

Marxism and religion – Yesterday and Today

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1) Classical Marxism's theoretical ('philosophical') attitude towards religion combines three complementary elements, the germ of which can be already found in the young Marx's Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Law (1843-44):

First a critique of religion, as a factor of alienation. The human being attributes to the divinity responsibility for a fate which owes nothing to the latter ('Man makes religion, religion does not make man'); he/she compels him/herself to respect obligations and prohibitions which often hamper his/her full development; he/she submits voluntarily to religious authorities whose legitimacy is founded either on the fantasy of their privileged relationship to the divinity, or on their specialisation in the body of religious knowledge.

Then a critique of religious social and political doctrines. Religions are ideological survivals of epochs long gone: religion is a 'false consciousness of the world' - even more so as the world changes. Born in pre-capitalist societies, religions have been able to undergo - like the Protestant Reformation in the history of Christianity - renewals, which necessarily remain partial and limited so long as a religion venerates 'holy scriptures'. But also an 'understanding' (in the Weberian sense) of the psychological role which religious belief can play for the wretched of the earth.

"Religious misery is, at one and the same time, the expression of real misery and a protest against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

From these three considerations emerges in the view of classical Marxism, one sole conclusion set forth by the young Marx:

"The overcoming (Aufhebung) of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo."

2). Nevertheless, Classical Marxism did not pose the suppression of religion as a necessary precondition of social emancipation (the remarks of the young Marx could be read thus: in order to overcome illusions, it is necessary first to put an end to the 'condition that requires illusions'). In any case - as with the State, one might say - the point is not abolishing religion, but creating the conditions for its extinction. It is not a question of prohibiting 'the opium of the people', and still less of repressing its addicts. It is only about putting an end to the privileged relationships that those who trade in it maintain with the powers that be, in order to reduce its grip on minds.

Three levels of attitude should be considered here:

Classical Marxism, i.e. the Marxism of the Founders, did not require the inscription of atheism in the programme of social movements. On the contrary, in his critique of the Blanquist émigrés from the Commune (1874), Engels mocked their pretensions to abolish religion by decree. His clear-sightedness has been completely confirmed by the experiences of the 20th Century, as when he asserted that "persecutions are the best means of promoting disliked convictions" and that "the only service, which may still be rendered to God today, is that of declaring atheism an article of faith to be enforced."

Republican secularism, i.e. the separation of Church and state, is on the other hand a necessary and

irreducible objective, which was already part of the programme of radical bourgeois democracy. But here also, it is important not to confuse separation with prohibition, even as far as education is concerned. In his critical commentaries on the Erfurt Programme of German Social Democracy (1891), Engels proposed the following formulation:

"Complete separation of the Church from the state. All religious communities without exception are to be treated by the state as private associations. They are to be deprived of any support from public funds and of all influence on public schools." Then he added in brackets this comment, "They cannot be prohibited from forming their own schools out of their own funds and from teaching their own nonsense in them!"

The workers' party should at the same time fight ideologically the influence of religion. In the 1873 text, Engels celebrated the fact that the majority of German socialist worker militants had been won to atheism, and suggested the distribution of eighteenth century French materialist literature in order to convince the greatest number.

In his critique of the Gotha programme of the German workers' party (1875), Marx explained that private freedom in matters of belief and religious practice should be defined only in terms of rejection of state interference. He stated the principle in this way: "Everyone should be able to attend his religious as well as his bodily needs without the police sticking their noses in." He added however :

"But the workers' party ought, at any rate in this connection, to have expressed its awareness of the fact that bourgeois 'freedom of conscience' is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of religious freedom of conscience, whereas it [the party] strives much more to free the consciences from the witchery of religion."

3). Classical Marxism only envisaged religion from the viewpoint of relationships of European societies to their own traditional religions. It took into consideration neither the persecution of religious minorities, nor above all, the persecution of the religions of oppressed peoples by oppressive states belonging to another religion. In our epoch, marked by the survival of colonial heritage and by its transposition into the imperial metropolises themselves - in the form of an 'internal colonialism' whose original feature is that the colonised themselves are expatriates, i.e. 'immigrants' - this aspect acquires a major importance.

