup, was inspired by the Iranian example and became a fervent Islamist. An Arab nationalist (with all the problems that creates in a country with a strong Berber minority) he came to pronounce that Islamism was the “only authentic revolt against the economic and cultural domination of the West.” (Page 96) Freed from Maghreb detention he put his ideas into action, and, within a few years, founded an Islamist party opposed to the Algerian one-party state. Bella’s former comrades on the French left – and here I am speaking from direct experience – excused the turn. Asked if there was room for atheists in his version of the Islamic society when his template theocracy murdered non-believers it was said that a follower of *Das Kapital* could be considered one of the People of the Book.

It is hard, however, not to consider that the attitude of the French left towards Islam, like other European lefts, has been influenced by much wider considerations. The Bolsheviks, we learn from the Socialist Workers Party, tried in their early years to win Muslims to socialism. The early Comintern responded favourably to Pan-Islamism, as an anti-imperialist force. No less an authority than J.V. Stalin, supported the fight of the Emir of Afghanistan for independence, since his struggle “weakens, disintegrates and undermines imperialism.” If Trotsky’s assertion that, “the rule of Islam, of the old prejudices, beliefs and customsthese will more and more turn to dust and ashes” was not fulfilled the tradition of supporting any movement which saps imperialist power was established. It has endured. If the principle that undergirded the strategy, that all these movements were part of the era of revolutions which would produce, sooner or later, the “transition” to socialism and a communist mode of production, has become threadbare there are still many on the left, in France and across the world, who remain trapped within its premises. [3]

From Foucault to Harman

In this respect Birnbaum offers two contrasting accounts of the relation between Islam and revolution. The first is a sympathetic (some would say, unduly so) account of Michael Foucault’s writings on the late seventies Iranian Revolution. Foucault, we learn, was struck both by the originality of this revolt, a people united in a “collective will” without – apparently – a vanguard – and by its originality, that is, its ‘political spirituality’. He remained, Birnbaum assures us, suspicious of “power”.

At the time Maxime Rodinson discerned the potential in the clerics for the totalitarian exercise of that power in the Iranian movement. If he charged Foucault with ignorance about the ambitions already apparent in Islamism, from the Moslem Brotherhood onwards, others have questioned the ‘anti-modernist’ project itself. In a comprehensive study of these writings, Janet Afrey and Kevin Anderson (*Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*. 2005) ask ““Did not a post-structuralist, leftist discourse, which spent all of its energy opposing the secular liberal or authoritarian modern state and its institutions, leave the door wide open to an uncritical stance toward Islamism and other socially retrogressive movements, especially when, as in Iran, they formed a pole of opposition to an authoritarian state and the global political and economic order?” [4]

Foucault was no doubt right about the importance of the Iranian Revolution and its long-lasting effects. The evidence for that legacy is there to read on the left. Alistair Crooke’s claim that “The key event that emerge from the Islamist revolution has been the freeing of thinking from its long tutelage to the tyranny of instrumentalism” may be more muted today. Judith Butler’s claim that the

Burka represents a form of oppositional spirituality to the Western gaze, follows Foucault in ignoring the struggle of Iranian feminists against the veil. For Butler the March 1979 enforcement of the Muslim dress code to cries of “You will cover yourselves or be beaten” is invisible as well. Such indeed is the autonomous power of Islamist spiritual ideology. [5].

Birnbaum then delves into Chris Harman’s *The Prophet and the Proletariat* (1994) for a less exalted view of Islamic revolution. Harman, a leader of the “puissant” (powerful – yes....see page 148) Socialist Workers Party, recognised the importance of the Iranian revolution. A polemic against those who considered the Islamists ‘fascists’, and those who were prepared to directly align themselves with Iran against imperialism, Harman’s account, notably of the Algerian government’s own role in encouraging ‘moderate’ Islamism in the 1970s and early 1980s, indicates the realism of the text. To Harman the class character of diverse Islamist movements, in the petty bourgeoisie, amongst ‘new exploiters’, went without any fascist ambitions to attack the workers’ movement. He noted (see J.V. Stalin, above), “the destabilising effect of the movements on capital’s interests right across the Middle East.” Their main fault in this respect was not being anti-imperialist enough; their petty bourgeois utopia envisaged justice without challenging capitalism.

