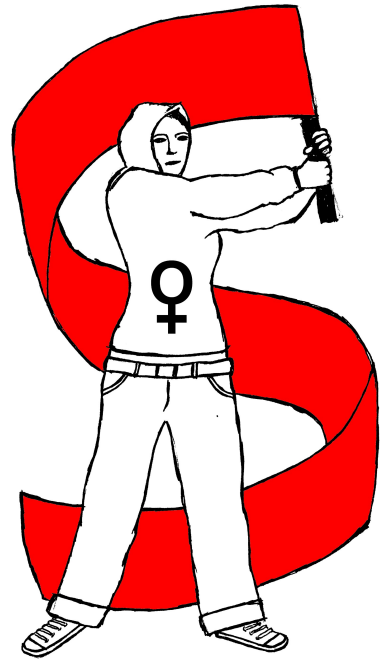


Alliance for Workers' Liberty Discussion Bulletin

312



Islam, political Islam, "Islamophobia": recent contributions

This is a print-out from the website forum. Keep contributions coming, and we'll print out further collections as we go.

Ten points about the conference discussion

Janine

1. It is right that conference did not accept Pat S's resolution as an emergency resolution – for the simple reason that an article published seven years ago can not possibly constitute an emergency. An emergency resolution must relate to something that has happened since the deadline for ordinary resolutions. (This is a norm of labour movement democracy, and is important because it insists that the regular way to deal with resolutions is through a process that allows adequate time for debate and amendment.) The only thing referred to in Pat's resolution that has happened since that deadline is an uproar on Facebook. We can not allow that to define the issue as an emergency. It was not right, however, that arguments were made against accepting the resolution as an emergency which were actually arguments against the resolution.

2. The AWL Executive Committee (EC) had the right to publish a statement in response to the Facebook uproar. We elect a National Committee (NC) to take decisions between conferences, and the NC elects an EC to make decisions between NC meetings. Each body has to act within the policies set down by the body that elected it. Further, the EC had a responsibility to publish a statement, rather than simply leave comrades to fend for themselves. Moreover, the content of the statement itself is good. It thoroughly and clearly explains the key issues in the argument, and should help us, as well as others, to understand the issues better. We might reflect, though, that part of the reason it needed to do so was because those arguments were not thoroughly and clearly explained by the original article.

3. One political issue that has been highlighted has been around "Islamophobia". I don't think this is a particularly helpful term, because it identifies the target as "Islam" (a religion) rather than "Muslims" (people); and because much of what it is used to refer to is not actually a phobia but straightforward bigotry. (I suspect that since "homophobia" has been accepted as the appropriate term for anti-gay prejudice, "phobia" has been lazily used for any other kind of prejudice identified since then. But while anti-gay prejudice is very largely an irrational fear, not every form of prejudice is.) However, I do not agree with Jim D that "Bigoted prejudice against people who are Muslims is almost always racism and based on their ethnicity, not their beliefs ... We should talk/write about "racism" not "Islamophobia"." There *is* bigotry against Muslims as Muslims, not just because of their race. (As perhaps a clearer parallel, there has been significant anti-Catholic bigotry at various times and places. Would Jim also consider that to be really racism? If so, on the basis of which race?!) Probably the best term is "anti-Muslim bigotry", but the main point is that it exists and we are against it – and we should recognise that what we write in opposition to Islam and Islamism should take account of that.

4. Perhaps I have missed something, but I have yet to hear or read a convincing justification for Sean's article arguing that "envy" and "covetousness" forms part of much of the Islamic world's view of the West. I would like to see a defence of this: without one, it just seems wrong to me.

5. We should take care to ensure that we are consistent in what arguments we think are acceptable or valid. If we argue that, say, using tropes that right-wingers/racists use is not in itself racist, then we might have to revisit the way we address people who use tropes that anti-semites use in what they say about Israel/Palestine. If we end up basically arguing that it is ok for us to do it but not for others to, then we are on a sticky wicket.

6. Cath F's contribution, highlighting post-modernism's anti-materialist obsession with language, was quite right. However, we should beware of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Our rejection of the post-modernist view does not mean that we think language is irrelevant or unimportant. It is important.

7. I am a great advocate of words being used, and read, in line with their literal meaning. (I don't even like references to cuts "decimating" services unless one-tenth of the service is brought cut. Winking smile.) However, I think we have to accept that there are some words which have a literal meaning which has over time become loaded with a more subjective, judgemental tone. One example would be "retarded". Someone might refer to a person with learning disabilities as "retarded" and insist that literally, this simply means that his/her intellectual development is delayed, or behind that of others. This is, of course, literally true: but I'm sure none of us would use the word "retarded" in this context – and the fact that "retard" has recently made a comeback as an insult is a regressive development. Why? Because its literal meaning has, over a period of time and in the context of prejudice, become embellished with negative and insulting connotations. We might consider that this is similarly the case with the word "primitive".

8. There was much sniggering at conference about arguments on our email debate about adjectives and nouns, etc. I think this is unhelpful, and unfair on Martin T, who introduced this argument into the debate. Martin argued that if people read Sean's article properly ie. in line with correct grammar, syntax etc, they would see what it really meant and not be fooled by the uproar against it. This is a reasonable line of argument to take: the issue I (and, I think, Clive and Pat Y) took with it was not that Martin was wrong to use that line of argument, but that actually, he wasn't quite right about the grammar.