In a context dominated by racism, a natural corollary of the colonial heritage, persecutions of the religions of the oppressed, the ex-colonised, should not be rejected only because they are the 'best means of promoting disliked convictions'. They should be rejected also and above all, because they are a dimension of ethnic or racial oppression, as intolerable as political, legal, and economic persecutions and discriminations.

To be sure, the religious practices of colonised peoples can appear as very retrograde in the eyes of the metropolitan populations, whose material and scientific superiority was in line with the very fact of colonisation. Nevertheless, it is not by imposing their way of life on the colonised populations, against their will, that the cause of the latter's emancipation will be served. The road to the hell of racist oppression is paved with good 'civilising' intentions, and we know how much the workers' movement itself was contaminated by charitable pretensions and philanthropic illusions in the colonial era.

Engels however had indeed warned against this colonial syndrome. In a letter to Kautsky, dated 12 September 1882, he formulated an emancipatory policy of the proletariat in power, wholly marked with the caution necessary so as not to transform a presumed liberation into a disguised oppression:

"The countries inhabited by a native population, which are simply subjugated, India, Algiers, the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish possessions, must be taken over for the time being by the proletariat and led as rapidly as possible towards independence. How this process will develop is difficult to say. India will perhaps, indeed very probably, produce a revolution, and as the proletariat emancipating itself cannot conduct any colonial wars, this would have to be given full scope; it would not pass off without all sorts of destruction, of course, but that sort of thing is inseparable from all revolutions. The same might also take place elsewhere, e.g., in Algiers and Egypt, and would certainly be the best thing for us.

"We shall have enough to do at home. Once Europe is reorganised, and North America, that will furnish such colossal power and such an example that the semi-civilised countries will follow in their wake of their own accord. Economic needs alone will be responsible for this. But as to what social and political phases these countries will then have to pass through before they likewise arrive at socialist organisation, we to-day can only advance rather idle hypotheses, I think. One thing alone is certain: the victorious proletariat can force no blessings of any kind upon any foreign nation without undermining its own victory by so doing."

An elementary truth but still so often ignored: any 'blessings' imposed by force equal oppression, and could not be perceived otherwise by those who are subjected to them.

4) The question of the Islamic scarf (hijab) condenses all the problems posed above. It allows us to outline the Marxist attitude in all its aspects.

In most countries where Islam is the religion of the majority, religion is still the dominant form of ideology. Retrograde, more or less literal, interpretations of Islam serve to maintain whole populations in submission and cultural backwardness. Women especially and intensively undergo a secular oppression, draped in religious legitimisation.

In such a context, the ideological struggle against the use of religion as a means of submission is key in the fight for emancipation. The separation of religion and the state should be a demand prioritised by the movement for social progress. Democrats and progressives must fight for the freedom of every man and woman in matters of unbelief, of belief and of religious practice. At the same time, the fight for women's liberation remains the very criterion of any emancipatory identity, the touchstone of any progressive claim.

One of the most elementary aspects of women's freedom is their individual freedom to dress as they like. When the Islamic scarf and, a fortiori, more enveloping versions of this type of garment, are imposed on women, they are one of the numerous forms of everyday sexual oppression - a form all the more visible as it serves to make women invisible. The struggle against the requirement to wear the scarf or other veils is inseparable from the struggle against other aspects of female servitude.

However, the emancipatory struggle would be gravely compromised if it sought to 'free' women by force, by resorting to coercion, not with regard to their oppressors but with regard to women themselves. Tearing off religious garb by force - even if it is judged that wearing it denotes voluntary servitude - is an oppressive action and not an action of real emancipation. It is moreover an action doomed to failure, as Engels predicted: the fate of Islam in the ex-Soviet Union as well as the evolution of Turkey eloquently illustrate the inanity of any attempt to eradicate religion or religious practices by coercion.

'Everyone should be able to attend his/her religious as well as his/her bodily needs' - women wearing the hijab or men wearing beards - 'without the police sticking their noses'.

Defending this elementary individual freedom is the indispensable condition of an effective fight

against religious diktats. The prohibition of the hijab paradoxically legitimises the act of imposing it in the eyes of those who consider it an article of faith. Only the principles of freedom of conscience and of strictly individual religious practice, whether in relation to clothing or anything else, and the respect for these principles by secular governments, allow legitimate and successful opposition to religious coercion. The Koran itself proclaims 'No coercion in religion'!