Harman stated, that this, “utopia” emanating from an impoverished section of the new middle class. As with any

“petty bourgeois utopia” its supporters are, in practice, faced with a choice between heroic but futile attempts to impose it in opposition to those who run existing society, or compromising with them, providing an ideological veneer to continuing oppression and exploitation. It is this that leads inevitably to splits between a radical, terrorist wing of Islamism on the one hand, and a reformist wing on the others. It is also this which leads some of the radicals to switch from using arms to try to bring about a society without “oppressors” to using them to impose “Islamic” forms of behaviour on individuals.” [6]

In fact what Harman advocated was not a formal alliance with the Islamists ‘against the state’ but – sometimes – being on the “same side” against racism and against (see J.V. Stalin again) imperialism. Always naturally involving discussion, and exposing the ‘contradictions’ of the Islamists’ utopian ideas and trying to win them to “revolutionary socialism.” As Birnbaum observes, this was not only an “optimistic” belief, it also rests on the assumption that the “objective” course of history, the working out of economic laws, favours the socialist left. Given the SWP’s own self-belief in the creation of its party as a “tribune of the people”, is equally, Birnbaum accurately gauges, is tied to the much shakier claim that they would emerge as the principle voice and vehicle for the oppressed.

This is not the place to more than outline the collapse of this attempt to embrace the same constituency as the Islamists. Birnbaum does not cover the grotesque alliance that brought forth the shambles and shame of Respect, a party that claimed to represent ‘Muslims’, and the SWP’s work with its leader, George Galloway, now puttering around on *Russia Today*, railing against Europe. Nor does he cover the miasma that came from these quarters following the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, the British *Je ne Suis pas Charlie*, workshop organised by the ‘anti-racist’ movement, Unite Against Racism, from those who had barely heard of the Hebdo who knew, just knew, that they (and the Hypercacher victims?) had it coming to them. But *Un Silence Religieux*, well informed as ever, does cover the more limited attempts on the French left, in the shape of the Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA) to reach out to Islam. The admirable Pierre Rousset’s comment that the NPA’s acceptance of a veiled candidate in Avignon that this was (see J.V.Stalin above) an alliance against the “main enemy” and an inability to take religion seriously. And yet, as Rousset has more recently remarked, for the veiled candidate, Ilham Moussaïd, the « *le voile incarnait ce projet politique* » [The veil incarnated this political protest.] [7]

These examples would appear to show that anything but the most transient and punctual joint-action between those engaged in politics on the basis of Islam and those engaged in politics as socialists – that is those who derive their principles from the supra-human and those who base them on the world – is bound to run aground. If the British left could oppose the invasion of Iraq in alliance with a variety of forces, including the Liberal Democrats, it is hard to see how this can endure into the Syrian conflict where even the most moderate Islamists have sympathies for ...Islamists who wish to create an Islamic – moderate – state. And that is without confronting the issue of secularism in its broadest and weakest sense. No Islamist, by definition, can back the principle of freedom from religion in the running of the public sphere.

Marxism and Religion

Are there deeper fault-lines within Marxism that have contributed to this failure to come to terms with the religious reality of Islamism? Birnbaum discusses Marx's conjecture that faith, as an imaginary projection of social relations, will evaporate once a fully transparent, communist society is created. He spends some time on the equally speculative writings on the origin of the religious imaginary in human alienation, despair and hope for the future. The feeling that somehow, at its origin, that Christianity, and – once whispered – Islam was a form of 'primitive communism', or at least socialistic, views expressed with some verve by Karl Kautsky and repeated by many, from Rosa Luxemburg, to, Birnbaum discovers, Gramsci, may yet encourage a renewal of that famous "dialogue" between the left and the believers that clearly some hanker after. Knowledge of the exclusive nature of these early communities, not to mention the reign of Mohammed, do not encourage imitation amongst more than small circles. The history of utopian communities is riddled with factionalism and failure. Medieval and other apocalyptic revolts with their mass killings, and hysteria, may also be important moments of early – peasant – class conflict – but they do not inspire modern supporters of the right not to believe.

But for Islamism that time has long passed. Birnbaum contrasts the hopes for a fully human world that animated the Spanish Internal Volunteers with the Jihadist refrain of *Viva la muerte!* (page 213) The social relations that are turned upside down and projected in the visions of death that appear in the jihadist wish for the "end of the world" and a "good death" are perhaps the affair of specialists, who might trace them in Olivier Roy's nihilism. They do not fit easily into the explanations of those who wish to uncover a Universalist society of equality – a religious utopia in Ernst Bloch's sense – amongst those attracted to violent Islamism. What we see bears a strong resemblance to another of Foucault's visions, a disciplinary society based on obsessive regulation of every gesture by the learned interpreters of the Qur'an, or their home-made improvised pretenders. A world in which every form of behaviour, every belief we hold in our hearts under surveillance – by the vice-regents of god – and corrected. Which is ruled by punishment, always punishment. And mortal cruelty. [8]

Birnbaum asks why the enthusiasm for Islam, which has led in the form of Daesh, to a "cruel violence" a hatred of modern Reason, in its different shapes, philosophical, Marxist, bourgeois or proletarian, inspires. The left, after the Fall of Official Communism, the triumph of capitalist economics and the predatory wars of the West, briefly came to life in the anti-, or 'other-' 'globalisation movements, which have faded. We are, in sum, confronted with not the end of the 'grand narratives' of the left, progress, emancipation, but at an impasse.