9. I think the points that have been made in the debate both on this list and at conference about sticking up for each other in the face of sectarian attack are right and are important. (I prefer Martin T's description of this as "solidarity" rather than others' reference to it as "loyalty", but that's a minor point.) As a character in a lowbrow sci-fi novel I am currently reading says, "We don't leave our people behind – even the annoying ones".

10. I have been alarmed by some of the comments demanding that comrades be "tougher". At times, I have almost expected someone to urge us to "man up" or "grow a pair". We are not the Spartans: we do not put our members through unnecessary torture to make them fit for battle. Unlike Mark O, I did not join the group because I thought it was "tough", but just because I thought it was right. We need to *help* comrades face attack and deal with the stress and anxiety that this can cause. If all we do is demand and denounce, then we will leave a lot of people by the wayside.

Janine

"Things that can't be said"?

Martin T

After our conference on 26-27 October, I think we've got past such ideas as having AWL apologise to those who have called us racist and Islamophobic for decades (to cover up their own capitulation to political Islam); or censor ourselves by suppressing our own articles in deference to those people; or denounce ourselves for having circulated racist or Islamophobic material for the last eight years, and not noticing until WP and ISN point it out; or declare many or all of our main articles against political Islam to be "problematic".

And, I hope, everyone is clear that no-one wants to say that the 2006 article was perfect, or used exactly the best words, or couldn't be improved with eight years' hindsight.

We can now discuss some issues.

"ISLAMOPHOBIA"

We have had front-page headlines reading "Defend Mosques and Muslims" twice in recent years. Plainly we recognise that the Muslim population in Britain suffers prejudice, hostility, and sometimes persecution.

We combine defence of Muslims (as people) against oppression and discrimination with hostility to Islam (as a religion) and hostility to political Islam (as a political current). "Love Muslims, hate Islam".

As Janine points out, "Islamophobia" is not a good word to describe the oppression and discrimination suffered by Muslims because it conflates hostility to Muslims (as people) with hostility to Islam (as a religion). The majority of those who pride themselves on struggle "against Islamophobia" in fact interpret as "Islamophobia" any but the mildest criticism of Islam (as a religion) or of mosque leaderships (as a social and political force).

Janine argues that "anti-Muslim racism" is not a good description either. I don't think she is right about that.

Hostility to groups of people explicitly on the grounds that they are a "race" with biologically-defined inferiority or vices is rare in Britain, and probably most of the world, today. Even Daily Mail types say: "I'm not a racist, but..."

But we call Daily Mail or EDL attitudes racism (in a looser sense) because they are based on regarding whole categories of people (defined by background, origin, etc.) as characteristically inferior and vicious.

Racism may use skin-colour or appearance as its "tag" for the victimised category, or it may use other things like religion or presumed religion ("looking Muslim"), or even language. The most virulent racism I've ever come across was of English-speaking Canadians in Quebec against French-speaking Quebecois, when I lived there in 1965, even though none of the racists argued that French-speaking Quebecois were a biologically-distinct species. The attitude of Orange bigots to Northern Ireland Catholics is essentially a form of racism.

I don't know how to measure this, but isn't it true that in Britain a Bangladeshi or Pakistani who privately is unreligious will suffer more anti-Muslim racism (because of "looking Muslim", etc.) than, say, someone of Turkish background who "looks European" but is a religiously devout Muslim?

To use the word "bigotry" in place of "racism" doesn't help, I think. Bigotry is a generic word for vehement, obstinate unreason: thus, you can have bigoted Catholics and lackadaisical Catholics, etc. If attitudes to Muslims are bigoted, they are a bigoted species of what?

"LOVE MUSLIMS, HATE ISLAM"

It's possible to write and say things which are ostensibly only against political Islam, or "Islamic extremism", or Islam as a religion, and yet convey hostile attitudes to Muslims as people.

Equally, criticism of political Islam, or "Islamic extremism", or Islam as a religion, is often rejected by some on the left as automatically conveying hostile attitudes to Muslims as people.

This is not new. In Britain and Ireland, socialists have long had to combine defence of the oppressed Catholic Irish with denunciation of Catholic religion and Catholic religious authorities (and political-Catholic clerical-fascism when it was a force, but that was only briefly).

In principle, an over-the-top denunciation of Catholic religion might shade over into inciting hostility to Catholics.

I'll comment only that we tilted much more towards vehement denunciation of Catholicism as a religion, and of the "priest-ridden" (etc.) plight of Catholic Irish society, than we tilt towards denunciation of Islam as a religion. And yet we managed to be trenchant about defence of oppressed Northern Ireland Catholics as people.

WHAT "CAN'T BE SAID"

Wherever we draw the line, it can't be in a place which makes us censor ourselves from saying true things about Islam, or about political Islam, for fear that they will "reflect badly" on Muslims. Telling the truth must be the first principle: only once that is established do the questions arise about when, where, in what words, etc.

Pat S writes: "Islamophobia has tropes and language associated with it; such as an Islamic conspiracy to take over the West or the portrayal of Muslims as suicide bombers or terrorists".

For sure anti-Muslim racists may pursue those themes. But then Orange bigots inflate and caricature many allegations against Catholicism which, in uninflated and uncaricatured form, are facts.

