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Europe & beyond: Islamophobia and the rise of a new fascist movement

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Those who fight for a society of multiracial equality have a lot of work to do, and they have to start by fighting the new fascists. The far right and new fascists are at their highest point in Europe since the second world war. This poses a grave threat to democratic rights, immigrant communities, the left and the labour movement - and to the interests of the working class and oppressed more generally. The rise, and in some cases installation in power, of these forces, poses a terrible threat to social progress and to immigrant communities, women and LGBT communities in particular.

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In Italy, Denmark, Hungary and Austria, fascist or hard-right parties are already in the government. In France the Front National and in Germany the AfD (Alliance for Germany) continue to pose a threat. And in Britain Tommy Robinson's 'Democratic' Football Lads Alliance is the most credible and dangerous fascist force for decades - much more credible, with much more support, than the National Front in the 1970s.

These phenomena are part of a global shift to the right exemplified also by the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the vote for Brexit in Britain. It represents the complete failure of social democracy and other 'centre-left' forces to put forward credible policies to meet the austerity crisis of neoliberalism. Indeed many of these parties, like the Blairite Labour Party, the French Socialist Party, the SPD in Germany and the Italian Democratic Left, have been the government, or part of the government, that has administered neoliberal austerity. However, if this has caused a polarisation to the left and the right, today the tide is overwhelmingly to the right.

Roots of Islamophobia

The calling cards of the fascists and hard right are xenophobia and racism, usually laced with an admixture of misogyny and homophobia. But the cutting edge has been anti-immigrant racism, and the cutting edge of that has been Islamophobia, at a level which parallels anti-Semitism in Germany before the advent of the Nazis in power in January 1933. How did this mass Islamophobia, reinforced by anti-Black racism (and anti-Latino racism in the United States), arise? Of course, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of mass racism have subsisted in Western societies since the advent of European imperialism (and in the case of anti-Semitism, before). But today's Islamophobia is

much deeper and much more widespread. Its roots lie in the 9/11 attack and the subsequent 'war on terror' launched by American imperialism. It has been reinforced by mass panic over immigration, much of which comes from war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, where most people are Muslims.

There has been a disastrous synergy between the hard right forces in Western politics and the terrorism of Al-Qaeda and then of Isis. Terrorist attacks on civilian populations carried out by people who profess allegiance to Islam, have been weaponised ruthlessly by the political right, using the hugely powerful mass media to establish a series of stereotypes about Muslims. The most important of these of course is the association of Muslims with terrorism, when evidently the overwhelming majority of Muslims oppose and repudiate terrorism. Linked to this has been mystification about the religious and family practices of Muslims, culminating in the caricatures of women who wear the hijab or niqab.

War on Terror

Every stage of capitalism generates a dominant ideological 'glue', a way of justifying the status quo and tying the working class to the existing order. In the 40 years of the 'cold war', roughly from 1949 to 1989, the dominant ideology was that of the superiority of consumer capitalism and liberal democracy. This was tied together by political anti-communism, which targeted the foreign enemy (mainly the Soviet bloc plus China) and tried to associate the regimes in these states with the political left domestically - the 'enemy within'.

This ideological framework of anti-communism was shared by the major pro-capitalist parties, in Europe mainly centre-left and centre right, and in the United States the Democrats and Republicans. Much of the European labour movement, for example the Social Democrats in Germany and the Labour Party in Britain, bought into this anti-communist framework, which also coincided with the era of mainly progressive economic growth, full employment and welfare states. In most advanced capitalist countries liberal democratic regimes were compelled to tolerate powerful labour movements and extensive democratic rights.

But there were exceptions to this 'benign capitalism' model, most notably the treatment of ethnic minorities but also some harsh anti-left domestic regimes - such as the United States during the 1950s McCarthyite anti-communist witch hunt and the autocratic Gaullist regime in France after 1958. Even so, social democratic and centre right politicians were able to point to real gains for the working class and contrast their societies with the apparently undemocratic regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The ideology of consumer capitalism, plus anti-communism under the umbrella of American military dominance, was powerful because it appeared to coincide with reality.

