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Interview

The Anti-Imperialist Left Confronted with Islam

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The following interview with Tariq Ali was conducted by Alex De Jong and Paul Mepschen of the SAP (Dutch section of the Fourth International) at the Ernest Mandel symposium held in Brussels in November 2005. It was published in the March-April 2006 issue of the SAP's journal, Grenzeloos.

Grenzeloos: It is of course the assassination of the film-maker Theo van Gogh and the threats made against the liberal member of parliament Ayaan Hirsi Ali which have particularly drawn attention to Islam in the Netherlands. Like her, you are an unbeliever who comes from the Muslim world. Have you already felt threatened?

Tariq Ali: No, never. I travel a lot both in the Muslim world and in the rest of the world, but I have never yet felt threatened. Why is that? It is no doubt because people who don't agree with me about religion know that I am an enemy of imperialism. I unceasingly criticize imperialism and all its works, more than the believers do. Whereas Hirsi Ali and people like her in the United States and in Europe make a profession out of attacking Islam. There are other important questions in the world.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/koran.jpg>]

Why do these people concentrate endlessly on Islam? In the way that they attack Islam, they go along with existing prejudices. And for that they are hated. There is no excuse or justification for acts of violence against these people. It is necessary to discuss with them. But these acts are a sign of despair: people are so much at the end of their tether that they have recourse to violence.

Don't you think that the violence and threats against these people also represent a threat to all those of Muslim origin who do not correspond to the norm? To the unbelievers, the feminists, the homosexuals?

Certainly. But you have to understand that the Muslim community is very diversified. People are very uninformed about the Muslim world. The image that they have of it comes to a large extent through the immigrant communities in Europe, who are, besides, very different from each other. Life in the Muslim world is not monolithic: there are believers, unbelievers, atheists.

Whether the unbelievers can freely express themselves is obviously another question. Often they can't, but that doesn't mean that they don't exist. As is the case here, religion is not the central element in the life of Muslims. People work, eat, make love, build families. Some go to the mosque, others don't. Exactly like in other parts of the world. The difference lies only in the fact that in some countries it is forbidden to criticize Islam. But that is not the case for example in Turkey. In other countries where it was also possible it has become more difficult today.

Religion is taking on much more importance. For young Muslims in the West, Islam is to a large extent a question of identity.

I think so too. It is a product of different factors, but above all of the vacuum of present day capitalism. There is no real alternative. Many people feel this and turn towards religion, not only Muslims. For the last 20 or 30 years, people who wouldn't have considered themselves to be particularly religious have been turning towards Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. Why? Because capitalism flattens everything like a steamroller and human beings want to find a refuge for themselves. Because many of them no longer see any socio-economic alternative, they go back

to religion. That is why in the immigrant communities there are people who consider their identity from a purely religious point of view, and I don't expect anything good to come from that. But I also think that all that will change with the coming generation. Today people are not all religious with the same degree of intensity, we can see different variations. I don't think that the return to religion is universal.

One aspect of the orientalist representation of Muslims that is dominant today is that they are portrayed as people who can only behave in an uncritical and dogmatic way in relation to the Koran, whereas other believers, above all Christians, are reputed to be capable of producing a modern interpretation of their holy book.

This is in fact a mistaken representation, although it is very widespread. That is why I insist on the diversity of the Muslim world. In Poland the Church played at one time a significant role in the struggle against the Stalinist regime. In the West its role was greeted with enthusiasm. Why do we have this double standard?

Many people in the Muslim world consider an attack against Islam as unacceptable. Many of them, without being at all religious - I know some of them - say: "Yes I am a Muslim". That is a result of the fact that the US has made it from a certain point of view unacceptable to be a Muslim. You are living in a country (the Netherlands) in which religion occupied a dominant position in an extreme way.

Protestant fundamentalism is one of the worst forms of fundamentalism. Protestant fundamentalism, of English or Dutch origin, was responsible for a genocide in North America; it wiped out the indigenous population in the name of progress - something that Muslims have not yet done.

Wherever we see this religious revival of which you speak - among Muslims in the West, among Christians in the United States... - we can see that conservative representations of sexuality play a big role.

That has always been the case. I don't think capitalism absolutely wants human beings to have conservative representations of sexuality, but capitalism does want them to be brought up in nuclear families, isolated from each other.