Many political Islamists proclaim their desire to see the whole world subjected to Islamic rule and Islamic law. Hizb-ut Tahrir are explicit about that. The more moderate Muslim Association of Britain, in the newspaper it produced to promote itself to demonstrators on the September 2002 march against the invasion of Iraq, announced its aim as "the widespread implementation of Islam as a way of life; no longer to be sidelined as merely a religion".

MAB explained that in its ideal Islamic state, a person who "chooses not to embrace Islam" may have the right to be a citizen, but only if they "express loyalty to the state and recognise its legitimacy so that he or she does not engage in any activity that may be construed as threatening to its order". Even then that person's citizenship is "qualified", "and such qualification is only lifted when the concerned person embraces Islam". In that state apostasy from Islam should be punishable by death.

Hizb-ut Tahrir and MAB are not stupid. They do not aspire to create their global Islamic order by a small conspiracy suddenly seizing the levers of power in countries like Britain. They know and say that the realisation of their aims requires patient proselytising in countries of non-Muslim majorities, as well as seizures of political power in mostly-Muslim countries.

But do they want to take over the world? Yes, they do.

Many political Islamist groups celebrate their suicide bombers and terrorists as models of virtue for all Muslims. Most Muslims do not accept those models. But the political Islamist groups do proclaim and promote them.

Pat S also complains about description of political-Islamist attitudes as including "envy and covetousness" towards the world's more prosperous countries. On Thursday 24 October we had an AWL London forum about the Shahrokh Zamani case, with an Iranian comrade speaking.

He pointed out that alongside the Iranian Islamists' preaching of simple Islamic virtue in contrast to corrupt Western consumerism, the mullahs' families and the Pasdaran have done very nicely, economically, from the Islamic state. A major source of income for them is under-the-counter importation of European and US luxury goods.

That's a fact. We cannot and should not be silent about it for fear that talking about it will reflect badly on all Muslims, whether supporters or opponents of political Islam.

As it happens, the article from WL 3-1 about which complaints have been made nowhere speaks of Muslim religious beliefs as "primitive". It uses the word "primitive" pejoratively about Christians and Christian beliefs, and beliefs like astrology, in Europe and the USA.

The word "primitive" appears in that article in relation to Muslims only in the sense of "original" or "pristine" (to describe the simplicity and purity, or claimed simplicity and purity, of the desert tribes which followed Muhammad and his companions in the first great Islamic conquests) and to refer to conditions in rural Afghanistan in contrast to the more advanced conditions of (also-Muslim) urban Afghanistan.

But we need to be able to say that Muslim religious beliefs are primitive (archaic, reflecting a more brutalised society, etc.) as well as that Christian beliefs are primitive.

FACTS AND TROPES

A trope is a metaphorical expression or figure of speech. Pat S's text sees "Islamophobia" as residing mostly in "tropes and language".

But then there are facts which right-wingers may build on to create their "tropes". For decades right-wingers built on real facts about the USSR to create their "tropes" about "communism". Stalinists called our comrades "anti-Soviet", "anti-communist", or "cold warriors" because they insisted on reporting those real facts. But our comrades were right.

The same holds in relation to political Islam, and Islam.

Part of the trouble here seems to be people reading literal historical references - the desert tribes of 7th century Islam for example - as "tropes".

As Cath explained at the conference, a debilitating influence here is post-modernism, for which there is nothing but text and discourse. Everything is a trope.

We are not post-modernists. For us, there really were 7th century conquests by Muslim desert tribes. Referring to them is not a matter of deploying a metaphor or figure of speech.

I think another debilitating influence is the British bourgeois version of multiculturalism, which preaches tolerance as part of a package with categorising people (children, especially) into a series of distinct "cultures" defined primarily by religion. It inculcates the idea that criticism of "faith groups" and of cultures as defined by religions is inherently intolerant and discriminatory, while criticism or denunciation of secular political ideas is all right.

A WORLD DIVIDED INTO TWO PARTS

The article from WL 3-1 argued that political Islam, in addition to its straightforwardly backward-looking, reactionary dimension, also has a "reactionary anti-imperialist" dimension. It gains strength by being able to articulate, in a warped form, the anger against global inequalities of people in mostly-Muslim countries, which are generally among the world's poorer countries, often historically victims of colonial or semi-colonial oppression by European powers. That makes political Islam

different from politicised Christianity (e.g. in the USA) which has no such addled anti-imperialist content.

Pat S's text, however, claims that the article "paints a picture of the world divided up into simple, backward societies such as the 'Islamic world', replete with poverty and deprivation, and modern, technologically advanced societies, such as the West", and that "wholly positive and negative attributes are designated" to those two blocks, presumably meaning that the article describes European and US societies as "wholly positive" and poorer countries as "wholly negative".

It would be very odd if we published an article depicting British capitalist society as "wholly positive"! (And with no-one noticing, for eight years, that it had done that!) In fact the article reserves its most vehement language for denunciation of social and cultural conditions in the richer countries of Europe and the USA.

Far from the article promoting a Fabian-type support for whatever is more economically advanced against whatever is more economically backward, it describes the war of "primitive" rural Afghanistan (i.e. more primitive than the "relatively advanced" though also-Muslim cities of Afghanistan) against the "advanced" Russian invaders as "a just war".

