

On the ideology of “anti-Islamophobia”

Flora Grim & Alexandra Pinot-Noir

May 2016

The intention of this text is to reply to those among the anarcho-communists who are engaged in the fight against “Islamophobia” and who, for that reason, bar all criticism of Islam and endorse a theory of race as a social class, in an atmosphere of increasing tension, accusations of racism, and even actual physical attacks.

The term “Islamophobia,” which probably dates back to the early twentieth century, only recently came into widespread use to designate racism against “Arabs.” This corresponded to a shift from racism against North Africans to terror or horror aroused by the Muslims’ religion. Immigrants and their descendants, formerly rejected for “ethnic” reasons, are discriminated against today for their supposed adherence to an original culture identified with one of its dimensions—the Muslim religion—which many do not even practice, although some observe certain traditional customs.

Through this artifice, religion is assimilated to “race” as a cultural matrix in what amounts to a “cultural mystification (...) by which an entire cross-section of individuals is assigned, on the basis of their origin or physical appearance, to the category of ‘Muslims,’ silencing any criticism of Islam, which is perceived, not as a critique of religion, but directly as a manifestation of racism.”¹ While Claude Guillon sees “contempt” in this “antiracism of idiots,”² we mainly recognize the specter haunting the left—third-worldism. According to this ideology, which entails uncritical support of the “oppressed” against their “oppressor,” those who saw the “colonized” as the exploited people par excellence during the Algerian war unconditionally supported the NLF. Or take the Vietnam committees during the Vietnam war, for whom denunciation of the Americans meant supporting the Viet Minh and the politics of Ho Chi Minh, chanting his name and waving his picture at every demonstration. This scenario was repeated with the Iranian revolution in 1979 and with the pro-Palestinians. Today, taking the Kurds’ defense usually implies supporting the PKK and waving Oçalan’s picture. Such was the process by which, little by little, the third-worldist perspective abandoned the proletariat as revolutionary subject and replaced it with the colonized, then the immigrant, the descendant of immigrants... and finally the believer. While at first, third-worldism promoted cultural relativism, its successors adopted culturalism, which

¹ Cassandre, “Nos ‘révolutionnaires’ sont des gens pieux,” see the Ravage Editions blog (in French), <https://ravageeditions.noblogs.org/>

² Claude Guillon, “Et Dieu créa l’islamophobie,” see his blog Lignes de Force (in French), <https://lignesde-force.wordpress.com/>

posits cultural differences to explain social relationships. SOS Racisme's great manipulation in the 1980s made this shift a doctrine that ultimately engendered all the excesses we're witnessing today, in particular the Muslim identity assigned to "Arab" immigrants and their descendants as a whole.

Interestingly, the culturalist ideology assumed by part of the left became, after 1968, the angle of attack for one of the far-right currents—the New Right. The latter's rejection of immigration no longer reflected biological racism but rather the concept of identity construction based on a view of societies frozen in ancient traditions and the need to maintain homogeneous cultures to ensure social peace. In the imaginings of neorightists—for whom there are ethno-cultural but not class conflicts—North Africans are affiliated with Muslim culture and as such must remain in their native country and live there together according to their traditions! The New Right's leader Alain de Benoist goes so far as to defend third-worldist, anti-imperialist struggles and deny the racist character of his "defense of European identity." A similar change has in recent years affected the racist discourse of another far-right party seeking respectability; the National Front (FN) borrowed certain aspects of the New Right's rhetoric: the problem is no longer "immigrants" but "Muslims."

This is how two sides, in theory radically opposed to each other, end up advocating identity politics according to which all immigrants or descendants of immigrants from any North African (or other "Arab") country must consider themselves Muslims, absurdly labeled "French people of Muslim origin." Hence disregarding the fact that they are discriminated against not because they practice or allegedly practice a given religion, but because they are migrant workers or children of migrants. The issue at stake is not identity but class. The so-called "Muslim origin" which makes North African atheists' blood boil is merely a social stigma disguised as a cultural stigma. The State and the media know what they're doing when they turn the "Muslim"—obviously Islamist (and anything from moderate to radicalized)—into the new characterization of a member of the *dangerous class*³.