This dominant ideological framework began to fray at the edges during the 1960s and '70s but paradoxically was struck a decisive blow by its victory - the fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Anti-communism could hardly function as a central ideological plank when communism had collapsed. In fact the ideologues of Western capitalism struggled in the post-1949 period to come up with a credible political ideology for integrating the working class and uniting the political leaders of each class, the political elites and intelligentsia in an overall pro-capitalist framework. Francis Fukuyama tried warming up Hegel's 'end of history' thesis, arguing that liberal capitalism was the end point of human historical development and from now on the world would glide to a prosperous, liberal democratic, nirvana (1). This was too rarefied an idea to have much mass purchase, especially as it was immediately disproved by events like the first Gulf War. This was especially the case because of the advent of neoliberalism and growing economic

crisis. The idea of benign capitalist development that benefitted everyone could not be sustained.

The opportunity for a new ideology to replace anti-communism, with deep roots in mass consciousness, came with the 9/11 attacks in the United States, which as everyone knows killed more than 3000 people, and caused a huge wave of shock and grief in America. George Bush Junior's militaristic and deeply conservative team rapidly rolled out the 'war on terror'. Within five months of the attack Bush was using his 2002 State of the Union address to declare 'either you are with us or against us'. A new enemy - 'terrorism' - had been declared, and one which conveniently used US military power to reinforce American political dominance in the West.

It could hardly escape anyone's attention that the jihadi terrorism that targeted the United States was led by Muslims and conducted in the name of Islam. Fuelled by the grossly undemocratic Patriot Act and utterly reactionary new sources like Fox News, hostility and suspicion towards Muslims became normalised in the United States. Every survey has shown that in Europe and the United States terrorism is rejected by the overwhelming majority of Muslims.

This has not stopped the stereotyping and targeting of Muslim communities by all the forcers of the reactionary right and by Western capitalist states. The Patriot Act, permitting extensive new rights of detention without trial, increased border security, intrusive surveillance and search measures, was mainly aimed at Muslims and passed within five weeks of 9/11. According to the FBI racist attacks on Muslims increased by 16000% in 2002, and even 15 years later was at five times the pre-2001 level. The 'othering' of Muslims, stereotyping them as a suspicious, potential 'enemy within' became part of mass consciousness. The visceral anti-communism of the McCarthyite witch hunt period in the 1950s, was replaced by a visceral Islamophobia post-9/11.

Amongst Western political elites and the middle-class intelligentsia, a new theory emerged with much more purchase than Fukuyama's brittle 'end of history'. This was the 'clash of civilisations' idea, popularised by Samuel Huntington's book (2), but first put forward by Bernard Lewis in his 1990 article, *The Roots of Muslim Rage* (3). Lewis discusses a range of possible explanations to the question 'why do they hate us'? 'Us' in this case being the West and by extension Israel. Finally, he comes to this conclusion:

"Ultimately, the struggle of the fundamentalists is against two enemies, secularism and modernism. The war against secularism is conscious and explicit, and there is by now a whole literature denouncing secularism as an evil neo-pagan force in the modern world and attributing it variously to the Jews, the West, and the United States. The war against modernity is for the most part neither conscious nor explicit and is directed against the whole process of change that has taken place in the Islamic world in the past century or more and has transformed the political, economic, social, and even cultural structures of Muslim countries. Islamic fundamentalism has given an aim and a form to the otherwise aimless and formless resentment and anger of the Muslim masses at the forces that have devalued their traditional values and loyalties and, in the final analysis, robbed them of their beliefs, their aspirations, their dignity, and to an increasing extent even their livelihood."

So for Lewis, Muslim rage is aimed at modernity and secularism. Huntington argues that there are three main contending civilisations - Judeo-Christian, Muslim and Confucian (read: China). While Lewis' account of Islamic resentment against the West is probably accurate as far as conscious Islamist political organisations are concerned, as an account of the consciousness of the Muslim masses it is a wild caricature. Both Lewis and Huntington posit the decisive contest between Judeo-Christian civilisation and Christian civilisation as a centuries-long contest, which has been waged for 1300 years. In his 1993 article in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* (4) Huntington claimed:

“It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilisations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future.”

In a stinging rebuke to the clash of civilisations thesis, Edward Said wrote:

“Uncountable are the editorials in every American and European newspaper and magazine of note adding to this vocabulary of gigantism and apocalypse, each use of which is plainly designed not to edify but to inflame the reader’s indignant passion as a member of the ‘West,’ and what we need to do. Churchillian rhetoric is used inappropriately by self-appointed combatants in the West’s, and especially America’s, war against its haters, despoilers, destroyers, with scant attention to complex histories that defy such reductiveness and have seeped from one territory into another, in the process overriding the boundaries that are supposed to separate us all into divided armed camps.”