A simplistic division of the world into "North" and "South" is commonplace on the left. It would be unfair even to very confused kitsch-leftists to say they depict the poorer South as "wholly positive" and the richer North as "wholly negative", but they do describe the "South", more or less en bloc, favourably as "anti-imperialist", and the "North", more or less en bloc, as "imperialist".

Pat S's text suggests that the WL 3-1 article proposes an inverted version of that scheme (North good, South bad, rather than North bad, South good). This is not even quarter-plausible.

We have written many articles against the idea of a world of "blocs", to show the existence of combined and uneven development in the "South", and to highlight class divisions and class struggle across both "South" and "North". The article in WL 3-1 concludes by advocating, as the way to undercut the revival of religion and politicised religion, socialist class struggle - not a conquest of the "wholly negative" South by the "wholly positive" North, or a course of waiting for the South, through gradual economic development, to become as "wholly positive" as the North!

It makes no sense to imagine that Sean would write, and the rest of us would typeset, lay out, read, promote, and circulate for eight years, an article saying the very opposite of what we generally say.

If there is a need for further discussion here, it should start with a discussion of our arguments and writings about imperialism, for example the Preamble to the "Next 12 Months" document.

Soft on Racism!

Tim vT

There is another angle to all this that I think is worth talking about.

Last Monday I attended a meeting of Sheffield Anti-Fascist Network. Afterwards, while a few of us were standing outside the venue and a local anarchist who we sometimes work with in local campaigns asked me what I thought of Sean's article and pointed out the serious ramifications it had had - he named a member who left over the issue. An ISN member who was standing in the group confirmed that said member had left AWL.

I was less than happy to have been put on the spot like this - I haven't read the article itself enough and had not kept up with the internal discussion as well as I might have liked.

So I said that those on the left who want to portray us as racist should put up or shut up. If they really think we're racist, what on earth are they doing sitting in meetings about fighting the EDL with us, supporting us in student and trade union elections and working with us in various other way without ever mentioning to others involved that we might be a bit racist?

The man who asked me the question responded along the lines of 'exactly, if they actually thought you were racists they should treat you as they would any other racist'. The ISN member said nothing. Not a thing.

The point of this anecdote is that I think it reflects what the rest of the left do in relation to us, most of the time. Sure, there might be a little flurry from time to time of the sort of shit WP are trying to stir up but this will die down again. If you challenge people in this way, they tend to be left feeling a bit sheepish.

I wanted to highlight this for three reasons:

1. Comrades might find this line of argument useful in face-to-face and online discussions to shut this shit down.
2. It lends a lot of credibility to some of the arguments made at conference by Martin T, Daniel R and Mark O about individual comrades' and the group's response to all this.
3. I have been wondering if it would be worth publishing something that takes this idea that we're racist and runs with it for a few paragraphs. It wouldn't be hard to look at all the various ways that various members of these groups, or groups as a whole, have worked with us, called for votes in various elections for our members, intervened at our events without calling us out on our racism etc etc etc.

Now that they have found some more 'proof' that we're racist, perhaps we should show everyone all the 'proof' of how

tolerant they are of a group of 'racists'. How they work with a group of racists because it's sometimes politically expedient to do so, or actually sometimes because in a given situation our (racist) comrades are the best people to work with/vote for from their point of view. Ask whether we are in fact a group of racists that have been singled out by the left as being tolerable where no other racists are tolerable, or whether in fact we are not racist at all and this is just sectarian mischief-making.

Perhaps this is a terrible idea, I don't know. A whole article of what amounts to sarcasm might not be the best way to go. I just can't help thinking it'd be pretty bloody satisfying.

Tim v T

Two quick points in response to Martin, one to Tim:

Martin 1. I didn't argue that "anti Muslim racism" is not a good description. Please, in a discussion in which accurately quoting people and using words correctly is such a key theme, we should at least quote each other accurately. I do think, though, that "anti Muslim bigotry" is a better term.

Martin 2. Although I appreciate that you have attempted to answer the point about 'envy' - something that has been missing so far - I don't think your attempt does answer it. So Islamist leaders like Western luxury goods despite their preaching of simple virtue? How does that prove that much of the Islamic world looks at the West with envy and covetousness? It doesn't.

Tim: Don't try it. They will take up the challenge somewhere, and it may well be someone where we are not able to properly defend ourselves. It could backfire spectacularly.

Backfire

Janine - the more I think on it the more I think you're probably right. But I can't get away from the idea that these points should be made somehow. If not by playing them at their own game, then with some approach that's a bit more careful.

Tim v T

Anti-racism, and how to engage

Daniel R

I share Tim's instincts to expose the absolute irrationality of the claim that we are "racists", but I think it's best done by pointing (as the EC response to the outcry did) to our long and ongoing record of work in anti-fascist, anti-racist, and migrant solidarity campaigns.

That's not to say that an individual or group involved in such work couldn't have some racist opinions. But, even on our detractors' own terms, the assertion that AWL as a whole is "racist" because of some sentences in Sean's article does rely on a post-modernist "there is only text"-type analyses. If one places the offending sentences first in the context of the whole article, then in the context of our publicly-stated positions on racism, immigration, etc., then in the context of our historical and ongoing work on such issues, the assertion that we are "racists" is shown up for what it is.

