

A BLOODY MISALLIANCE: RADICAL ISLAM AND INFANTILE MARXISM

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The Grotesque Alliance

Metaphorical references to “borders” and “frontiers” have been a staple part of Western culture since the terrorist attacks of 9/11. If the dreadful events in New York and Washington achieved nothing else, they made it uncomfortably clear that the border between Islam and the West was far more porous than we previously supposed. It is no longer possible for even the most purblind Westerner to believe that Islam is something which happens “over there” in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Nearly everyone recognises that it has now established a significant and perhaps immovable presence in the heartlands of the West, bringing much that is beneficial and much that is ugly in its wake. There are now at least two million Muslims in the USA and a staggering 53 million in Europe. The issue of how the “host communities” should relate to them is one of the most important in international politics. Should the border between Muslims and non-Muslims be pushed back, heavily guarded or even dismantled altogether? The coming decades will tell.

One of the most disheartening aspects of the interchange between Islam and the West is also one of the least noticed. Over the course of the last five years, largely as a consequence of the Western intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have seen the emergence of a grotesque alliance between militant Islamists and certain sections of the Marxist left.¹ Devout followers of Muhammad and excitable disciples of Leon Trotsky have joined together to oppose the wars and even to found new political parties and movements. This process has probably gone furthest in some of the most culturally diverse regions of Britain, notably the East End of London and the North of England. The key event so far has been the establishment in 2003 of the so-called Respect Coalition (or “Respect” for short), whose members are largely drawn from the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the hard-line Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). Led by George Galloway, the egregious MP for Bethnal Green and Bow who famously paid tribute to Saddam Hussein’s “strength, courage and indefatigability”,² Respect has cheerfully stooped to all manner of political roguery in its quest for influence. Its members have openly supported the fascist insurgency in Iraq, blamed the British government for the terrorist attacks in London in July 2005, defended the veil and the burqa as legitimate expressions of religious faith and denounced the Danish cartoonists for exercising their right to free speech. One incident in particular exemplifies the depths to which Galloway and his supporters have sunk. At the London demonstrations against Israel’s intervention in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, they carried placards whose slogan made their support for clerical fascism resoundingly clear:

“We are all Hezbollah now”. Not since the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 have revolutionary socialists cosied up to the far right as outrageously as this.

How has this Happened?

Despite the crimes that were committed in its name in the twentieth century, Marxism remains one of the most libertarian of modern belief systems. Not for nothing did Marx and Engels describe their vision of a communist society as one in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”³ This makes it all the more bewildering that so many Western socialists should have embraced Islamofascism as enthusiastically as they have. How can it all be explained? Why on earth do the likes of Galloway, Tariq Ali and John Pilger support a movement whose main objectives are to re-establish the medieval Caliphate, institute the most austere and repressive form of Sharia law, destroy Western democracy and stone adulterers, infidels and homosexuals to death? The ostensible reason is their hostility to American “imperialism”. Committed to the view that revolutionary change can never occur when some nations are dominated by others, they argue (or at least imply) that Islamic extremism is well worth supporting so long as it gives Washington a bloody nose. When ordinary Muslims are murdered on the streets of Baghdad by suicide bombers (or when Iraqi communists and trade unionists are butchered by disciples of Osama Bin Laden), they go along with it on the grounds that “support for a movement for liberation should not depend on those who lead it at a particular point in time.”⁴ Yet it is surely clear that other, more fundamental explanations also need to be canvassed. What I want to suggest here is that the rapprochement between Islamism and Marxism reflects some disconcerting similarities between the two systems of thought. For all its intellectual majesty and libertarian fervour, Marxism possesses a number of characteristics which frequently make it attractive to the authoritarian mind—a fact which the inglorious history of “actually existing socialism” tragically bears out. Several of these characteristics are also present in Islamic doctrine, where they have caused similar problems. Recognising at some level that authoritarian Muslims behave as they do because they hold similar beliefs to their own, Marxists of a certain stripe have their worst political instincts immeasurably strengthened. The result is a monstrous perversion of a great ideology.⁵

A Tendency Towards Totalitarianism

Let me give a few examples of what I mean, beginning with the crucial issue of the role of politics. As is well known, Islam differs from the other world religions in refusing to

distinguish between the religious and the political. At its core is the belief that the main duty of Muslims is to use the terrestrial authorities to intervene in every sphere of life, reshaping even the most private forms of behaviour in accordance with the will of Allah. Whereas the secular democracies in Europe, Asia and the Americas seek to impose strict limits on the power of the state, Muslims assert that it is only through the extensive deployment of political power that “intimations of sacred transcendence” can be achieved. Much that is wrong with the modern Middle East can be traced to this outlook. If the majority of the region’s governments seem incapable of tolerating criticism, respecting the rights of women or sustaining a lively scientific culture, it is not only because Western imperialism is miring their territories in a state of permanent underdevelopment. The more important reason is that the political class regard themselves as the earthly representatives of Allah and are happy to crush anyone who doubts it.

