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Feminists in a conundrum: Reflecting on the Cologne attacks one month on

Wednesday 27 September 2017, by [BUESKENS Petra](#) (Date first published: 2 February 2016).

Feminists are in a conundrum with the Cologne attacks: speak out and align with racism or be silent and align with complicity. As we all now know, notwithstanding the belated media response, and its devolvement into a series of unhelpful culture wars, on New Year's Eve up to 1,000 men sexually assaulted, robbed and, in some instances, raped, women in the central plaza of the German city of Cologne.

It is now confirmed that these men were 'almost exclusively' of Middle-Eastern and North-African descent and included asylum seekers. In what sounds like a horrific night, victims described being surrounded by groups of 20-30 men, having their clothes torn off, 'hands everywhere', and being digitally raped while their phones, purses and bags were torn off.

As it stands a total of 838 people have filed criminal complaints, including 497 women alleging sexual assault. Some of the victims have jointly filed a single complaint, so that the number of alleged crimes stands at 766, of which 381 are sexual offences, including three rapes.

The Cologne attacks have, however, become a vexed issue for feminists given most hold Left political views and are thus, by and large, in favour of humanitarian aid for refugees and strongly opposed to racial profiling. Indeed, this egalitarian ethic is so strong that feminists have found it difficult to respond at all to what amounts to an historically unprecedented attack (in the West) against women in public space.

With subsequent coverage it has become clear that similar attacks were simultaneously carried out in other German cities as well as in Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland. It is astonishing that gang assaults of women across Europe, and on the scale that occurred in Cologne, could be, if not ignored, then not given the critical commentary and activism they deserve.

It took German police and media days to respond. Indeed, the main broadcaster ZDF subsequently issued an apology for their lack of immediate coverage. Similarly, feminist opinion was noticeably absent. It took almost two weeks for the Guardian, who regularly include feminist commentary, to respond.

This was quickly picked up by the Right and by lay commentators alike (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Innumerable comments appeared on social media like this on Twitter:

There is a concern – all over the Right wing internet – that when feminists can't 'blame white men' they fall silent on the subject of sexual assault.

Early on Lara Prendergast noted that,

"...the headlines have been conspicuous by their absence. So far this year, the main 'feminist' topic covered by Guardian comment writers is Chris Gayle's cricket sexism row, which involves the sportsman chatting up a female journalist. There is not one mention of the Cologne attacks, aside

from in news reports. Why is that? Is it because they are not deemed important? Perhaps we don't care about vicious attacks against German frauen? Or is it because the details of the story – that the men appear to have been of "Arab or North African origin" who did not seem to speak German or English, and that there is a possibility they are some of the 1.1 million migrants to have entered Germany last year – make it too controversial to touch?"

To be fair feminists have responded. Laurie Penny wrote an excellent article damning the attacks and imploring feminists not to allow bigots to usurp the agenda. Closer to home Amy Gray pointed out that when it comes to sexual assault women's words fail to carry the weight of truth (which explains why even now this is part of the problem on the Left with accepting the cultural backgrounds of the assailants). More recently, the Australian Muslim feminist writer, Randa Abdel-Fattah has challenged the racism and hypocrisy she sees masquerading as concern for women's rights.

However, one of the distinguishing features of this commentary is the crafting of an equivalence between privatised sexual and domestic violence in the West and what occurred on the streets of Cologne not exactly in broad daylight, but certainly in public.

To be sure the former is utterly abhorrent, and I share the feminist fight to eradicate men's violence against women, but to say that intimate partner violence (or isolated instances of sexual assault in public), is the same as a group of up to 1,000 men – what, in fact, amounts to a small army – publicly assaulting and even raping women in a co-ordinated manner is to make a false equivalence.

These are two very different kinds of violence – one is individual, hidden and shameful and the other collective, open and shameless. To be sure, both are about men's power over women, but that's where the similarity ends.

What has been lacking in the extant commentary is the willingness to distinguish between these different forms of violence and to address the unprecedented nature of the Cologne attacks in the West and, beyond this, what they signify.

There is also the thorny matter of culture, which is that things are altogether different in conservative Muslim countries and especially in those in which fundamentalism prevails. Women are not, even tacitly, the equals of men. In most Middle-Eastern and North-African countries women are categorically subordinate to men and this is sanctioned in law, religion and culture. The accusation of 'racism' from which feminists recoil risks erroneously aligning race with culture or, more specifically, with religion. In western culture rape is no more prevalent in one racial group than another, with the notable exception of Indigenous communities; what we see here, then, is not a racial but a cultural difference. This difference is evident in the atypical nature of the crime itself.

Indeed, we may see the police force's complete inability to handle the situation as evidence of a 'completely new dimension of crime'. What has emerged in the ensuing weeks is that similar assaults also took place in Sweden at the large music festival, 'We are Sthlm'. Here too the police were unprepared (and stand accused of covering it up for fear of stirring racial hatred).