Janine, on the issue of "envy", I have written something brief on this on the other thread (here).

On "Islamophobia", I feel that we should avoid using the term. Many people use it to describe the phenomenon of anti-Muslim bigotry and prejudice, but it's also used to describe (and to attempt to stifle) perfectly legitimate anti-religious criticism of Islam. We defend Muslims' right to worship, but we do not "defend" Islam.

No terminology is perfect but in my view "anti-Muslim racism" best describes the social phenomenon under discussion. Evidently, "Muslims" are not a "race" in the technical sense, but Martin's right when he says: "Hostility to groups of people explicitly on the grounds that they are a 'race' with biologically-defined inferiority or vices is rare in Britain, and probably most of the world, today. Even Daily Mail types say: 'I'm not a racist, but...' But we call Daily Mail or EDL attitudes racism (in a looser sense) because they are based on regarding whole categories of people (defined by background, origin, etc.) as characteristically inferior and vicious."

Furthermore, most anti-Muslim bigotry does have an objectively "racist" (in the more "traditional" sense of being hostile to people of colour) social function because the majority of British Muslims are non-white.

A difficulty of this whole debate is that we're necessarily talking about British Muslims and their views as something "other" from ourselves. This isn't evidence of our latent Orientalism (!), but rather an inescapable function of the empirical fact that, like the rest of the British far left, we have no implantation in mainly-Muslim British-Asian and migrant communities. The only experience of significant interaction between those communities and the British far left in recent years was the Stop the War Coalition and Respect, which hopefully we all agree is a good case study in how Marxists should not engage with ethnic-minority working-class communities with religious ideas.

Our discussion of terminology, tropes, motifs, and language shouldn't lose sight of the fact that we actually have some clear aims in terms of practical politics here. These are to build a labour-movement based anti-fascist and anti-racist united front,

which can mobilise Muslim workers (religious and irreligious) in community self-defence, and to attempt to do as the revolutionaries did in relation to the Jewish communities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and attempt to "split them along class lines", confronting communalist-religious consciousness and identities and developing working-class socialist consciousness and identities that allow workers of all ethnic and religious backgrounds to see themselves as having more in common with each other than they do with businesspeople and clerics who happen to share their ethno-religious background.

We can all agree on things we shouldn't do in pursuit of those aims (self-censor, promote ourselves as communalist "fighters for Muslims", accomodate to backwards ideas) — but let's talk about what we should do.

Another reference, plus response to Janine

Martin T

This reference may be useful:

<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2008/09/26/awl-day-schools-2008-globalisation-imperialism-political-islam-israel-palestine>

(it indicates, by the way, that the 2006 article did not just moulder in the archives between then and now: we used it in 2008 as a text for a day school).

In response to Janine:

1. If you think "anti-Muslim racism" is ok as a description, that's good (by me), and sorry for misunderstanding. I don't think "anti-Muslim bigotry" is better, because bigotry is such a generic word for obstinate unreason.

2. "Envy and covetousness"? The "much of the Muslim world" which is described as expressing this attitude (as part of a mix which also includes other sentiments) is political Islam. (It's the subject of the argument throughout the whole passage: the words "political Islam" are used for it in the previous sentence, and "Islamic fundamentalism", to denote the same thing, in the next).

Like other political movements which combine a plebeian populist appeal with right-wing and hierarchical ideas, political Islamist movements do indeed express that "envy and covetousness".

It combines in a contradictory way with the claim to simple virtue which they also express. The contradiction gets resolved by the leaders doing the acquisition which they'd coveted, and the rank and file having to make do with simple virtue.

The repeated military campaigns by the Wahhabis in Arabia which eventually brought the House of Saud to power are another example alongside Iran.

Matgamna and Engels

Paul H

One of the sentences in Sean's article some comrades object to is the ascription of "envy and covetousness" to Muslims. I realised today that Sean's expression in this passage is more-or-less a paraphrase of a footnote written by Frederick Engels in his *On the History of Early Christianity*, first published in the German SPD theoretical journal *Die Neue Zeit* in 1894. It is found in the *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, volume 27: 448.

Engels wrote:

"A peculiar antithesis to this was the religious risings in the Mohammedan world, particularly in Africa. Islam is a religion adapted to Orientals, especially Arabs, i.e., on one hand to townsmen engaged in trade and industry, on the other to nomadic Bedouins. Therein lies, however, the embryo of a periodically recurring collision. The townspeople grow rich, luxurious and lax in the observation of the "law." The Bedouins, poor and hence of strict morals, contemplate with envy and covetousness these riches and pleasures. Then they unite under a prophet, a Mahdi, to chastise the apostates and restore the observation of the ritual and the true faith and to appropriate in recompense the treasures of the renegades. In a hundred years they are naturally in the same position as the renegades were: a new purge of the faith is required, a new Mahdi arises and the game starts again from the beginning. That is what happened from the conquest campaigns of the African Almoravids and Almohads in Spain to the last Mahdi of Khartoum who so successfully thwarted the English. It happened in the same way or similarly with the risings in Persia and other Mohammedan countries. All these movements are clothed in religion but they have their source in economic causes; and yet, even when they are victorious, they allow the old economic conditions to persist untouched. So the old situation remains unchanged and the collision recurs periodically. In the popular risings of the Christian West, on the contrary, the religious disguise is only a flag and a mask for attacks on an economic order which is becoming antiquated. This is finally overthrown, a new one arises and the world progresses."