On these foundations, the identity-based anti-islamophobia ideology is linked, even by certain Marxists, with the concept of "social race," an academic fantasy recently imported from the US which attempts to transplant on this side of the Atlantic the racial, communitarian model of the American society. This "racialist"⁴ conception which claims to create "race" as a new class in fact only serves to conceal or even deny the real capitalist social relation: exploitation of proletarians, all proletarians, whatever their origin, skin color, religion or personal customs and beliefs. Its justification lies in the supposedly indispensable role racism played in capitalist development as the underlying reason for colonialism. In reality, the ruling class has always used the strategy of assigning an inferior status to all oppressed, whatever their supposed "race." Successively, serfs, poor peasants, slaves and then workers were held in their lowly station and prevented from expressing themselves or getting an education on grounds that they were too stupid or ignorant and belonged to an inferior category. It is worth recalling that the British unrelentingly colonized and plundered the Irish, and the Russians, the Ukrainians, without in either case needing

³ Louis Chevallier, famous bourgeois, but nevertheless fascinating, historian, *Classes Laborieuses, Classes Dangereuses*, Perrin

⁴ Term borrowed from the authors of "Tiens ça glisse," see blog <http://racialisateursgohome.noblogs.org>, which calls "racialization any analysis contributing to the development or dissemination of a theory of race"

such justification. Indeed, plundering and colonization in general, like exploitation itself, do not require any excuses.

However, racism does undeniably exist, and one of its manifestations is the rejection of poor immigrant “Muslims.” The anti-Islam discourse of the FN, the Bloc Identitaire and Pegida is merely the tree hiding the forest: these groups are nothing but racists clamoring for immigrants to go home. They probably see the cultural argument as somehow more respectable than the old racist crap involving supposedly innate traits (Blacks are like this, Arabs are like that, etc.). These movements’ strategy also enables them to cast a wider net, especially by exploiting the genuine rise of radical Islam for their racist ends. They generally stick to such more honorable arguments as the defense of secularism or the fight against sexism, but they view immigration as the fundamental problem and consider all immigrants (poor, naturally) undesirable, whether they’re Muslim or not.

Racism, like xenophobia, is a tool rulers use against the ruled. In the words of Fredy Perlman: “The American settler-invaders had recourse to an instrument that was not, like the guillotine, a new invention, but that was just as lethal. This instrument would later be called Racism, and it would become embedded in nationalist practice. (...) People who had abandoned their villages and families, who were forgetting their languages and losing their cultures, who were all but depleted of their sociability, were manipulated into considering their skin color a substitute for all they had lost.” “Racism had initially been one among several methods of mobilizing colonial armies, and (...) it did not supplant the other methods but rather supplemented them.”⁵ By creating categories, divisions could be used to prevent or crush rebellions and social struggles. That was what the French government did in Algeria when it granted French citizenship to “indigenous Jews” in 1870 (Crémieux decree), arbitrarily separating them from “indigenous Muslims.” Likewise in former Yugoslavia, “religious persuasion” was used to put down social struggles through the manufacturing of a nonexistent “Muslim nationality” to turn against each other people who had until then lived together.

As one would expect, racial divisions function most effectively during crises, when incomes plummet and jobs become scarce. The FN cultivated these issues to win over what used to be the Left’s working-class strongholds. Even in periods of full employment, the State and the media have always tended to fuel xenophobia and encourage stigmatization of each successive wave of immigrant workers (“Polaks,” “macaronis,” “spics,” “dagos,” etc.). Whatever the state of the economy, such divisions had less effect in workplaces, where proletarian solidarity prevailed over prejudice and everyone worked and fought side-by-side. Or at least that’s how it used to be.

The problem with the word “islamophobia” lies not so much in the concept itself but in the way it is used for manipulative purposes. Similarly, the notion of anti-Semitism becomes manipulative when the term is presented as equivalent to anti-Zionism and ultimately “Judeophobia,” based on the claim that criticism of Zionism necessarily indicates a racist attitude towards “Jews” rather than a critique of the colonial character of the confessional state of Israel.

The aim of political Islam, according to Claude Guillon, is to turn Islamophobia into “an ideological weapon of war against atheism”⁶ and, more generally, a propaganda vehicle for the Muslim religion. The position of far-left anti-Islamophobes regarding political Islam is, to say the

⁵ Fredy Perlman, “The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism,” <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/fredy-perlman-the-continuing-appeal-of-nationalism>

⁶ Claude Guillon, op. cit.