Shoulder to Shoulder

In these conditions what remains? If we recognise “la force autonome de l’élan spirituel” we have made a step forward: ideology is a material practice. But is that all? The rationalist strain in Marxism, which owes something to d’Holbach, has tried to concentrate on exposing the ‘error’ of religion. Yet science, atheism, or simply rational explanation, has so far fared badly faced with ideology. Translating Reason into lived experience has always looked a formidable task. But now when a world-view so all-encompassing, enforced by a web of publishers, of ‘educational’ bodies, and Courts, state backed or not, and financed so generously by the twin arms of Islamic intolerance, Riyadh and Tehran exists how can this be confronted but by open political struggle? [9]

They are already engaged in inter-Muslim warfare. But outside, from the institutions down to the jihadist micro-powers, right up to the Islamic State itself in Syria and Iraq, another battle, ideological, and ultimately, physical, is taking place. New fault-lines are emerging. It is clear, and Birnbaum admirably contributes to the literature, that there are many in the Islamic world, including those who consider themselves good Muslims, who for love of the world and its people, promote democracy, human rights, and free-thought about religion. We are less sanguine than Birnbaum’s former teacher, and one-times supporter of the Gauche Prolétarienne, Christian Jambert, on the resources available inside Islamic philosophy that can continue to the spirit of liberty. Will they, as d’Holbach suggested, be able to reform the idea of god? Will we be able to attract widely for the secular cause of freedom? For the moment it is for us to stand shoulder to shoulder with these democrats. [10]

Andrew Coates

P.S.

* Tendance Coates. A Left Socialist Blog:

<https://tendancecoatesy.wordpress.com/2016/03/29/un-silence-religieux-la-gauche-face-au-djihadisme-jean-birnbaum-review-article/>

Footnotes

[1] Page 67. D’Holbach. Premières œuvres. Les Classiques du peuple. 1971.

[2] Albert Camus. Chroniques algériennes. 1939 - 1958. Gallimard. 2012. Pages 498 - 591 Claude Lanzmann. Le lièvre de Patagonie. Gallimard. 2009. Page. 56. Jean-François Lyotard: L’Algérie évacuée Socialisme ou Barbarie. No 34. 1963. La Politique et la Pensée de la Politique. (Les lettres nouvelles. 1963) Reprinted in: Sur une colonne absente. Claude Lefort. Gallimard. 1978.

[3] Page 75. J.V. Stalin. The Foundations of Leninism. Peking. 1970. Also available here, The Foundations of Leninism THE NATIONAL QUESTION:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1924/foundations-leninism/ch06.htm>

Leon Trotsky: Perspectives and Tasks in the East. 1924. See on ESSF (article 37608),

[Perspectives and Tasks in the East - Speech on the third anniversary of the Communist University for Toilers of the East.](#)

- [4] Page 136. Foucault and the Iranian Revolution.. Gender and seduction. Janet Afrey and Kevin B. Anderson University of Chicago. 2005.
- [5] Resistance. The Essence of the Islamist Revolution. Alastair Crooke. Pluto Press.2009. For Judith Butler the Burka, "signifies belong-ness to a community and religion, a family, an extended history of kin relations, an exercise of modesty and pride, a protection against shame, and operates as well as a veil behind which, and through which, feminine agency can and does work."(Page 142) It is related to the fear of "decimation of Islamic culture and the extension of US cultural assumptions about how sexuality and agency ought to be organised and represented,"(Page 142). The Precarious life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence, Judith Butler. Verso 2006
- [6] Chris Harman, The Prophet and the Proletariat:
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/xx/islam.htm>
- [7] Pierre Rousset, ESSF (article 37073), [Le NPA, sept ans après : projet, réalités, interrogations:](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article37073)
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article37073>
- [8] Michael Foucault, Discipline and Punish. Penguin, 1991.
- [9] Marx et le baron d'Holbach. Denis Lecompte. PUF. 1983.
- [10] On the forces sustaining and dividing the power of Islamism see: Riddles of the Book. Suleiman Mourad. New Left Review. No 86. Second series. 2014. Christian Jambert. Q'est que la philosophie islamique. Folio. 2011.