Director of events at Stockholm City Council, Roger Ticoalu made the observation, 'It was a modus operandi that we had never seen before: large groups of young men who surround girls and molest them.' As journalist Ivar Arpi said, 'The German police made a similar point: they are used to handling drunks. But gangs of young men encircling and then groping women at large public gatherings: who has ever heard of such a thing?'

We have never seen this kind of mob violence before, but who is 'we'? Non-western feminists

certainly have and they've been talking about it for some time. Take the razer-sharp commentary of Algerian sociologist Marieme Hélie Lucas after the Cologne attacks. She documents analogous assaults against Arab women by large groups of men in Tunis, Algiers, and Tahir Square during the Arab Spring.

'We' of course heard about Tahir Square because a Western woman, CBS reporter Lara Logan, was herself surrounded, stripped, assaulted and digitally raped while covering the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Sometime later it transpired that a Dutch journalist had also suffered the same fate. This phenomenon was also documented in the award-winning Egyptian film 678 in 2010.

The practice known as *Taharrush gamea* is a form of group sexual harassment practiced in Middle-Eastern countries by men against women who protest in or simply use public space.

This group harassment fits exactly the description of what happened in Cologne as has been noted by a number of social commentators in the last week (though Hélie Lucas was the first). As she says,

*"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 definition. An underlying racism, never 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 essentialized otherness lies a hierarchy too shameful to mention: **the radical Left's blind defense of 'Muslim' reactionaries** ...The recent brutal challenging of women's presence in public space on December 31st is only one more illustration of it ..."*

The distorting Eurocentric vision prevents from seeing similarities with what took place, for instance, in North Africa and the Middle East. In Europe, 'Muslims' are seen as victims, oppressed minorities - this apparently justifying any aggressive and reactionary behavior from them ...The fact that the Left and far too many feminists stick to the theory of priorities (the exclusive defense of people of migrant origin - refurbished as 'Muslims' - against the capitalist western right) is a deadly error that history will judge, and an abandonment of the progressive forces in and from our countries which absurd inhumanity will forever stain the banner of internationalism.

Hélie Lucas writes of the 'conceptual millstone that the Left carries about' including 'an implicit hierarchy of fundamental rights in which women's rights rank far behind minority rights, religious rights, [and] cultural rights...' She continues,

"When the interests of patriarchy (that the Left does not dare defend officially anymore) merge with the noble defense of the 'oppressed' (their prestige, even on the Left, was somewhat damaged after the November attacks in Paris), it suits many people. That questions could still be asked regarding the concerted nature of simultaneous attacks in at least 5 different countries and nearly a dozen cities in Europe, this leaves one speechless in [the] wake of so much dishonesty, so much blindness or so much political perversity."

How is this different, she asks, from blaming the victim if our primary concern is to 'protect perpetrators'?

Radical atheist and ex-Muslim feminist Maryam Namazie has also spoken powerfully about the conflation between criticism of Islamism as a far Right political movement and Muslims as people. Not only is this a false conflation, which undermines free speech and, in turn, robust critique of the growth of fundamentalism and its myriad human rights abuses, it also falsely conflates political critique with bigotry.

What happens to free speech, she asks, when those who are critical of Islam as a religion or Islamism as a far Right political movement cannot speak? There is, she notes, a kind of reverse racism when political correctness makes it impossible to see the heterogeneity of Muslim people and, in particular, to deny or worse silence (aka 'no-platform') the voices of dissenting Muslims.

Namazie's primary focus is on the misogyny of Islam and yet she was recently prevented from speaking on the subject of 'Apostasy, blasphemy and free expression in the age of ISIS' at London's Goldsmith's college by the Student union, a move which, it beggars belief, was supported by Goldsmiths Feminist Society on the grounds that Namzie is an 'Islamaphobe'.

That's right, an Iranian human rights activist and feminist was last month prevented from speaking at a university about the profound abuses of women under Sharia law (among other things) because feminists and Left students deemed she might offend the sensibilities of Muslims on campus (a decision that was, thankfully, overturned).

As she said, 'If people like me who fled an Islamist regime can't speak out about my opposition to the far-right Islamic movement, if I can't criticise Islam... that leaves very [few] options for me as a dissenter because the only thing I have is my freedom of expression.'

To watch her deliver this lecture at Goldsmiths in December (2015), only weeks before the mass assaults in Cologne, is to see precisely the abuse of power and the attack on free speech she describes. She is repeatedly interrupted and her equipment tampered with by students from the Islamic Society, almost all of whom were men. They created an atmosphere of intimidation and death threats were allegedly issued to at least one audience member, the UK-Iranian lecturer and free speech campaigner Reza Moradi.

