

After Cologne: Myopia on Muslim Fundamentalism (Tahrir square in Europe)

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Underplaying the simultaneous attacks on women across five countries in Europe protects the dangers of Muslim fundamentalism.

Facts

On New Year's Eve 2015, simultaneous coordinated sexual attacks took place against women in public space in about 10 cities, mostly in Germany, but also in Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland. Several hundred women, to this day, filed a case for sexual attack, robbery, and rape. These attacks were perpetrated by young men of migrant descent (be they immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, or other) from North Africa and the Middle East.

Reactions were predictable and unsurprising: there was a distinct misrepresentation of facts and dilution of the extent and spread of incidents across countries in Europe; this was done by governments, the police and even the media, for as long as it was possible to do. Women's rights were sacrificed for social peace.

There was, what I would term as a preventive hullabaloo from the Left, which includes a fair number of feminists, in order to defend foreigners, presumed to be 'Muslim' from racism. Please note: there was an intended shift of nomenclature. The attacked women described the attackers, on the basis of geographical location of identity, as 'Arabs' or 'North Africans', in the pre-emptive discourse this was altered to 'Muslims.' There was a clamour for more security measures on the far Right. In Germany, the first indiscriminate pogrom against non-whites took place. In substance there was a denial of the gravity of the attacks on women that took place across Europe with the use of the slogan of 'racism' to prevent any soul-searching on the rise of a far right Muslim fundamentalism in Europe.

Memories

2011: At the heart of Tunis, a protest by secular feminists against Ben Ali: groups of young fundamentalists (there is evidence of their affiliation) surround the mostly women demonstrators, isolate them, attack them sexually, touch their sex and breasts, hit them violently, despite efforts to rescue them by male supporters who joined the meeting in solidarity. The Police is watching.

2012: Tahrir square, Cairo, the place where anti-government opposition meet: for the first time women in numbers take this opportunity to seize and exercise their citizenship rights. Groups of young men (were they part of the Muslim Brotherhood or manipulated by them?) sexually molest hundreds of women demonstrators (and foreign journalists), press photos show some of them partly undressed, there are attempts to register cases of rape. The police, too, get at women demonstrators, beating them up, forcing 'virginity tests' upon them, etc. This policy of sexual terror will go on for months in Cairo, to the point that women's organizations develop an electronic

emergency map of Cairo where attacks on women are registered in real time so that teams of male rescuers can rush to the trouble spot.

Summer 1969 An even older memory from Algiers: at the first Pan-African Cultural Festival: hundreds of women sit on the ground on the Main Post Office square which has been cleared of cars; they attend one of the many free public concerts that take place everyday from 5 pm to 4 am, cultural dates that women follow in masses; most of them wear the traditional white 'haïk' typical of the Algiers region and they have brought many children too. At dusk around 8.30 pm, a rallying cry sounds, 'En- nsa, l-ed-dar', 'women go home', chanted by hundreds of men who also came to attend the concert. Slowly, little group by little group, with much regret, the women and children leave the square. Men, triumphant and despising, laugh at them. The Nazis too, so defined women's place: 'church, kitchen and cradle'. Seven years after independence, the place assigned in public space to the celebrated revolutionary heroines of the glorious Algerian liberation struggle is now clearly defined. Patriarchy and fundamentalism, culture and religion, fly high together.

How strange that such links are not being made with the present attack, not even by feminists who supported the women of Tahrir Square when they were attacked there?

It seems Europe cannot learn anything from us and that nothing that happens or happened in our countries can be of any relevance to what goes on in Europe. By extension, an underlying racism, never yet so exposed in the radical Left, implicitly admits to an unbridgeable difference between 'civilized' and 'under developed' people, their behaviors, their cultures, their political situations. Under this essentialised otherness lies a hierarchy too shameful to mention: the radical Left's blind defence of 'Muslim' reactionaries, implicitly condones the belief that, for non-Europeans, a far right response is a normal one to a situation of oppression; clearly, we are not seen as capable of either a revolutionary or a civilised response.

(I will not develop here, in this article, how this belief is exported even by Left elites in Asia and Africa).

Cassandras that no one listens to, that is us. We have been yelling, screaming and howling for three decades now. We have been pointing at the similarities, the dangerous authoritarian, proto-fascist trends, that could have led to a political enlightening. Algerian women especially, who fled fundamentalist terror in the nineties, have pointed relentlessly to similar, regressive steps taken in Algeria from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Within Europe and North America too there have attacks on the legal rights of women of Algerian, Arab, North African descent. There have been demands for a specific 'Muslim' law in family matters, sex segregation in hospitals, swimming pools and elsewhere; these have coincided with communalist demands for a non-secular education and syllabus. It is these demands that have been followed by physical, targeted attacks on individuals who do not bend to these demands. These have included girls being stoned and even burnt to death. Secularists have been branded as *kofr* (these include journalists, actresses, and *Charlie Hebdo*). The culmination is indiscriminate attacks on anyone whose behavior does not fit with fundamentalist norms: remember Bataclan, café terraces, and attacks on football match, etc.? These attacks have steadily grown.

In Algeria from the 1970s until the 1990s, the fundamentalist attacks began with the targeted attacks on women's rights and their very presence in public space. We have had long experience of governments who do not hesitate in trading women's rights for a form of social contract with fundamentalists.

However, the European Left seems incapable of distancing itself from its own situation where people

of migrant descent, among whom there are both 'Muslims' and others, do face discrimination. By not facing to the character and strategy of Muslim fundamentalists in societies within and those foreign to Europe, by not denouncing the attack of the Muslim right on women, in Europe and outside, the Left cedes the right to be moral arbiter. The terrain is then left free for the far Right within Europe that has now appropriated all discourse on the issue.