When religion occupies a central place in a person's identity, then that person seeks to distinguish him or herself from those around them; he or she defends morality and takes a position against homosexuality, at the same time affirming that women have an inferior value.

In the formation of the identity of each person, the question of sexuality plays a big role. Human beings are constantly looking for differences and they find them most easily in religion.

Is there a future for the feminist movement in the Muslim world and in the Muslim societies here in the west?

Of course. There was for example a very effective movement in Pakistan against the Islamic legislation that was introduced during the dictatorship, in 1977. All over the country women organized, demonstrated, and criticized the sharia. Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia have seen feminist movements.

The state authorities reacted to this challenge either by themselves creating fundamentalist movements, as in Pakistan, or by collaborating with them, as in Egypt. In exchange for a policy that was conservative and hostile to women on the part of the authorities, the fundamentalists undertook to no longer attack the state.

In the West, in the future, feminist movements will have to develop which are at the same time explicitly anti-imperialist. Then it would be possible to win young Muslim women to feminism. Unfortunately in the West feminism has little existence as a political current.

In the framework of your insistence on the differences, you speak in the "Clash of Fundamentalisms" of an official multiculturalism.

Yes, there lies the cause of the search for differences. When you look at Britain, you can see that religion has been supported there - by the government and above all by Blair. Even after September 11, the foundation of religious institutions, for example religious schools, was encouraged. Within official multiculturalism the differences between people are seen as a good thing.

In part that is really the case - people are different. But as a socialist I also know how difficult it is to forge unity. I think that among young people there are more points of convergence than there are differences. I am an optimist: the importance of religious dividing lines will not last long in Europe, perhaps 30 or 40 years.

Why?

To put it cynically: because capitalism is blind as far as sex, skin colour or religion are concerned. Insofar as it expands and extends it sets aside all the particularities of human beings. That is what has always happened.

Is the Left capable of showing that there is an alternative?

A: The Left is at present very weak. As far as the radical Left is concerned I am not optimistic. In Britain I am not a member of Respect. I disagree with them on some points. The way things are happening in Respect is pure opportunism. Obviously I am in favour of working with Muslim groups, but socialists the goal must be to win followers of religion to our own point of view, not to leave them in their entrenched positions.

So we should work together in a less uncritical way?

Of course. The way Respect is doing it won't lead to anything. We have to find a neutral terrain which can offer a space for discussion. We must not conceal our own point of view by hiding it under the table. Many of the (Muslim) groups with which Respect has developed collaboration have very conservative and reactionary roots. In the countries from which they come, like for example Egypt or Indonesia, they have always been the enemies of the Left.

This is one of the problems that anti-racists and socialists come up against. On the one hand we want to develop solidarity with minorities who suffer discrimination, while on the other hand we have to maintain a critical position in relation to the conservative ways of thinking that are partly dominant among these minorities.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bombay.jpg>]

Muslim women in Mumbai demonstrate against the war

For socialists the task is clear: the Muslim communities must be defended against being made scapegoats, against repression, against the very widespread representation that terrorism is proper to Islam. All that must be energetically fought. But at the same time we must not close our eyes to the social conservatism which reigns in

these communities, nor hide it. We have to try to win this people to our own ideas.

I would like to give an example: the last chapter of my book is an open letter to a young Muslim. After having written this letter, nearly a year later, I received a reply from some young Muslims. They thought that my letter was talking about them because they found in it remarks that they had made themselves. They were surprised to be taken so seriously and they had also discussed a lot among themselves. The result was that two of them joined the Scottish Socialist Party.

Our aim must be to reinforce the position of the youngest ones, who are turning in the direction of a progressive and secular perspective. That is very important. There are a lot of progressive people who can be found in the Muslim communities, but because of the atmosphere that reigns there, they can obviously not assert themselves openly. It is these people who can build secular forces and it is them that we must support. And it is above all among the young women that we will find such resources.

We can win over many of them if we don't ignore them, which the far Left in France tends to do. The French far Left is the mirror image of British opportunism. It has practically no contact with the Muslim community and doesn't consider that as a priority. Both attitudes are mistaken - we have to find a middle way.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/tariq-ali.jpg>]