At first sight there would appear to be no Marxist equivalent of the Muslim worship of the state. Far from seeking to concentrate power in the hands of a few pious men, Marxists look forward to an age in which the masses rule and the state simply “fades away”. And yet, as anyone who has watched some of the crankier elements on an anti-war march has reason to know, the fringes of the Marxist left are full of noisy mavericks who pay fervent homage to Assad’s Syria, Ahmadinejad’s Iran or Gadaffi’s Libya. Marked out by their lack of humour and the fixity of their stares, they seem to experience a palpable rush of sadistic pleasure at the thought of Muslim soldiers cracking the skulls of their political opponents. The thing which most obviously binds them to Islamic extremism is their political monomania. In the spirit of Islamofascist ideologues like Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb or Hassan Al Turabi, they insist on equating the whole of human existence with the sphere of politics. This draws our attention to an important similarity between the Islamic conception of government and the Marxist theory of social organisation. Whereas Islam seeks to bring all aspects of life under the authority of the confessional state, Marxism specialises in identifying traces of the political at every level of society. Its celebrated doctrine of “base and superstructure”, elucidated in its canonical form in Marx’s “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), famously asserts that “the economic structure of society [constitutes] the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.”⁷ No matter how remote from the centres of power a particular thought, practice or institution may seem, its ultimate purpose is usually to shore up support for the existing economic system.⁸ The drawback with this undeniably fertile insight is that it is peculiarly vulnerable to authoritarian distortion. Once it has been absorbed by people with a certain cast of mind, it is only a matter of time until the demand for absolute political power is put on the agenda. If capitalism has penetrated to every corner of modern life, or so the argument seems to go, then surely we need a state which can pursue it ruthlessly until the last vestiges of its influence have been

crushed? Such is the logic that allows the *Koran* to be conflated with *Das Kapital*.

Equality Betrayed

Another thing which occasionally brings out the worst in both Marxists and Muslims is their peculiar attitude towards equality. While subscribing in theory to the belief that all men are equal, many of them are inclined in practice to behave with violent snobbery. The root of the problem is that Islam and Marxism both contain second-order beliefs which cut across their primary commitment to equality, producing a tendency (though only a tendency) to divide humanity into the deserving few and the undeserving many. In the case of Islam the problem reaches back to its earliest years. When a Muslim is asked to justify the claim that his faith is more egalitarian than any other, he is likely to refer to Muhammad’s opposition to the treatment of the poor in seventh-century Mecca. Appalled by the greed of the new class of Arab merchants, or so it is claimed, Muhammad embraced a monotheistic creed in order to inspire (or scare) his fellow countrymen into an awareness of their mutual obligations. One of the most powerful expressions of his belief in equality was his insistence that all Muslims should pay alms to the poor, thereby protecting the faith against internal dissension. But there is an obvious contradiction at the heart of this doctrine. If a movement obliges its adherents to share their wealth with the destitute, *it presupposes that they are not destitute themselves*. Undeniably sincere in his sympathy for the poor, Muhammad fell into the trap of setting himself up as their saviour rather than their representative. The consequences for men less spiritually scrupulous than himself have often been disastrous. For every Muslim who has discharged his responsibilities to the poor in a spirit of compassion and humility, there have probably been several others who have revelled in their status as “saviours” and felt nothing but contempt for the people they claim to be saving. One need only think of Saddam Hussein in his presidential palaces, gazing out with glassy eyed indifference at his utterly ruined people, to realise what this can lead to.⁹

Vanguardism and Ideological Certainty

While some Marxists would undoubtedly dismiss the giving of alms as a species of “reformism”, they too have their sources of spiritual pride. Among the most important is the doctrine of the “vanguard party” which many of them have taken over uncritically from the work of Lenin. According to Lenin, who spelled out his arguments in his legendary pamphlet *What is to be Done?* (1902), ordinary people are incapable of understanding the case for socialism without receiving assistance from outside. The responsibility for imbuing them with political consciousness lies with a tightly organised party, consisting entirely of “professional revolutionaries”, whose role is to guide them with a firm hand as they perform their historic function of overthrowing capitalism. If this idea has exerted an enormous and largely beneficial influence on modern history, not least because the Russian and Chinese Revolutions

would have been unthinkable without it, it has also proved spectacularly susceptible to the law of unintended consequences. In any group of people who regard themselves as a vanguard, a certain proportion will invariably fall prey to the most lunatic forms of egotism. Just as the Islamic radical secretly feels superior to the poor, so the infantile Marxist scorns the working-class for their lack of theoretical sophistication. In the worst cases this can sometimes lead to what Rosa Luxemburg once described as “substitutionism”—that is, the belief that the Marxist elite can ignore the working class altogether and create a new society on their own. The bloody and sadistic histories of Sendera Luminosa in Peru, the Baader-Meinhoff Gang in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy tell us everything we need to know about this sort of insanity.¹⁰

