

From France to Syria - Islamophobia, 'Islamism', (post)fascism

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In an interview with Lucion Nanni, historian Enzo Traverso looks at the current rise of Islamophobia and fascism in Europe today.



In this interview, Enzo Traverso, a historian specialising in totalitarianism and fascism, discusses the intensification of the Islamophobic offensive and questions the notion of 'Islamism', used to delegitimise in advance any solidarity of the left with Muslims, such as manifested by the demonstration of 10 November 2019. Finally, he discusses characterisations of the European far right and jihadist terrorism, questioning the appropriateness of the concept of fascism.

Lucion Nanni (C): How do you analyse the various reactions observed in the French political class since the despicable assassination of Samuel Paty? Macron had seemed relatively moderate on the issue of secularism during the 2017 presidential campaign, but his government now seems trapped in a delirious Islamophobic headlong rush, as concretely expressed in the dissolution of Baraka City, the CCIF and other voluntary organisations. How do you explain this?

Enzo Traverso (ET): Macron is a pure product of our time, the age of 'post-ideological' neoliberalism. His Islamophobic turn is not the result of any ideological evolution, simply a choice made from political expediency.

In 2017, he emerged as the man of providence capable of renewing a country paralysed by old, obsolete cleavages – that was his modernising discourse – and thus bringing together forces from both left and right. During the election campaign, in response to the xenophobic rhetoric of Marine Le Pen, he even seemed to embody a new politics that could rally to an 'Anglo-Saxon' liberalism, multiculturalist rather than national-republican, a large part of the 'progressive' middle classes and even a sector of the youth of postcolonial origin.

Today, the context has radically changed. The implementation of a highly anti-popular social policy and the brutal repression of social movements – notably the Gilets Jaunes and the movement against pension reform – have alienated the support of the left electorate. As a result, he is no longer the man who wants to overcome the right-left divide, but rather the man who wants to renew the right.

Hence his new posture as Bonaparte embodying law and order and his new xenophobic rhetoric: two messages that are addressed, beyond the traditional right, to the voters of the National Rally [former Front National].

Once the 2017 mythology of the man of culture at the Élysée Palace, a philosopher, friend of Paul Ricœur, etc., had been exhausted, Macron now reveals himself for what he is: a politician who navigates by practising low-level Machiavellianism, shaping a discourse that changes according to his convenience. Macron's only solid ideological anchor is his faith in the economy and the market society. For the rest, he may well move from anti-racism to Islamophobia, from 'open society' to 'republican order', from cosmopolitan France to France proud of its history and 'identity', from colonial repentance to pride in the colonial past, as he has just done.

The Minister of National Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, recently vigorously denounced the 'Islamism' supposedly rampant in the humanities departments of French universities. How should we interpret the rise of this category, as well as certain responses from intellectuals of 'our camp' who vigorously reject the charge of 'Islamism'?

ET: Not living in France, I don't know all the aspects of this debate. The concept of 'Islamism' was forged a few years ago by the conservative political scientist Pierre-André Taguieff. It aims to denounce a supposed collusion between Islam and the radical anti-racist and pro-Palestinian left.

The media have obviously propagated this label in order to criminalise any anti-racist policy. It fits perfectly with a xenophobic and authoritarian discourse that aims at presenting Islam and the radical left as objective accomplices if not allies of Islamist terrorism. Today, we have crossed an additional threshold with a Minister of National Education who has set himself the objective of purging the universities by hunting down 'Islamists'. Europe hasn't heard such remarks since the 1930s.

For a historian, the notion of 'Islamism' is closely reminiscent of 'Judeo-Bolshevism', which was one of the pillars of fascist and Nazi propaganda during the 1930s. Then, as today, it was a question of striking at the enemies of a national order, culture and 'identity' defined in ethnic-religious terms. The Bolsheviks wanted to overthrow institutions, the Jews were a foreign body within the nation. Today, leftists are attacking institutions and Islam is challenging the nation's cultural heritage.

The analogy goes further. In the 1930s, there were a large number of Jewish intellectuals in the radical, Marxist and communist left who had lost all connection with Judaism as a religion. Today, there are many intellectuals and activists of Muslim origin, in anti-racist movements and in the radical left, who have no religious practice, or who recognise themselves as Muslims only in reaction to the prevailing racism – as many 'atheist Jews' did in the 1930s.

The petition against 'Islamism' published in *Le Monde* denounced the pernicious influence of Anglophone multiculturalism in the French university. This outbreak of anti-Americanism reproduces another cliché of the racist discourse of the 1930s. At the time, cosmopolitan America was denounced as 'Judaised' and corrupted by Black culture. Today, the spectre of communitarianism, intersectionality and Black Lives Matter is raised. Anti-Americanism is a major feature of conservative European cultures. I am not a supporter of the linguistic turn, but the way it is caricatured by French neoconservative discourse is quite revealing.

The postcolonial studies that emerged with the linguistic turn deconstructed the Enlightenment, not from a reactionary point of view, to reject it after the fashion of European legitimism, but from the point of view of the colonised subjects. It was a matter of challenging the Eurocentrism and colonialism implicit in Western culture, which postcolonialism studied essentially in its aesthetic and

literary dimensions.