least, ambivalent. They want to bar any criticism of the Muslim religion, a practice they say is racist. This moralizing outlook reveals a lack of analysis of how political Islam has evolved in the world since the 1979 Iranian revolution and, for some, a denial of its very existence. Nor does Jihadism disconcert these anti-Islamophobes. After each attack perpetrated by Jihadists in Europe (adding to their long list of atrocities, especially on the African continent and in the Middle East), they worry mainly about its leading to fresh outbreaks of “Islamophobia” (and—with good reason—repressive measures) and ascribe sole responsibility to western imperialism. They claim, for instance, that the attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 were strictly a consequence of the wars led by the French state in Iraq, Libya, Mali, etc. France has obvious stakes in the geopolitics playing out in the Middle East and Africa but these alone cannot explain the emergence and persistence of the Islamic State⁷ or Boko Haram. Anti-Islamophobes rely on these kinds of discourse to avoid going into the real involvement of radical Islam in the attacks, here and abroad, and to deny their perpetrators any capacity for initiative, to the point of exonerating the Kouachi brothers or Coulibaly, so-called proletarians “of immigrant descent.” This victimizing ideology assigns individuals and groups to not only a specific identity (women, “racialized,” etc.) but a fixed status as oppressed victims whose choices and practices, however reactionary, must not be criticized. Such ideological positions obscure the counterrevolutionary nature of radical Islam, which in recent years has gained significant ground in western Europe (not to mention North Africa and the Middle East), although remaining a minority compared with the population of religious Muslims at large. Formerly uncommon or even nonexistent, radical Islam, and particularly Salafism, its most common form today, has become widespread.

For these worthy anti-Islamophobes, the issue is quite simple: the Muslim religion must be viewed with exceptional benevolence as the “religion of the oppressed.” They apparently forget that social control is the function of all religions and that political Islam in particular proclaims everywhere its determination to keep tight control over the society it intends to govern. In certain poor urban neighborhoods, Salafism is sufficiently entrenched to exert social control. In fact, during the 2005 riots, Salafists actually attempted to restore order in some suburbs. This trend has developed against a backdrop of economic crisis marked by rising mass unemployment, offensives against wages and shrinking State social policies. To replace the latter as a means to hold sway over the population, the Salafists succeeded in setting up networks of mutual economic assistance.

We must not to lose sight of this role played by religions. “A religion is actually a set of metaphysical beliefs possessing very specific, inherent rules of life based on tradition and morality, to which the individual must adhere. This is a social relationship, a form of obedience training imposed on each individual and on the masses as a whole. Its functions include justifying the ruling power, guaranteeing tradition and the established order and, more generally, ensuring a degree of social ‘pacification.’ This is achieved through an organicist interpretation of society, a glorification of hierarchy, and the rejection of individual autonomy. In addition, religion often serves to redirect conflictual social situations towards fictitious objectives or to curb them by holding out the possibility of paradise in the future... paradise, that sorry lie guaranteeing peace for the powerful here and now. By offering hope in transcendence, religion stifles most of the exploited class’s revolutionary upsurges here below and right now. Bakunin’s fine phrase, ‘If God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish Him,’ puts the finger on the real problem with

⁷ For a more in-depth analysis, see (in French) P.J. Luizard, *Le Piège Daech, La Découverte*

religion: the notion of divinity is the conceptual basis of authority, and its complement, faith, that of submission to bondage.”⁸

While faith and metaphysical questioning are personal affairs, and struggling alongside someone who claims to be a believer may not pose the slightest problem, we want to be able to declare loud and clear that we are atheists. Our political positions are inseparable from our avowed atheism and criticism of all religions, and we intend to exercise freely not only blasphemy but denunciation, at the very least, of coercive, mutilating or humiliating religious and/or traditional practices, and of the inferior status assigned to women by all monotheistic religions (As for the others, maybe on another occasion!).

We have a final point to make: there are just two classes, capital and labor. Even though some members of the exploited class are more exploited than others due to their gender or origin, they do not constitute a class but are segments of it created by the ruling and exploiting class. Bourgeois thinking, whatever political guise it assumes, seeks to contain social struggles by dividing the proletariat and fostering competition among workers. Division only undermines the working class’ ability to struggle and segmentation is a good way of dividing it; the capitalist class can then pit workers against each other, especially in times of crisis. Racism cannot be fought by anti-racism but by class struggle. For those who’ve reached the point where “thinking in terms of race becomes an inescapable necessity” and “refusal of this vocabulary and what it implies will systematically be construed as blindness or even denial and should be blamed accordingly,”⁹ people who, like us, don’t share that vision are racists. That’s a conclusion we have a little trouble swallowing!

⁸ Cassandre, *op. cit.*

⁹ “Tiens ça glisse,” see footnote 4

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Flora Grim & Alexandra Pinot-Noir
On the ideology of “anti-Islamophobia”
May 2016

Retrieved on 3 March 2017 from
<https://cominsitu.wordpress.com/2016/06/22/on-the-anti-islamophobia-ideology>
Sur l'idéologie anti-islamophobe. Translated from French by *Communists in situ*.

theanarchistlibrary.org