Moreover: “A unilateral decision made to draw lines in the sand, to undertake crusades, to oppose their evil with our good, to extirpate terrorism and, in (former US deputy defence secretary) Paul Wolfowitz’s nihilistic vocabulary, to end nations entirely, doesn’t make the supposed entities any easier to see; rather, it speaks to how much simpler it is to make bellicose statements for the purpose of mobilizing collective passions than to reflect, examine, sort out what it is we are dealing with in reality, the interconnectedness of innumerable lives, ‘ours’ as well as ‘theirs’.”(5)

For Said the writings of Lewis and Huntington was part of a new ‘Orientalism’, his word for describing the writings and art of late 19th century European intellectuals who pictured the cultures of Asia and the Middle East as dark, mysterious and barbaric.

Of course Lewis and Huntington did not have a mass audience in the early 1990s for their clash of civilisation ideas. But once the 9/11 attack had taken place in 2001, the neoliberal, militaristic government in the United States, as well as right wing opinion formers world-wide, reached for the clash of civilisations idea, which became a useful framework for the ‘war on terror’. It is notable for example that the precursor of the hard right AfD (Alliance for Germany) that now has 94 seats in the Bundestag, was the street activist PEGIDA movement. Its name literally means Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West. Events like the November 2004 shooting of Dutch film maker Theo van Gough by a man of Moroccan origin could be easily used to create the stereotype - ‘we’ are liberal, ‘they’ are violent and illiberal. Most importantly ‘we’ must keep them out.

Terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis

The incoherence of the clash of civilisations idea did not of course stop it being picked up and used by every racist and xenophobe in politics and the media. The notion that ‘they’ are not like ‘us’, that they are a potential enemy internally and externally, has gone deep into popular consciousness in the West. But Islamophobia and terrorist attacks in the US and Western Europe have a terrible synergy. While the number of victims of this nihilistic terrorism is small compared with the huge number killed in Muslims lands by Western military intervention, it is still an awful litany of hundreds of ordinary citizens needlessly and ruthlessly killed.

One hundred and ninety-one people were killed in train bombings in Madrid in 2004; 52 people were killed in the 2005 attacks on the London transport system; 130 people were killed in the Paris attacks in 2015; and 22 people were killed in the Manchester attack in 2017. These are just some of

the more notable attacks. This recourse to terror is a direct and widely predicted result of the countless dead in the West's brutal wars on Muslim lands.

In addition to straight Islamophobia, obviously the other, overlapping, element that fuels the racist right in Europe is the refugee crisis. Millions of people have crossed into Europe in the past 15 years and the number has accelerated sharply to over a million a year by 2016.

Three things are central to understanding this. First a huge percentage of migrants come from countries that have been wrecked by war, and generally these have been started by the West. Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq are major examples, but of course many come from Syria. Second in countries where direct Western military intervention is not a factor, Western states and corporations are often complicit in wars and economic collapse. As Slavov Zizek explains in relation to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

"...A UN report into the illegal exploitation of resources in the Congo found that is mainly about access to and control of, and trade in five key mineral resources: cobalt, diamonds, copper, coltan and gold. Beneath the façade of ethnic warfare, we thus discern the workings of global capitalism. Congo no loner exists as a unified state; it is a multiplicity of territories ruled by local warlords, with armies that usually include drugged children. Each of these warlords has business links with a foreign company or corporation controlling the mainly mining wealth of the region" (6)

Third, the complete collapse of centre right and centre left politicians in front of anti-immigrant rhetoric that prepared the ground for the far right. Anti-immigrant rhetoric, the constant promise to get tough on immigration, is standard fare for mainstream parties that long proceeded Donald Trump and the new rise of the far right. As Kenan Malik explains:

"Too often when we discuss hateful portrayals of migrants or Muslims or other minorities, we focus on the far right, or on groups such as Pegida, or on countries such as Hungary and politicians such as Viktor Orbán. It is certainly important that we call out such organisations and politicians and eviscerate their arguments.

"But we need also to recognise that the truth about dehumanisation is far more uncomfortable and far closer to home. The ideas and policies promoted by the far right and by populist anti-immigration figures have not come out of nowhere. They have become acceptable because the groundwork has already been laid, and continues to be maintained, by mainstream politicians and commentators.