Moreover and at the risk of challenging freedom of education, the prohibition of the Islamic scarf or other religious signs in state schools in the name of secularism is an eminently self-defeating position, since it results in promoting religious schools.

5) In France, Islam has been for a very long time the majority religion of the 'indigenous' people in the colonies and it has been for decades the religion of the great majority of immigrants, the 'colonised' of the interior. In such a case, every form of persecution of the Islamic religion - numerically the second religion of France, though it is very inferior to the others in status - should be fought.

Compared with religions present on French soil for centuries, Islam is underprivileged. It is victim to glaring discrimination, for example concerning its places of worship or the domineering supervision that the French state, saturated with colonial mentality, imposes on it. Islam is a religion vilified daily in the French media, in a manner that is fortunately no longer possible against the previous prime target of racism, Judaism, after the Nazi genocide and the Vichy complicity. A great amount of confusion laced with ignorance and racism filtered through the media, maintains an image of an Islamic religion intrinsically unfit for modernity, as well as the amalgam of Islam and terrorism, facilitated by the inappropriate use of the term 'Islamism' as a synonym for Islamic fundamentalism.

Of course, the official and dominant discourse is not overtly hostile; it even makes itself out to be benevolent, its eyes fixed on the considerable interests of big French capital - oil, arms, construction etc., in the Islamic lands. However, colonial condescension toward Muslim men and women and their religion is just as insufferable for them as open racist hostility. The colonial spirit is not confined to the right in France; it has long been rooted in the French left, constantly torn in its history between a colonialism blended with an essentially racist condescension expressed as paternalism, and a tradition of militant anti-colonialism.

Even at the beginning of the split of the French workers' movement between social democrats and communists, a right wing emerged among the communists of the metropolis themselves (without mentioning the French communists in Algeria), particularly distinguishing itself by its position on the colonial question. The communist right betrayed its anti-colonialist duty when the insurrection of the Moroccan Rif, under the leadership of the tribal and religious chief Abd el-Krim, confronted French troops in 1925.

The statement of Jules Humbert-Droz about this to the Executive Committee of the Communist International retains certain relevance:

"The right has protested against the watchword of fraternisation with the insurgent army in the Rif, by invoking the fact that they do not have the same degree of civilisation as the French armies, and that semi-barbarian tribes cannot be fraternised with. It has gone even further, writing that Abd el-Krim has religious and social prejudices that must be fought. Doubtless we must fight the pan-Islamism and the feudalism of colonial peoples, but when French imperialism seizes the throat of the colonial peoples, the role of the CP is not to combat the prejudices of the colonial chiefs, but to fight unfailingly the rapacity of French imperialism."

6) The duty of Marxists in France is to fight unfailingly racist and religious oppression conducted

by the imperial bourgeoisie and its state, before fighting religious prejudice in the midst of the immigrant populations.

When the French state concerns itself with regulating the way in which young Muslim women dress themselves and exclude from school those who persist in wearing the Islamic scarf; when the latter are taken as targets of a media and political campaign whose scale is out of proportion with the extent of the phenomenon concerned and thus reveals its oppressive character, perceived as Islamophobic or racist, whatever the intentions expressed; when the same state favours the well-known expansion of religious communal education through increasing subsidies to private education, thus aggravating the divisions between the exploited layers of the French population - the duty of Marxists, in the light of everything explained above, is to be resolutely opposed.

This has not been the case for a good part of those who call themselves Marxists in France. On the question of the Islamic scarf, the position of the Ligue de l'Enseignement (the League for Education), whose secularist commitment is above all suspicion, is much closer to genuine Marxism than that of numerous bodies that claim it as their source of inspiration. Thus, one can read the following in the declaration adopted by the Ligue, at its June 2003 general meeting at Troyes:

"The Ligue de l'Enseignement, whose whole history is marked by constant activity in support of secularism, considers that to legislate on the wearing of religious symbols is inopportune. Any law would be useless or impossible.

"The risk is obvious. Whatever precautions are taken, there is no doubt that the effect obtained will be a prohibition, which will in fact stigmatise Muslims....