Clearly Engels was comparing relations between urban and nomadic Muslims, while Sean's analogy is between Muslims and advanced capitalist societies. But the modes of expression i.e. the language, tropes etc are very similar.

But before anyone leaps in to make accusations about Engels, some further observations. There is a substantial scholarly interpretation of this passage of Engels' work, which suggests it is based on the writings of Ibn Khaldun, one of the foremost scholars in world history, a Muslim who lived in the Maghreb and Egypt in the 14th century.

An article by Nicholas Hopkins, Engels and Ibn Khaldun in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, (1990) makes a convincing case that Engels had read translations of Ibn Khaldun's major works and borrowed freely from them through his life. Hopkins wrote for example:

"The notion of cyclicity, of a progressive movement of dynamic and pure Bedouin coming in from desert and mountain to overthrow an effete urban dynasty, only to become lazy and corrupt in turn, is one of the major themes of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, written in the fourteenth century. Ibn Khaldun stresses that the strength of *Casabiyya* ("group feeling" or solidarity) among the Bedouin makes it possible for them to overthrow lazy and luxury-oriented town-based governments, particularly when the *Casabiyya* is combined with a sense of Islam."

My point is that some tropes used by Matgamna were probably borrowed from Engels, who probably borrowed them from Ibn Khaldun. We can discuss whether the tropes are valid as historical observations or as analogies with current conditions, but their origin is far more nuanced than a superficial reading would have suggested.

As it happens, I think Engels makes a pretty reductionist argument in the passage, which we would dispute, namely that progressive resistance movements sometimes take a religious form but are really expressing economic causes. This might be true in some cases, but is not helpful in analysing political Islam/Islamic fundamentalism. Such movements do not demand a more progressive economic system, nor a more democratic polity. They are instead reactionary. This point is argued by the Lebanese Marxist Gilbert Achcar in his recent book, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (2013). Nor do I think societies are trapped into cyclical repetitions, as Ibn Khaldun suggests (and Engels disputes). However these interpretations provide insights and contrasts that grapple with substantial issues.

But it would be absurd to write off tropes - originating with one of the finest Muslim scholars, who arguably pioneered much of what is regarded (including by Marxists, classical and recent) as modern historiography and historical sociology - as beyond the pale, racist, chauvinist etc.

It would be equally ridiculous to dismiss such a trope as "Islamophobic" when it originated as a critique of elements of the Islamic world by Muslim scholars themselves. At the very least, the authors are trying to capture real relations, contradictions and social forces. Their writing should be judged by its explanatory power and whether it captures something significant, not by whether their language parallels modes of expression used by others far from our politics.

Arguments in the online outcry

Daniel R

Hi comrades.

I've been fortunate enough to avoid most of the Facebook outcry against us, but I've caught a few of the key propositions of the loud voices within it and have been moved to write something about it. I know this is slightly off at a tangent from the substantive political discussion above, but I wanted to post it anyway to get comrades' thoughts. I'm hopeful that comrades closer to the eye of the Facebook storm will find this useful (mainly in terms of formulating things in their own minds, rather than replying to people on Facebook, which, as I've said before, is rarely productive in my view).

The "propositions" in the document are based on things I've actually seen people write on Facebook. This doesn't deal directly with the argument that AWL should be banned, boycotted, or not-worked-with because of the article, but given that the "case" for banning, boycotting, or not working with us relies on the same propositions, it addresses that indirectly.

Cheers,
Daniel Randall

Arguments in the online outcry

Proposition: "The AWL is racist"

What's the evidence for this? The AWL is not one article, but a totality made up of the 47 years of our tendency's existence — all the policy we have agreed upon, all the articles we have written, and all the class-struggle activity we have undertaken in that time. Where is the substantive evidence within that totality that we are "racist"?

There is none. In fact, and obviously, there is substantial evidence to the contrary. Our record on questions of anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigning, migrant solidarity, and explicit commitment to the principle of open borders, is better than many other groups on the left.

Any claim that "the AWL is racist" must be substantiated with reference to that 47-year totality.

Proposition: "The 2006 article is racist"

The online outcry against "the article" has in fact been an outcry against 118 of its 2,657 words. To substantiate the claim that the article makes a racist argument, the 118 offending words must be placed in the context of the article as a whole (and the article as a whole must, in turn, be placed in the context of the 47-year totality which the AWL represents).

What does the article argue? It argues that religion, and particularly Islam and Christianity, are growing as forces in world politics, to a degree unseen for centuries, and that this growth should be a source of alarm for socialists. It argues that both the collapse of Arab nationalism and global inequality are catalysts for the growth of Islamism, but that it cannot be understood merely as a reaction or blowback, but rather has its own internal and indigenous dynamics.

The article argues that the growth of Islamism exists in symbiosis with the growth of militant Christian fundamentalism, which the article describes as “as irrational as anything in the Islamic world”. The article concludes by arguing that only class-struggle socialism can pose a meaningful alternative to both the actual spread of religion and politico-religious ideas, and the system which create the conditions of oppression and inequality which fuel its growth.