"There is a tendency among liberals to see a great divide on immigration between the mainstream and the populists and between a more liberal western Europe and a more reactionary east. That is to distort reality. For, while differences clearly exist, the divisions are not nearly as sharp as often suggested. It is the rhetoric and the policies emerging from the mainstream and from western Europe that have helped legitimise the hostility to immigration expressed by the populists and in eastern Europe." (7)

The fear of 'excessive' immigration, of being – as both Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron put it – 'swamped' by an alien peoples and cultures, is what lay behind the discourse of the anti-immigrant mainstream, beefed up by fake arguments about how immigrants lower wages, use excessive amounts of health care and live on welfare benefits. The Daily Mail may describe Tommy Robinson as a racist thug, but the racist ideology and hostility to immigrants which brings Robinson and his fascist bands to the fore, has been a constant theme of the Mail, the Express and Sun, and constant relayed in the discourse of Conservative and New Labour politicians and their favourite media outlets like the Telegraph and BBC.

It is this atmosphere that created the 'hostile environment' proclaimed by the Home Office under Theresa May and led directly to the Windrush scandal. Anti-immigrant racism has led directly to the failure of the European Union countries to develop a strategy for aiding migrants and the toleration of the deaths of many hundreds who have drowned while trying to reach the West. Aiding them would involve countries throughout the EU accepting immigration, and not trying to bottle up immigrants where they first landed, mainly Greece and Italy.

The portrayal of Muslims as the unfathomable 'other' leads directly to treating 'them' as less than human, or at least less human than 'us'. Not only are we resigned to letting hundreds drown, while a Royal Navy ship looks out for illegal boats and fails to rescue a single struggling immigrant in the water, we are resigned to allowing tens of thousands of them to die directly or indirectly at the hands of Western military forces or in Western sponsored wars like that in Yemen. And then we wonder why they want to escape and come to Europe.

Muslims have become the 'perfect enemy' for the hard right and for right-wing politicians of every kind. They are strange, evil, violent and have incomprehensible atavistic obsessions. Donald Trump's campaign trial promise to keep out visitors to the US from Muslim countries "until we find out what is going on" says it all. What we do know is that they mean us harm and this justifies the new militarism and repressive regimes at home. Most of all, it helps provide an ideological framework for xenophobia and nationalism, habitually used to divide and dilute mass protest against austerity and poverty at times of capitalist economic crisis.

Functioning of Islamophobia

Modern racism and xenophobia, of which Islamophobia is the cutting edge, play a key role in dividing the working class and other oppressed sections of society, tying important popular layers to a pro-capitalist and pro-austerity discourse. Many of the millions who voted for Trump and Brexit, and who vote for organisations like the FN in France, the Liga in Italy and the AfD in Germany, are convinced that immigration is responsible for economic crisis and is a threat to their traditional way of life. The French philosopher Michel Foucault talked about the creation of 'regimes of truth' by 'discourse' - constant repetition by the media and intellectuals. Foucault abandoned any notion of class interests, but we can use his terminology to understand anti-immigrant racism. The 'regime of truth' that has been created is that 'they' are alien, 'they' threaten our values, and if not stopped 'they' will swamp 'us'.

Islamophobia is maintained at numerous levels in the US and Europe. First, state action and new laws targets the Muslims communities. In the United States a raft of measures in the Patriot Act is designed to survey and control the Muslim community. In Britain the Prevent strategy is designed to make teachers and social workers police the thoughts and attitudes of their students and clients, and a big majority of referrals have targeted alleged Islamic extremism - only 10% of referrals has targeted right wing extremism. The objective of the Prevent strategy is to intimidate Muslims and create a climate of fear - fear that any kind of protest or activism will get you labelled 'extremist'.

In France measures against Islamic religious observance have included the 2004 ban on wearing the hijab (headscarf) in schools, a ban on the niqab (face covering in public places), and the insistence by some local authorities that schools in the locality must not serve alternatives to pork at lunchtime, a practice that has continued despite a 2017 court ruling against it. In several other European countries there are bans on the niqab.

Austria had decided to close seven mosques and expel 60 imams. The siting of mosques continues to

be a subject of political controversy in many European towns, and a focus of extreme right-wing activism.

Islamophobia has generated a massive increase in violent attacks on Muslims, including in the United States especially a series of shootings. A disproportionate number of these attacks have been on women wearing the hijab or niqab.

Discrimination against Muslims in employment and housing is rife in the UK, across Europe and in the US. In Britain Muslims are more likely to live in social housing, more likely to have low paid jobs or be unemployed and more likely to live in poor areas.

Even the conservative and pro-NATO OSCE says:

“Intolerance and discrimination against Muslims has become increasingly prevalent in the OSCE region in recent years. The “war on terror”, the global economic crisis, anxieties about national identity and the difficulties in coping with the increasing diversity in many societies have led to a growth in resentment against Muslims and Islam that has sometimes been fuelled by intolerant language in media and political discourse.