"For those who would wish to make the wearing of a religious symbol a tool for a political fight, exclusion from state schools will not prevent them from studying elsewhere, in institutions in which they will have every opportunity to find themselves justified and strengthened in their attitude....

"Integration of all citizens, independent of their origins and convictions, passes through the recognition of a cultural diversity, which should express itself in the framework of the equality of treatment that the Republic should guarantee to everyone. On these grounds Muslims as with other believers, should benefit from freedom of religion in the respect for the rules that a pluralist and deeply secular society imposes. The struggle for the emancipation of young women in particular goes primarily through their schooling and respect for their freedom of conscience and their autonomy: let us not make them hostages to an otherwise necessary ideological debate. In order to struggle against an enclosed identity, secularist pedagogy, the struggle against discrimination, the fight for social justice and equality are more effective than prohibition."

In its report of 4 November 2003, submitted to the Commission on the application of the principle of secularism in the Republic, the Ligue de L'Enseignement deals admirably with Islam and its representations in France, of which only some excerpts are quoted here:

"The resistance and discrimination encountered by the 'Muslim populations' in French society are not essentially due, as is too often said, to the lack of integration of these populations but to majority representations and attitudes which stem in large part from an old historic heritage.

"The first is the refusal to recognise the contribution of Arab-Muslim civilisation to world culture and to our own western culture....

"To this concealment and rejection is added the colonial heritage ... bearer of a deep and long-lasting tradition of violence, inequality and racism, which the difficulties of de-colonisation, and then the rifts of the Algerian war amplified and reinforced. The ethnic, social, cultural, and religious

oppression of the indigenous Muslim populations of the French colonies was a constant practice, to the point that it is echoed in limitations to its legal status. It is thus that Islam was considered as an element of the personal statute and not as a religion coming under the 1905 Law of Separation (of Church and State - trans).

"For the whole duration of colonisation, the principle of secularism never applied to the indigenous populations and to their religion because of the opposition of the colonial lobby, and in spite of the requests of the ulema (Muslim scholars - trans) who had understood that the secular regime would give them freedom of religion. Why should we be surprised then that for a very long time secularism for Muslims was synonymous with a colonial mind-police! How should we expect that it would not leave deep traces, as much on the previously colonised as on the colonizing country? If many Muslims today still consider that Islam should regulate public and private civil behaviour, and tend sometimes to adopt such a profile, without demanding the status of law for this, it is because France and the secular Republic have ordered them to do it for several generations.

"If many French people, sometimes even amongst the best educated who occupy prominent positions, allow themselves to make pejorative appraisals of Islam, whose ignorance vies with their stupidity, it is because they subscribe, most often unconsciously while denying it, to this tradition of colonial contempt."

A third aspect gets in the way of the consideration of Islam on a footing of equality: it is that Islam as a transplanted religion is also a religion of the poor. Unlike the Judeo-Christian religions whose followers in France are spread across the whole social chessboard, and in particular unlike Catholicism, historically integrated into the dominant class, Muslims, whether French citizens or immigrants living in France, are situated for the moment in their great majority at the bottom of the social ladder.

There the colonial tradition still continues, since the cultural oppression of the indigenous populations was added to economic exploitation, and since the latter has for a long time weighed very heavily on the first immigrant generations, while today their heirs are the first victims of unemployment and urban neglect. The social contempt and injustice that strike these social categories affect every aspect of their existence, including the religious dimension. No one is offended by the scarves on the heads of cleaners or catering staff in offices: they only become the object of scandal when worn with pride by girls engaged in studies or women with managerial status.

The lack of understanding shown by the main organisations of the extra-parliamentary Marxist left in France of the identity and cultural problems of the populations concerned, is revealed by the composition of their electoral slates in the European elections: both in 1999 and 2004 citizens originating from populations previously colonized - from the Maghreb or from sub-Saharan Africa in particular - have been outstanding by their absence at the tops of the LCR-LO slates, by contrast with the French Communist Party slates, a party so many times stigmatized for its failures in the antiracist struggle by these two organizations. In so doing they are at the same time depriving themselves of an electoral potential amongst the most oppressed layers in France, a potential which the results obtained in 2004 by an improvised slate such as Euro-Palestine demonstrated in a spectacular fashion.