Is this a racist argument? Nothing in the online outcry has attempted to argue that it is. Nothing in the online outcry has attempted to argue that the article's central argument is anything other than this. So in what sense is “the article”, as a totality, “racist”?

Proposition: “The 118 words are racist”

What is being argued in the 118 words? Sean Matgamna uses a historical trend (the attitude of 7th and 8th century desert tribes to growing towns — a real historical phenomenon, commented on by Engels and the 14th century Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun) as an analogy for the attitude of contemporary Islamism (which, the article argues, is now influential in “much of the Islamic world”) towards the hegemonic imperialist powers in the west.

Is this “racist”? Islamists themselves are explicit in their identification and affinity with “primitive Muslim” societies (in the literal sense of “primitive”).

Proposition: “Racists compare contemporary Muslims to 'backwards' societies of the past. The article does this.”

No, the article discusses the political outlook of contemporary Islamists with reference to societies of the past. Whether those societies are indeed backwards and primitive, or rather an ideal to be aspired towards (as the Islamists contend), is a matter of political assessment, but it cannot be necessarily, in and of itself, “racist” to mention this.

Proposition: “The image of Arabian tribes 'sharpening their knives' echoes racist motifs of contemporary Muslim immigration having an 'invasive' character and explicitly aiming to attack or destroy 'western values'”

But the article does not use this image with reference to immigration but rather as an analogy for Islamist attitudes towards “the west”.

Perhaps another analogy would have served the argument better. But the claim that Islamist attitudes towards the west are characterised by often-violent hostility is irrefutable.

We reject notions of “western values”, as if ideas such as democracy and feminism are the sole property of “the west”. Some of what Islamism opposes in “the west” - the imperialist adventures of western governments, for example - we also oppose. But we oppose them for different reasons. Islamist hostility to “the west” is inseparable from its positive, and profoundly reactionary, political project.

Proposition: “The reference to the ‘walls of Vienna’ is racist, because racists use the Ottoman invasion of Europe to scaremonger about contemporary Muslim immigration.”

Yes, but the article doesn't. As stated previously, the AWL's position on immigration (by Muslims or anyone else) is very clear. The article refers to the “walls of Vienna” as part of a rhetorical flourish referencing its previous assertion that religion is now a greater force in politics than it has been at any point since the 17th century.

One might criticise the use of such a flourish for the ease with which it could be misinterpreted, or even argue that the motif is now so effectively “owned” by right-wingers that it cannot but be misinterpreted and should therefore be avoided (although such an argument would also exclude a great deal of other figurative language). But the online outcry has not argued this; it has simply asserted that the mere use of the phrase automatically makes the article, and/or the AWL, “racist”, regardless of the phrase's context in the article or the article's context in the totality of the AWL's politics.

Proposition: “The article is not racist, but it is Islamophobic and/or Orientalist”

What do these terms (“Islamophobia” and “Orientalism”) mean? If “Islamophobia” means hostility and opposition to (or even, if you like, “fear of”) Islam, as a system of ideology and a politico-social force, the article is very Islamophobic indeed. By this definition, the whole of materialist-humanist revolutionary politics (not just Marxism but class-struggle anarchism too) is necessarily militantly “Islamophobic”, and “Christianophobic”, “Judeophobic”, “Hinduphobic”, and so on.

Much of the online outcry has suggested, implicitly or explicitly, that in conditions where Muslims face social prejudice which sometimes manifests as bigoted intolerance of their religion, any attempt to criticise or oppose that religion necessarily feeds into that prejudice. This is an idea that has to be resisted. It can only lead to self-censorship and boycotting crucial aspects of our politics (militant secularism, humanism, and materialism).

Those who deploy the term “Islamophobia” as if its meaning is clear-cut or uncontested should be challenged to explain themselves. If they mean by the term the general atmosphere of prejudice and intolerance towards Muslim people and their religion (which, because most Muslims are non-white, has an objectively racist social function), they should say that. On that, our policy is again quite clear. We have carried “Defend Muslims and mosques” as a headline on our newspaper, are actively involved in militant anti-fascist and anti-racist campaigning, and have written and campaigned extensively against scaremongering about immigration.

And what does “Orientalism” mean? An “othering” of “the East”, as a homogenous bloc? Again: look at the totality of AWL's politics. We have fought against the idea of dividing the world into homogenous blocs of any kind, arguing instead for a class analysis that sees struggles between workers and bosses in all countries as paramount, rather than struggles between “imperialists and anti-imperialists”, “east and west”, or “global north and global south”. Again, our record of solidarity with workers' struggles in “the east” (in Iraq, Indonesia, Iran, Kurdistan, Egypt, and elsewhere) is better than most groups on the

left.

If it cannot be argued that the article is making an "Orientalist" argument, or that the offending phrases are making an "Orientalist" argument, or that there is anything in the AWL's policy or political practise which could meaningfully be described as "Orientalist", then one is left with an essentially journalistic criticism about the choice to deploy certain images or analogies. Anyone, inside the AWL and out, should be free to make such criticisms, but they would have a very different character from an online outcry that has seen us denounced as "racist", "Islamophobic", and "Orientalist".