“As a result, many Muslims experience a range of discrimination, including verbal harassment, hate speech, violent attacks and religious profiling. Many are also confronted with a lack of equal opportunities in employment, housing, health care and education, and face restrictions on the public expression of their religion.” (8)

State action is backed up by a barrage of anti-Muslim propaganda. Nathan Lean has explained how a multi-million dollar ‘industry’ has grown up in the United States to spread anti-Muslim propaganda. This includes grass roots anti-Muslim organisations like ACT for America, right-wing Christian organisations, bloggers and pundits like Pamela Geller and Milo Yanopoulos, and a huge array of ‘alt-right’ organisations. These groups have access to massive amounts of funding and their views are constantly relayed in the mass media. And of course support for ‘our boys’ – the US and British military fighting wars in Muslim countries, is drenched in Islamophobia.

The net result of all these things is to strengthen Islamophobic prejudices throughout society. Nathan Lean says all these things interact with one another:

“There is a mutual relationship between all of these things. If anxieties about Muslims – or even blatant prejudices about them – did not exist organically, to some degree, the ground would not be very fertile for anti-Muslim agitators of the Islamophobia industry.

“But, of course, the argument can easily be made that the Islamophobia industry is responsible for the images, narratives, memes, tropes, axioms and even policies that engender a climate of fear and hatred of Islam and Muslims. People are not born prejudiced.

“As the South Pacific song goes: “You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear, it’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear”. Some of the people doing that drumming today are those who comprise the Islamophobia industry.” (9)

The imprisonment of Tommy Robinson for contempt of court arises from his action around a court case in which a group of Pakistani men are accused of grooming and raping vulnerable young women. His clear aim of course is to caricature Muslims as threatening ‘our’ women, and to associate Muslims with rape culture and paedophilia. It’s true that in several areas men from Muslim backgrounds have been involved in this activity. But it is untrue that these grooming and rape crimes against young women are mainly carried out by Muslim men. The movement for Tommy Robinson’s

release, supported by far-right movements across Europe, is Islamophobic and racist to the core. Many involved in the Football Lad's Alliance - probably a majority - are working class. But to imagine that this new fascist movement will disappear when working class struggle attains a higher level than today, is naïve in the extreme. The new fascist movement must be confronted and fought, and its ideas challenged, though every means available to the radical left, the labour movement and the whole gamut of progressive movements on a European level and beyond.

In 2013 anti-racist academic and journalist Sunny Hundal proclaimed the victory of multiculturalism in Britain. While he based himself on real trends - the popularity of multiculturalism among the young in particular - overall he was much too optimistic. Basing himself on an opinion survey by Lord Ashcroft, he noted that 70 per cent of those interviewed regarded multiculturalism as positive. In the era of Brexit, Donald Trump and Tommy Robinson, it's very doubtful that such a result would be returned. He said:

"It's official: 45 years after Enoch Powell made his 'rivers of blood' speech - the fearmongers have lost the war, while those who think Britain is stronger with a multiracial and multicultural identity have won...the continuous war waged by the rightwing press against multiculturalism has utterly failed. Public opinion has in fact moved in the opposite direction and become less hostile to people of different cultures and ethnicities living in the UK. In other words, interacting with ethnic minorities and watching them contribute to the UK (in sport, business, academia etc) has easily overcome tabloid scaremongering." (10)

It would be an amazingly positive result if this was true. Now those who fight for a society of multiracial equality have a lot of work to do, and they have to start by fighting the new fascists.

Phil Hearse

NOTES

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin 1993
2. Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilisations*, Simon and Schuster, 1990
3. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>
4. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>
5. <https://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance/>. See also Said's longer
6. <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Edward-Said-The-Myth-of-Clash-Civilizations-Transcript.pdf>
7. Slavov Zizek, *Against the Double Blackmail*, Penguin Random House, 2016 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/10/sunday-essay-how-we-colluded-in-fortress-europe-immigration>)
8. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/countering-discrimination-against-muslims>
9. Nathan Lean is the author of *The Islamophobia Industry* (Pluto 2017). This interview is at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/06/groups-spread-hate-islamophobia-industry-170610092856852.html>
10. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/22/multiculturalism-won-uk-move-on>

P.S.

- PRRUK. Jun 11, 2018:

<https://prruk.org/confronting-the-islamophobia-of-the-new-fascist-movement/>