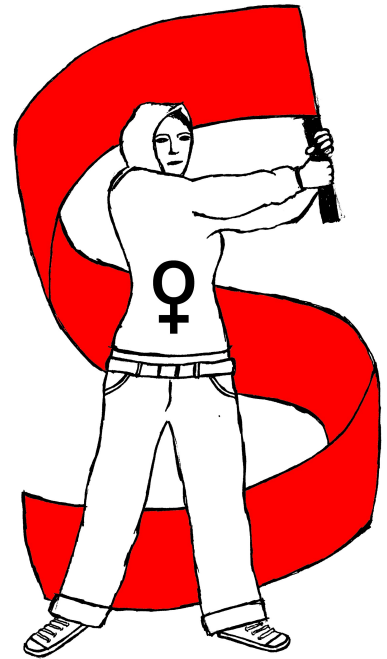


Alliance for Workers' Liberty Discussion Bulletin

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Islam, political Islam, "Islamophobia": more discussion

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A reply to Simon Hardy on Islamism and imperialism

by Sacha Ismail

Simon Hardy's article

[http://www.internationalistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/fighting-oppression/266-awl-on-islamism-analysis-without-history-words-without-meaning-criticising-\"The AWL on Islamism\" has the merit of being that, an article.](http://www.internationalistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/fighting-oppression/266-awl-on-islamism-analysis-without-history-words-without-meaning-criticising-\)

Simon avoids the wilder claims made against the AWL, but it looks as if he has not read Sean Matgamna's 2006 article very thoroughly, or thought about it very hard. Thus he describes its attack on Christian fundamentalism as "almost an afterthought", when it takes up 800 words out of 2,700, as against 1,000 in the section on Islamism. (This was four years after the Islamist attack in New York, during a powerful growth of Islamism due to the US 'war on terror' – about which more later.) Simon claims that Sean did not attack Christian fundamentalists in the same "colourful" language he used for Islamists. Erm:

"There is also militant primitive Christianity, most importantly in the USA. The savage joke is that the USA, the main international bulwark against political Islam, is itself riddled with its own ignorant fundamentalism. Christians in the half-demented grip of an eyes-put-out dogmatic faith in the Bible as the literal word of God, and an impervious belief that their own religious feelings, aspirations, and wishes are truths superior to reason and modern science, are an assertive and increasingly active political force in the USA. A "Fundamentalist" Christianity, as primitive and anti-rational as anything in the Muslim world, is a growing force in what is, technologically, the most advanced society on Earth! The President of the USA [George Bush] is one of them." (Emphasis added)

Such language is typical of the "colourful" way Sean, more than any other AWL writer, has denounced not just Christian fundamentalism but organised Christianity over many years.

Simon's shoddiness reflects in diluted form the tone of the majority of the 'debate' around Sean's article in the last two weeks. At the same time, he presents the article as if it was a stand-alone product and the entire sum of Workers' Liberty's writings on Islamism. Conscious or not, this allows him to caricature our views and to blur over the contradictions in his own understanding of Islamism – and that of the political tendency which educated him, Workers Power, and the group which published him, the ex-SWP International Socialist Network.

Sean Matgamna's article and the AWL's literature on Islamism

Sean's article was not a detailed analysis of Islamist ideas and movements. It was a relatively short introduction to a collection of classical Marxist stuff on religion (Nikolai Bukharin on "Church and school in the Soviet Republic", Max Shachtman debating Catholic priest Charles Owen Rice), published to help

recreate a socialist literature on these questions. It aimed to contextualise those writings by arguing that "today [in 2006]...religion, or concerns and interests expressed in religion, are at the centre of international politics to a degree without parallel for hundreds of years." Its political thrust is that "in both East and West the growth and increasing centrality of religion is in very large measure a consequence of the decline and failure of socialism as a mass force which organises working people to free themselves from exploitation, economic uncertainty, helpless dread of the future, superstition, and mere animal-like existence within or on the envious fringes of commercial capitalist society."