Proposition: "The problem is not just with the article, but with 'structural racism' within the AWL"

What does this mean? That, internally, the AWL discriminates against non-white people? That there is internal prejudice against our non-white members? That we are hostile to non-white people in a "structured", "organised" way? This claim is made without substantiation.

The AWL is an overwhelmingly white organisation. The far-left as a whole (including, and probably especially, the anarchist left, and particularly the Bloomsbury anarchist left) is overwhelmingly white. That is in a sense a reflection of "structural racism" - the left as a whole recruits heavily from posh universities, which, because of systemic racism, non-white people often find it harder to access.

Could AWL, and other left groups, do more to combat the reflection of that systemic racism inside our own organisations? Undoubtedly, just as we must always work harder and improve our culture to minimise the ways in which sexist power dynamics are reflected inside left organisations (as we all know they sometimes are - grotesquely and spectacularly in recent cases in the SWP and SP, but more subtly inside all left-wing and labour movement organisations, including our own).

But the online outcry has not addressed this question; it has made the plain statement "the AWL is racist", pointed for evidence only to 118 words in one article, and then repeated the claim at an increasingly shrill pitch.

This is not a rational way to conduct any political debate. If our detractors' claim is that neither the arguments of the article as a whole, nor our democratically-decided policy on the issues (racism, immigration, etc.), nor our record of past and current activity on those questions, nor Sean's intention in using the language which has caused offence, nor anything at all, makes any difference whatsoever, and that their particular reading of 118 words in an article is the only relevant consideration to deciding the question of whether or not the AWL, as a totality, is "racist"... this is not a starting point it's possible to have a meaningful engagement with. This is indeed a hyper post-modernism in which nothing but discourse matters and which our detractors' arrived-at "truth" (that we are "racist") is unchangeable by any reference to objective, material context. They are essentially saying: "I've decided you are racist, and if you want proof, my proof is the fact that I've decided it."

On the basis both of the form of the discussion, and its substance (or lack thereof), we should unapologetically defend ourselves and our political record.

Vienna

Martin T

Wrapping up his book on Muhammad (well worth reading), the Marxist writer Maxime Rodinson commented: "From him [Muhammad] sprang... all the Muslim empires and kingdoms down to the Ottoman Empire, which threatened Vienna".

Writing for interested readers, Rodinson didn't think it necessary even to give the date of the battle of Vienna (1683): he could just use the word "Vienna" as shorthand for the end of the era of expanding Islamic empires.

In Europe and much of Asia, over a thousand years of history, from the days of Muhammad through to 1683, geo-political conflict was heavily connected with, and expressed in terms of, religion. Christian and Islamic powers fought to install Christian or Islamic rule. They also used those wars to settle accounts among themselves, but what we would now call "politics" was saturated with and expressed as religion.

Milestones included the first sudden expansion of Islamic power in the last years of Muhammad's life and the following century; the Islamic conquest of Spain in 711; the Crusades between 1095 and 1272; the Islamic conquest of Byzantium (Constantinople) in 1453; the completion of the Christian reconquest of Spain, in 1492; the victory of Spain and its allies in sea battle with the Ottomans at Lepanto in 1571; and Vienna.

For much of that thousand years the Islamic empires were more culturally advanced than the Christian powers. It was through them that much of ancient Greek culture, and Indian mathematics, came down through the centuries. By 1683 the Ottoman empire and other Islamic states were in relative decay, though they were still more religiously tolerant than the Christian powers of Europe.

1683 is a milestone for the end of that thousand-year era, and for the start of a new era dominated by nationalism and national states.

The introduction to WL 3-1 remarks that with the rise of political Islam - of mass movements, not just marginal sects, aiming for "the restoration of the caliphate" and the creation of new strictly-Islamic states - conflicts expressed in terms of religion now figure large in world politics for the first time in 300-odd years.

Later, at the point where it concludes the discussion of political Islam to pass on to condemning the revived influence of Christianity in politics in Europe and the USA, the introduction uses the word "Vienna" again.

It says "the Islam which failed outside the walls of Vienna over 300 years ago is now a force..." It's a way of tying the flow of argument back to the start of the article, and varying again the terminology for "political Islam". The species of Islam which seeks to construct or expand strictly-Islamic states is, after centuries, resurgent.

Would it have been better at the start of the article just to say "we have to go back to the 17th century"? Instead of "primitive Muslim simplicity and purity", to write "original Muslim simplicity and purity"? In that same sentence, to write "the political Islamists" instead of varying the usage to "much of the Muslim world"? To reword the sentence tying back to the start of the article?

With eight years' hindsight, yes. In 2006 when the introduction was published, and in 2008 when we used it as reading for AWL day schools, absolutely no-one read into the article what is now read into it. But now words and phrases are being pulled out of context to denounce the introduction as "really" saying something no-one previously thought it said. It's best to guard against that risk if we can, though there's no way any of us can guarantee against something we write now being read in some unexpected way in eight years' time.

However, "Vienna" is not a "trope" here. It is not a metaphor or figurative expression. It is a literal historical reference.

There is a crank right-wing website which uses "The Gates of Vienna" as a "trope" in agitating for the defence of "Christian Europe". No-one who reads the denunciation in the introduction of the revived influence of Christianity in politics in Europe can think the article has anything in common with that. The use of "Vienna" as a "trope" in that fashion is esoteric enough that it is possible to make the historical reference without being tainted.