7). In mentioning "those who would wish to make of the wearing of a religious symbol a tool for a political fight", the Ligue de l'Enseignement was alluding, of course, to Islamic fundamentalism. The expansion of this political phenomenon in the West amongst people originating from Muslim immigration, after its strong expansion for the last thirty years in Islamic countries, has been in France the preferred argument of those wishing to prohibit the Islamic scarf.

The argument is a real one: like the Christian, Jewish, Hindu and other fundamentalisms aiming to impose a puritan interpretation of religion as a code of life, if not as a mode of government, Islamic fundamentalism is a real danger to social progress and emancipatory struggles. By taking care to establish a clear distinction between religion as such and its fundamentalist interpretation, the most reactionary of all, it is necessary to fight Islamic fundamentalism ideologically and politically, as much in the Islamic countries as in the midst of the Muslim minorities in the West or elsewhere.

That cannot however constitute an argument in favour of a public prohibition of the Islamic scarf: the Ligue de l'Enseignement has explained this in a convincing fashion. More generally, Islamophobia is the best objective ally of Islamic fundamentalism: their growth goes together. The more the left gives the impression of joining the dominant Islamophobia, the more they will alienate the Muslim populations, and the more they will facilitate the task of the Islamic fundamentalists, who will appear as the only people able to express the protests of the populations concerned against "real misery".

Islamic fundamentalism is, however, heterogeneous and different tactics should be adopted according to concrete situations. When this type of social programme is administered by an oppressive power and by its allies in order to legitimate the existing oppression, as in the case of numerous despotisms with an Islamic face; or when it becomes a political weapon of reaction struggling against a progressive power, as was the case in the Arab world, in the 1950-1970 period, when Islamic fundamentalism was the spearhead of the reactionary opposition to Egyptian Nasserism and its emulators - the only appropriate stance is that of an implacable hostility to the fundamentalists.

It is different when Islamic fundamentalism plays the role of a politico-ideological channel for a cause that is objectively progressive, a deforming channel, certainly, but filling the void left by the failure or absence of movements of the left. This is the case in situations where Islamic fundamentalists are fighting a foreign occupation (Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, etc.) or an ethnic or racial oppression as in those situations where they incarnate a popular hatred of a politically reactionary and repressive regime. It is also the case of Islamic fundamentalism in the West, where its rise is generally the expression of a rebellion against the fate reserved for immigrant populations.

Indeed as with religion in general, Islamic fundamentalism can be "at one and the same time, the expression of real misery and a protest against real misery", with the difference that in this case the protest is active: it is not "the opium" of the people, but rather "the heroin" of one part of the people, derived from 'the opium' and substituting its ecstatic effect for the narcotic effect of the latter.

In all these types of situation, it is necessary to adopt tactics appropriate to the circumstances of the struggle against the oppressor, the common enemy. While never renouncing the ideological combat against the fatal influence of Islamic fundamentalism, it can be necessary or inevitable to converge with Islamic fundamentalists in common battles - from simple street demonstrations to armed resistance, depending on the case.

8) Islamic fundamentalists can be objective and contingent allies in a fight waged by Marxists. However it is an unnatural alliance, forced by circumstances. The rules that apply to much more natural alliances such as those practised in the struggle against Tsarism in Russia, are here to be respected a fortiori, and even more strictly.

These rules were clearly defined by the Russian Marxists at the beginning of the 20th Century. In his preface of January 1905 to Trotsky's pamphlet *Before the Ninth of January*, Parvus summarised them thus:

"To simplify, in the case of a common struggle with casual allies, the following points can be applied:

- 1) Do not merge organisations. March separately but strike together.
- 2) Do not abandon our own political demands.
- 3) Do not conceal divergences of interest.
- 4) Pay attention to our ally as we would pay attention to an enemy.
- 5) Concern ourselves more with using the situation created by the struggle than with keeping an ally."

"Parvus is profoundly right" wrote Lenin in an article in April 1905, published in the newspaper *Vperiod*, underlining the definite understanding, however (very appropriately brought to mind), that the organisations are not to be merged, that we march separately but strike together, that we do not conceal the diversity of interests, that we watch our ally as we would our enemy, etc.

The Bolshevik leader would enumerate many times these conditions over the years.