The article's analysis of Islamism is necessarily quite compressed, and uses a bit of elliptical and rather florid language. I am not saying it could not have been better written, or denying that a few phrases are open to misinterpretation. My point is that in the recent row, almost eight years after the article was first published, those phrases have been fantastically misinterpreted in a way possible only if the interpreter ignores everything else the AWL (including Sean) has written and done about Islam, Islamism, Islamophobia, etc over many years, including 2006-13.

Sean's intro was not something he published personally without the group noticing. It was the introduction to the first of our Workers' Liberty pull-outs, and to the main items we have had in permanent circulation since then on Marxism and religion. It was part of the basic reading for AWL day schools in 2008.

No one then, or over the years between then and 2013, read the article as saying what it is now alleged to say. And since then there have been numerous opportunities for the anti-Muslim views which Sean or perhaps all of us are supposed to hold to come out in practice – from the rise of the EDL to the racist upsurge after the Woolwich killing to the anti-Muslim Brotherhood coup in Egypt. On no issue in those eight years has Workers' Liberty responded in the 'racist' or 'Islamophobic' way which would be involved by what the article is now alleged by some to say. The article allegedly says something at odds not only with what the author says he means, but with our whole political record over those eight years!

Moreover, the AWL has published a lot about Islamism. Anyone who genuinely wants to understand our views can read, for instance, this detailed survey (12,000 words) by Clive Bradley, which we published in March 2002 as the "war on terror" began. This article provides exactly the sort of "more intricate and detailed analysis" of different Islamist movements and of "the question of social relations between" the Muslim world and the imperialist centres which Simon demands. It roots its analysis of Islamism in a Marxist political economy of North Africa and the Middle East. It alone, never mind everything else we have published, gives lie to the nonsensical interpretations of Sean's meaning which have dominated this controversy.

Does Simon really believe that Sean, as a Marxist,

believes in the right-wing 'clash of civilisations' thesis, or thinks that any form of modern Islamism represents the same kind of ideological current or social force as the 17th century Ottoman empire? If there is really any doubt, reading our wider material dedicated to Islamism should dispel it – if the reader is actually interested in what we think.

Clive's piece, and other writing he has done building on it, have been the basis of numerous discussions and educational sessions since 2002, and not provoked any significant disagreement in our organisation. Unless you believe Sean is part of a secret neo-con faction in the AWL, dedicating to surreptitiously challenging our public positions, then...

Some on the left find it easier to slander Workers' Liberty than to engage with the actual ideas expressed in our literature and practice, and argue about real differences rather than invented ones. This row has led to a fresh surge of such misrepresentation. Simon avoids crude slander, but ignores our literature on Islamism, stringing together a 'critique' from tendentious interpretations of phrases in Sean's 2006 article.

Islamism and imperialism

One of Simon's central themes is that Sean ignores the role of Western imperialism in the rise of Islamism. "Why is such a crucial aspect of the rise of political Islamic, reactionary movements so absent from the analysis?", he complains.

No socialist would deny the role of the US and its allies in the growth of Islamism over four decades, both in terms of active support (to fight the USSR in Afghanistan, to provide a counterweight to secular left or nationalist movements, eg in Palestine and South Asia) and in boosting Islamism's appeal through their brutal imperialist activity. The spread of Taliban-style fundamentalism in Pakistan as a result of the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan is an obvious case in point.

In fact, Sean's article does refer to both one-time Western aid to Islamists, and to the 'reactionary anti-imperialist' character of Islamism, ie its ability to channel resentment against the exploitation and disadvantage of the mostly poor countries where it is strongest.

Anyone who reads our literature, will find us making such points over and over – and not just as a matter of hindsight. Before the 'war on terror' even began, our propaganda against it – relevant to this debate on many points – predicted that the irruption of US imperialism would "spread the spores of fundamentalism" and produce "new masses of recruits for [al Qaeda] and other terrorist-fundamentalists". We stressed then something we have stressed ever since, that "the main victims of [Islamic] fundamentalist politics are the people, mostly Muslim, of the fundamentalists' home countries".