What H  lie Lucas, Namazie and others are saying, is that they are being silenced by a new form of identity politics and multiculturalism, which ironically cannot see its own stereotyping of Muslims and which panders to one particular notion of 'Muslim' that is conspicuously consistent with Islamism.

Of course, this is part of a broader politics around free-speech and no-platforming in universities unfolding in the UK and the US at the moment, but it also speaks powerfully to the new opposition between feminism, Left politics and the secular critique of Islamism, including what these very activists see as a co-ordinated effort by far Right Muslims to assault and intimidate Western women in public space on New Year's Eve.

For Namazie, Muslims are often the first victims of Islamism and, therefore among them (like herself) you will find its staunchest critics. Like H  lie Lucas, she draws attention to a profound inability on the Left, and of feminists, to be critical of Islam because of this new illiberal fear of causing offence. It is precisely this blindness that has obstructed robust critique of the Cologne attacks - a point Namazie made in her television program with Fariborz Pooya Bread and Roses last week.

Like the Paris attacks, the Cologne attacks show that a radicalized fringe of Muslim fundamentalists are active in the West - whether they are recruited in the West or arrive from outside is less relevant than the fact that they exist. What needs to be made clear is that such fundamentalists are not representative of the great majority of Muslims either in their own countries or as migrants; indeed, it is precisely fundamentalism and war (in part caused by relentless Western bombing) that the refugees are escaping!

Importantly, the accusation of 'racism', from which feminists and others on the Left recoil, risks

erroneously aligning race with culture and erroneously conflating progressive (or liberal) and conservative (or fundamentalist) Muslims. The latter conflation silences an important voice of critique that the Left would do well to listen to.

Liberalism, like its opposite, is a cultural phenomenon not a racial one. If you're culturally Western - that is you hold a universalist and egalitarian outlook (itself on a continuum from conservative to radical) - it doesn't matter what your racial background is.

When social commentators talk about 'Western values' what they're really talking about is liberalism or the idea that all are equal, that human life is sacred, that individual rights are inviolable, that personal attributes are not relevant to one's political status, that states are politically neutral about religion (and thus separate Church from State), and neutral among the ends of social, cultural and sexual expression (within the bounds of the law, which is concerned primarily with consent and non-harm to others rather than with tradition or religious edicts).

Despite this extraordinary accomplishment, nobody wants to defend liberalism or individual rights on the Left (with the notable exception of libertarians and secularists) because there is a lot of critique about the mess liberalism has got us in whether economically or socially.

One way liberals (who don't want to call themselves liberals) have got around this in more recent years is to call individual rights 'human rights'. This way the western origin of these rights and their modern philosophical foundation in liberalism is conveniently skirted, which takes me to my next point: why can't progressive (liberal) westerners define and defend their own tradition?

In a little known but beautifully erudite book by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, he notes that one of the historically unprecedented ironies of western modernity is its deep critique of itself. No other culture does this, notes Kolakowski, and it is the West's greatest strength and ultimate Achilles heel.

As we critique ourselves infinitum generating civil society in our wake - lively public debate, reflexive societies and internal revision as well as division - we also generate the paradox of universalism: that it fails to define or defend itself (because there is nothing to define, nothing to defend), and in turn fails to engender affinity. As Kolakowski observes,

"This culture, as a result, becomes vulnerable not merely to outside threats but, perhaps, even more dangerously, to that suicidal mentality characterized by indifference to our own distinct tradition, by doubt, indeed by an auto-destructive frenzy, all given verbal expression in the form of a generous universalism."

And because the Left are defined by the most radical or progressive end of liberalism (the political place I too call home), their focus is on social change - there are always more battles to be won: closing the gender pay gap, fighting casualization, ending domestic violence, legalising gay marriage, reducing climate change etc. Because of this it is difficult to take stock of just how good, in historical and cross-cultural terms, things actually are!

Given the epistemic relativism that defines western liberalism, few are willing to celebrate the attributes of their own culture, ironically, because they are so steeped in it. This is the political vacuum that many concerned liberals, including myself, are worried the xenophobic and fundamentalist Right are filling with hate speech. That is, right wing anti-immigration groups in the West and conservative Fundamentalism in the Middle-East, which of course speaks to and potentially recruits disaffected Muslims in the West.

We may conclude, then, that feminists and others on the Left, were and are unusually quiet about

Cologne because it invokes both a critique of Muslim fundamentalism (or, in other words, another political culture) and because it involves a defence of liberalism. In this specific case, the rights of women to bodily autonomy and the free and full use of public space.

While being at pains not to point the finger at vulnerable asylum seekers, we fail to address a social problem; we fail to protect women and we engage in a 'white wash' in not acknowledging the capacity for the reified victim to also, at times, be a perpetrator.

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P.S.

* "Reflecting on the Cologne attacks". 13 September 2017:

<http://www.siawi.org/article15197.html>

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<http://onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=17991&page=0>