Trotsky tirelessly defended the same principles. In *The Third International After Lenin* (1928), in his polemic about alliances with the Chinese Kuomintang, he wrote the following lines particularly apt for the subject under discussion here:

"As was said long ago, purely practical agreements, such as do not bind us in the least and do not oblige us to anything politically, can be concluded with the devil himself, if that is advantageous at a given moment. But it would be absurd in such a case to demand that the devil should generally become converted to Christianity, and that he use his horns.... for pious deeds. In presenting such conditions, we act in reality as the devil's advocates, and beg him to let us become his godfathers."

A number of Trotskyists do exactly the opposite of what Trotsky advocated, in their relationship with Islamic fundamentalist organisations. Not in France, where Trotskyists, in their majority, rather bend the stick the other way, as has already been explained, but on the other side of the Channel, in Britain.

The British far-left has the merit of having displayed a greater openness to the Muslim populations than the French far-left. It has organised impressive mobilisations with the massive participation of people originating from Muslim immigration against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the government of its country participated. In the anti-war movement, it even went as far as allying itself with a Muslim organisation of fundamentalist inspiration, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the British arm of the main 'moderate' Islamic fundamentalist movement in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood (represented in the parliaments of some countries).

There is nothing reprehensible in principle in such an alliance for well-defined objectives so long as the rules laid out above are strictly respected. The problem begins however with treating this particular organisation, which is far from representative of the great mass of Muslims in Britain, as a privileged ally. More generally, British Trotskyists have tended, during their alliance with the MAB in the anti-war movement, to do the opposite of what was stated above, i.e. 1) mixing banners and placards, in the literal as well as figurative sense; 2) minimising the importance of the elements of their political identity likely to embarrass their fundamentalist allies of the day; and finally 3)

treating these temporary allies as if they were strategic allies, in renaming 'anti-imperialists' those whose vision of the world corresponds much more to the clash of civilisations than to the class struggle.

9). This tendency was made worse by the passage from an alliance in the context of an anti-war mobilisation to an alliance in the electoral field. The MAB as such did not, to be sure, join the electoral coalition Respect, led by the British Trotskyists, its fundamentalist principles preventing it from subscribing to a left programme. However, the alliance between the MAB and Respect translated for example into the candidacy on the Respect slate of a very prominent leader of the MAB, the ex-president and spokesperson of the Association.

In doing this the alliance passed de facto to a qualitatively superior level, unacceptable from a Marxist point of view: While it can be legitimate indeed to enter into 'purely practical agreements' that 'do not oblige us to anything politically' other than the action for common objectives - as it happens, to express opposition to the war conducted by the British government together with the United States and to denounce the fate inflicted on the Palestinian people - with groups and/or individuals who adhere otherwise to a fundamentally reactionary conception of society, it is utterly unacceptable for Marxists to conclude an electoral alliance - a type of alliance which presupposes a common conception of political and social change - with these sorts of partners.

In the nature of things, participating in the same electoral slate as a religious fundamentalist is to give the mistaken impression that he has been converted to social progressiveness and to the cause of workers' emancipation both male...and female! The very logic of this type of alliance pushes those who are engaged in it, in the face of the inevitable criticism of their political competitors, to defend their allies of the day and to minimise, even to hide, the deep differences that divide them. They become their advocates, even their godfathers and godmothers within the progressive social movement.

Lindsey German, a central leader of the British Socialist Workers Party and of the Respect Coalition, signed an article in *The Guardian* described as "wonderful" on the MAB website. Under the title "A badge of honour", the author energetically defended the alliance with the MAB, explaining that it is an honour for her and her comrades to see the victims of Islamophobia turning towards them, with a surprising justification for the alliance. Let us summarise the argument: the Muslim fundamentalists are not the only people to be anti-women and homophobic, Christian fundamentalists are equally so. Moreover, women speak more and more for the MAB in anti-war meetings (as they do in meetings organised by the mullahs in Iran, it could be added). The fascists of the BNP (British National Party) are much worse than the MAB.

Of course, continued Lindsey German, some Muslims - and non-Muslims - hold views on some social issues that are more conservative than those of the socialist and liberal left. But that should not be a barrier to collaboration over common concerns. Would a campaign for gay rights, for example, insist that all those who took part share the same view of the war in Iraq?