I fear, as many of us fear, more and more, that this denial to face what happened and condemn it for what it was, will or may now lead to indiscriminate 'popular' and 'punitive' actions. This will satisfy the desire for revenge on both sides. Of the traditional xenophobic extreme right of Europe as also the Muslim fundamentalist right that will feeding into these circumstances, recruit more to its fold within Europe. We have already witnessed the attempts by Mayors elected from French parties of the extreme right, who have begun to legitimise the creation of an armed popular militia to 'protect' French citizens. Granted, both the French Left and the Social Democrats have regularly objected to these moves. However, insofar as they refuse to confront Muslim fundamentalism and remain in denial mode, they de facto surrender the ideological terrain to the racist extreme Right.

How are we to ignore the many steps forward that fundamentalists have made in Europe? The recent brutal challenging of women's presence in the public space on December 31, 2015 is only one more illustration of this phenomenon. A myopic Eurocentric vision prevents from seeing similarities with what took place, for instance, in North Africa and the Middle East over the decades, when the fundamentalists took over through democratic traditions and cultures.

In Europe, where 'Muslims' are seen as victims and oppressed minorities, this is apparently the justification for any aggressive and reactionary behavior from them. The European Left just needs to cross a few national borders to appreciate and understand what the nature of the political program and project of the fundamentalists is. What the fundamentalist worldview is regarding democracy, secularism, believers in other religions and women. What do fundamentalist regimes do when they are in a majority or when they come to power? The absence of this much needed political analysis is what allows them to further their tentacles in Europe. Thanks also to capitalist and xenophobic oppression in Europe, the rank reactionary worldview of the Muslim fundamentalist extreme right is being white-washed. Is this not a dangerously Eurocentric approach?

In a self-defeating attitude that can only be understood in terms of the 'theory of priorities', both the Left and far too many feminists promote the exclusive defence of people of migrant origin (re-invented as 'Muslims') pitted against the capitalist western right. This is another deadly error that history will judge harshly. Progressive forces within societies battling fundamentalism are being abandoned to fight their battles alone. The implicit hierarchy of human rights and their priorities, in which categorisation women's rights rank far behind minority rights, religious rights, and cultural rights enables this hypocrisy to continue.

Since 9.11 (2001) in the USA and the security measures that followed, the analysis of the debate for the Left and even human rights groups has centred around the 'War against terror.' Undeniably there have been gross abuses including the curtailment of civil liberties. In the France of 2014-2015, a similar situation now prevails. A state of emergency was imposed after the November attacks and there is legitimate fear that a Patriot Act of sorts could be developed in Europe.

'Terror' itself however is being pushed aside, out of the discourse. The reality of terror is made to fade and an illusion or a bogey-man for government's freedom-killing actions is replaced. It is almost as if there is a 'War on terror', but actually no 'terror'! In this worldview, terror is made to appear like the fantasy of the xenophobic extreme right; what this view ignores is that there were indeed human bombs that exploded in Paris. Yet there is no war in France? There are elaborate debates on what governments should and should not do, the intentions and motives of states are dubbed

manipulative and detrimental to liberties. A cause and a consequence system does now re- emerge, but in a reverse image. The traditional image of pulling the rabbit out of the hat in which it was made to disappear stands on its head: here we dig the hat out of the rabbit...

A worldwide phenomenon - the rise of a new brand of extreme right: i.e. Muslim fundamentalism - is not only being insidiously justified but quite literally 'disappeared' behind the critic of the reactions that its own actions engenders. We simply cannot let the phenomenon of extreme right-wing Muslim fundamentalism to be thus conjured away. Denial will not make the phenomenon disappear.

The emerging phenomenon that the world is experiencing is not simply a creature determined by western capitalism. It has emerged from within different regimes and spheres and cultural spaces. One thing is however clear. Over the past 30 years burying one's head into the sand has not led to any diminishing of the demands of the extreme fundamentalist right, neither in Europe nor anywhere else. Far from that, fundamentalism has surfed on the occultation of its political nature and grown through its cynical exploitation of democratic freedoms and of human rights.

What is at stake here goes far beyond women's rights; it is a project to establish a theocratic society in which, among many other rights, women's rights will be severely curtailed. The concerted action on 31.12 (2015) all over Europe, the brute challenging of women's place in public space(s) plays exactly the same role as the sudden invention of the so-called 'Islamic veil': it is a show of force and power, making visible the fundamentalist right.

This show of force may meet with success. This was exactly how the 'Islamic veil' was enforced on women: by force. The advice so far given by some of the German authorities to the attacked women in Cologne attest to a similar 'adjustment' and compromise. Reportedly the women who were attacked on New Year's Eve were told by German authorities: adjust to the new situation, stay away from men ('at arms length'), don't go out on your own, etc... In short, submit or pay the price. If anything happens to you, it will be your fault, you have been warned.

This kind of advice is similar to what used to be said in court(s) not so long ago to women who had been raped. Why were you in 'such and such' place? What were you doing out at 'such a time'? Why were you wearing 'such a dress'? Advice that Muslim fundamentalist preachers will definitely not disavow...

That the primary concern after the attacks on women all over Europe, was to protect the perpetrators and not defend women victims is a slight variation on the usual defence of men's violence against women. The questions that need to be asked, however, are this: to what extent is it a defense of patriarchy, or a defence of migrants, and of ethnic or religious minorities? The interests of patriarchy (that the Left does not dare defend officially anymore) merge with the noble defence of the 'oppressed' (the November 2015 Paris attacks dented the legitimacy of this argument, considerably). They become convenient bedfellows.

Searching questions need still to be asked on the concerted, simultaneous attacks on women in over a dozen cities in five different countries of Europe. Not to do so is to perpetuate a blind political perversity.

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P.S.

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