All of which brings us to the other great similarity between Islam and Marxism—the tendency to induce a crippling level of ideological certainty in their less thoughtful followers. Read an article by a member of Respect or a communiqué from Hezbollah and one thing becomes immediately apparent: These people have never doubted anything in their lives. Cocooned in world in which every truth is self-evident and every opponent a troublemaker, they utterly lack the sort of intellectual humility which makes democracy possible. But why? The main source of Islamist dogmatism is probably the perceived status of the Koran. Unlike Christianity, Hinduism or the other world religions, Islam insists that its holy book provides a direct record of the word of God. When Muhammad went into one of his famous trances and a “new Arab scripture [started] pouring from his lips”,¹¹ or so the argument goes, he was channelling the thoughts of Allah in all their ethical grandeur. Anyone who doubts the Koran’s teachings is therefore guilty of the grossest blasphemy, even if Muhammad himself believed that some of his outpourings were dictated by satanic forces and had to be discarded.¹² By contrast, the most powerful engine of ideological bigotry on the left is what Tony Judt has called Marxism’s “sheer epistemological cheek”.¹³ Equipped with an ideology which purports to explain everything from the “transition from ape to man” (Engels) to the events of the present day, it is very difficult for a certain type of person to resist the conclusion that he knows everything there is to know. It hardly needs saying that one of the best-known examples of this personality type is Joseph Stalin.

Against “Fundamentalism”

Let us not exaggerate the problem. The majority of the world’s Muslims are similar to the majority of the world’s Marxists: tolerant, compassionate and sincere. But the alliance between the authoritarian deadbeats of the revolutionary left and the Islamofascist right is not to be taken lightly. It is not simply individuals who are judged by the company they keep. The more that Marxism and Islam allow their margins to be clogged up by bigots, the greater the likelihood that their virtues will be obscured. If the genuine members of both faiths wish to rescue themselves from obloquy, they have no choice but to police their borders more rigorously. Their only option is to put up some

barbed wire, employ a few security guards and display a clearly marked sign: “No Fundamentalists Allowed”.

Notes

(1) Among the writers who have commented most perceptively on this phenomenon are Christopher Hitchens, Norman Geras, Oliver Kamm, Melanie Phillips, Nick Cohen and David Aaronovitch. See, in particular, Cohen’s recent book *What’s Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007).

(2) For Galloway’s pitifully unconvincing excuse for his sycophancy towards Saddam, see his autobiography *I’m Not the Only One* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 106f.

(3) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p. 60.

(4) Chris Harman, “Why Opposing Imperialism Means Supporting Resistance”, *Socialist Review*, December 2006. Harman is a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party and Respect.

(5) I had better make it clear that I am not arguing that Islam and Marxism both contain “totalitarian” elements which make them inherently despotic. For an interesting but unconvincing discussion of this thesis, see Caroline Cox and John Marks, *The “West”, Islam and Islamism: Is Ideological Islam Compatible with Liberal Democracy?* (London: Civitas, 2003).

(6) Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (London: Phoenix, 2001), p. 6.

(7) Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981), p. 20.

(8) It goes without saying that I am grossly oversimplifying a very complex doctrine at this point.

(9) Nor should one suppose that it is only the Islamic ruling class which feels contempt for the poor. I vividly remember a Muslim doctor of my acquaintance telling me that “I work hard for my money. Why should I give it to losers on the street?”

(10) There is also an interesting parallel between Islamic attitudes towards non-believers and Marxist attitudes towards the ruling class. Neither the Muslim extremist nor the infantile Marxist is much impressed by the idea of equality before the law. The more doctrinaire Islamic governments explicitly assign non-believers to second-class or “dhimmi” status, offering protection in return for a special tax and truncated legal rights. By the same token, especially in the Trotskyist movement, there are still legions of Marxists who believe that socialist societies should withhold the basic political liberties from “pro-capitalist” forces.

(11) Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

(12) This is a reference to the so-called *Satanic Verses* which caused Salman Rushdie such problems.

(13) Tony Judt, “Goodbye to All That?”, *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 53 No. 14, September 21 2006.