This last argument is perfectly admissible if it only concerns the anti-war campaign. But if used to justify an electoral alliance, with a much more global programme than a campaign for lesbian and gay rights, it becomes altogether specious.

10). Electoralism is a very short-sighted policy. In order to achieve an electoral breakthrough, the British Trotskyists are playing, in this case, a game that risks undermining the construction of a radical left in their country.

What decided them, is firstly and above all an electoral calculation: attempting to capture the votes of the considerable masses of people of immigrant origin who reject the wars conducted by London

and Washington (let us note in passing that the alliance with the MAB, was made around the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and not around the Kosovo war - and for a good reason!). The objective in itself, is legitimate, when it is translated - as has been the case - into the concern to recruit amongst men and women workers and young people of immigrant origin, through a particular attention paid to the specific oppression that they experience, and through the promotion to this end of left men and women militants belonging to these communities, notably by placing them in a good position on electoral slates - everything in short which the French far left has not done.

But in choosing to ally electorally - even though in a limited way - with an Islamic fundamentalist organisation like the MAB, the British far left is serving as a stepping stone for the former organisation's own expansion in the communities of immigrant origin, whereas it should be considered as a rival to be ideologically fought and restricted from an organisational point of view. Sooner or later this unnatural alliance will hit a stumbling block and will fly to pieces. Trotskyists will then have to confront those whom they have helped to grow for the mess of pottage of an electoral result, and it is far from sure that the results owe much to their fundamentalist partners anyhow.

All we need to do is look at the arguments used by the fundamentalists in calling for a vote for Respect (and for others, such as the Mayor of London, the left Labourite Ken Livingstone, much more opportunist than the Trotskyists in his relations with the Islamic association). Let us read the fatwa of Sheikh Haitham Al-Haddad, dated 5 June 2004 and published on the MAB website.

The venerable sheikh explains that it is obligatory for those Muslims living under the shadow of man-made law to take all the necessary steps and means to make the law of Allah, the Creator and the Sustainer, supreme and manifest in all aspects of life. If they are unable to do so, then it becomes obligatory for them to strive to minimise the evil and maximise the good.

The sheikh then underlines the difference between a vote for one of a number of systems, and voting to select the best individual amongst a number of candidates within an already-established system imposed upon them and which they are unable to change within the immediate future.

"There is no doubt", he continues, "that the first type is an act of Kufr [impious], as Allah says, 'Legislation is for none but Allah', while voting for a candidate or party who rules according to man-made law does not necessitate approval or acceptance for his method." Therefore "we should participate in voting, believing that we are doing so in an attempt to minimise the evil, while at the same time maintaining that the best system is the Shariah, which is the law of Allah.

"Voting being lawful, the question is then posed for whom to vote.

"The answer to such a question requires a deep and meticulous understanding of the political arena. Consequently, I believe that individuals should avoid involving themselves in this process and rather should entrust this responsibility to the prominent Muslim organisations.... It is upon the remainder of the Muslims therefore to accept and follow the decisions of these organisations."

In conclusion, the venerable Sheikh calls on the Muslims of Great Britain, to follow the electoral instructions of the MAB and ends with this prayer: "We ask Allah to guide us to the right path and to grant victory for law of our Lord, Allah in the UK and in other parts of the world."

This fatwa needs no comment. The deep incompatibility between the intentions of the Sheikh consulted by the MAB and the task that Marxists set for themselves or should set for themselves, in their activity in relation to the Muslim populations, is blatant. Marxists should not seek to harvest votes at any price, as opportunist politicians who stop at nothing to get elected do. Support like that of Sheikh Al-Haddad is a poisoned gift. It should be harshly criticised: the battle for ideological

influence within populations originating from immigration is much more fundamental than an electoral result, however exhilarating.

The radical left, on one or another side of the Channel, should return to an attitude consistent with Marxism, which it proclaims. Otherwise, the hold of the fundamentalists over the Muslim populations risks reaching a level which will be extremely difficult to overcome. The gulf between these populations and the rest of the men and women workers in Europe will find itself widened, while the task of bridging it is one of the essential conditions for replacing the clash of barbarisms with a common fight of the workers and the oppressed against capitalism.

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