I see this project as fruitful, even if I am far from sharing all the conclusions that some authors have drawn from it. However, postcolonialism suggests that in order to combat jihadist terrorism it is not enough to denounce its horror and violence, one must understand where it comes from. Admittedly, there is nothing to defend in jihadist terrorism, but it finds one of its roots, in a paroxysmal and frightening form, of what Aimé Césaire, speaking of colonialism, called a 'return shock'.

Today, we are confronted with the 'return shock' of some thirty years of neo-colonial occupations and wars in the Arab world, and also with the 'return shock' of the policies of social and ethnic segregation that France has practised towards its post-colonial minorities, French people who are eternally 'of immigrant origin'. However, for the wielders of 'Islamism' it is much simpler to assert that Islam embodies obscurantism, that France is the target of jihadist terrorism because it is the 'homeland of the Enlightenment', and that 'to explain is to apologise'.

We have seen the rise, even within our own camp, of the term Islamofascism or 'Islamic fascism'. Does this seem to you a relevant category not only for analysing the reality of contemporary Islamic terrorism but also for redefining an antifascism that is up to the needs of today?

ET: I don't reject the notion of 'Islamofascism', but I think it should be used with certain precautions. First of all, it doesn't apply to Islamist terrorism in the Western world. Calling the *Charlie Hebdo* and Bataclan massacres, or the murder of Samuel Paty, fascist is sometimes a spontaneous and understandable reaction, but in this case the adjective 'fascist' has only a banal and approximate meaning: the fascist is a fanatic who kills and makes a spectacle of his violence. However, classical fascism, both Italian fascism and German National Socialism, never practised individual terrorism. Their violence was that of a mass movement that did not hide.

A more relevant comparison would be between the fascisms of the 1930s and Daesh before its military defeat. Fascisms were born in a Europe ravaged and brutalized by the Great War, in countries that were dislocated, in civil wars where politics was done in the streets, with a language and means of action inherited from the war, where each political party had its own militia and ideologies were radicalised. Armed radical Islamism was born, from the 1990s on, in an Arab world devastated by Western wars, and has developed in some countries as a form of radical Sunni nationalism. From this point of view, the terror practised by Daesh in Syria and Iraq could be compared to that of the European fascist regimes during the Second World War.

Some analysts (Raymond Aron as early as the 1940s) have pointed out that the classical fascisms were 'secular religions', i.e. movements that, though inspired by secular ideologies, operated in a religious mode: the support they demanded from their followers was more comparable to an act of faith than to rational adherence. This is true, but Europe also experienced forms of 'clerical-fascism', such as the Dollfuss regime in Austria in 1933, Franco's regime in Spain, whose official ideology was 'National-Catholicism', and Salazarism in Portugal.

In all these cases, these were not 'secular religions' but traditional religions that acquired a radical nationalist political form. In the early 1980s, in the Guatemala of Ríos Montt, evangelism was instrumentalised to the point of becoming the ideology of a genocidal regime. So why not acknowledge the existence of 'Islamofascism'? It is one derivation among others of Islam, which has nothing intrinsically fascist about it, just as Latin American 'liberation theology' and Franco's 'National-Catholicism' were two antinomic derivations of Christianity. If one accepts this interpretation, one can, for example, speak of antifascism in relation to the Kurdish fighters of Rojava who are fighting against Daesh. In Europe, on the other hand, the category of 'Islamofascism'

fascism' risks giving an 'antifascist' endorsement to the special laws of Manuel Valls and Gérard Darmanin. To sum up my thoughts in one sentence: I like John Heartfield's antifascist photomontages; I don't like Charlie Hebdo's racist cartoons.

In your recent texts you use the category of postfascism. How does this help to shed light and act in the current situation?

ET: I don't know to what extent the category of 'postfascism' allows us to act, but it seems to me useful in order to understand a new phenomenon of global importance: the rise of an authoritarian, racist and xenophobic far right which no longer claims to be fascist. I call it 'postfascism' because, on the one hand, it comes after fascism and, on the other hand, it is something else. It is a phenomenon that takes very different forms, from Western Europe to the new EU countries, from the United States to India and Brazil, and has not yet crystallised into an ideological current with a coherent and well-defined profile.

The notion of postfascism captures the transitory nature of this hybrid and unprecedented constellation. It brings together heterogeneous movements for which the definition of fascism now appears inadequate but which, at the same time, cannot be analysed without constantly comparing them to a kind of fascist paradigm, that of twentieth-century Europe. In some cases, they can accommodate themselves to current institutions and absorb traditional political forces. In France, for example, there are many bridges between the National Rally, the classic right-wing Republicans, and even several figures from Macron's La République en Marche; in the United States, Trump has succeeded in cannibalising the Republican Party, etc.

However, in the event of a major crisis – for example a break-up of the EU – these movements could radicalise, broaden their base and gain the support of the dominant elites. In this case, they would become subversive forces reminiscent of classical fascism. We do not yet know the outcome, but they contain the premises of a twenty-first century fascism.

P.S.

• Verso Books. 09 March 2021:
<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5018-islamophobia-islamo-leftism-post-fascism>