Clive Bradley's survey is a detailed analysis of how, in the post-colonial period, uneven capitalist development affected societies in the Muslim world and, by creating problems that movements like Arab nationalism and the nationalist left tail-ending it could increasingly not even pretend to solve,

prepared the way for the growth of Islamism, with its elements of 'reactionary anti-capitalism'. Again, that thought, in compressed form, was a major part of Sean's article too.

(There is a strange facet to this. Ex-AWL member Pat Smith condemns the AWL for saying that the growth of Islamism is linked to the poverty and disadvantage of much of the Muslim world. Meanwhile Simon Hardy condemns us for allegedly ignoring it!)

No, the problem is not that we deny or ignore the role of Western imperialism in the rise and, after 2001, revival of Islamism. It is that Simon reproduces the familiar but false 'left-wing' idea that Islamism is straightforwardly and automatically a "direct result" of imperialism, largely ignoring the dynamics of the class struggle and ideological struggles in the Muslim world.

That the actions of the big powers provoke angry responses is obviously true. It does not explain the form of those responses. No form of 'reactionary anti-imperialist' politicised religion is strong in Central America, which has suffered more US mistreatment than most of the countries where Islamism is strong.

The first difficulty for Simon is that, although the first Islamists did indeed develop their ideas and begin to organise under colonial rule, the era when most Muslim countries were fighting for liberation from colonialism (1920s-60s) saw more secular politics dominate. It took a long time, and many other developments, for Islamism to get a real grip. Tunisia, for instance, won independence in 1956 under a radically secularist regime; Islamists became a force in the 1980s. Where national liberation struggle continued, among the Palestinians, Islamism was even slower in gaining traction, with Hamas not a mass force until the 1990s.

In Pakistan and Bangladesh, Islamism was heavily promoted from the 1970s by the right-wing, pro-US military regimes which overthrew the left-leaning governments established after the Pakistani upheaval of the late 60s and the Bangladeshi national liberation war of 1971. Here Western imperialisms played a very definite role (Britain promoting the carve up of India and creation of Pakistan as a 'Muslim state', US support for the militaries and Islamists as a bulwark against the left). But even these examples are hardly evidence of Islamism being a "direct result" of imperialism, rather than a complex interaction of 'external' and 'internal' factors.

(Of course, there are distinctive strands of Islamism like the ruling ideologies of the Gulf monarchies: for an analysis of Saudi Arabia, for instance, see [here](#).)

Islamism as counter-revolution

The same sort of problem is clear in Simon's treatment of the Iranian revolution. Was Iranian Islamism's rise to power a "response" to pre-1979 US domination in Iran? What about other "responses" – the powerful workers' movement, women's movement, national liberation movements and left-wing organisations which the Islamists smashed? Simon blurs over the class struggle in Iran, merging revolution and counter-revolution into simply what he oddly calls an "anti-colonial, anti-secular"

movement.

In some countries, Islamist forces directly repressed the left. In some, they benefited from previous repression, moving into the vacated space to expand networks of religious charities, welfare services and so on. Pretty universally, they benefited from the discrediting of a left closely tied to Stalinism or nationalism. Whatever the mix of these factors, Islamism's role was fundamentally counter-revolutionary.

Perhaps Simon has written on this elsewhere (I couldn't find anything on the Worker Power or Anti-Capitalist Initiative websites). But for sure his article's elision of the working class-driven revolution which overthrew the Shah of Iran, and the Islamist-led confiscation and destruction of it, goes to the core of what is wrong with much of the British left's view of Islamism.

Iranian revolutionary Marxists, among others, have analysed Islamism on the rise as not simply bourgeois or petty bourgeois, but a form of counter-revolutionary mass movement with similarities to fascism or extreme right-wing nationalism in Europe. Of course, secular bourgeois nationalist movements can be and have been repressive towards the working class. Islamism, nonetheless, by and large represented something new and different from most such movements, something fundamentally regressive. That was true across the board, despite the large differences between 'Islamisms' (eg Iran's Islamic Republican Party is very different in various respects from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt; both are very different from eg Al-Qaeda or the extreme Sunni-jihadist groups in Syria).

Like fascism, Islamism employs anti-imperialist rhetoric in the service not of limited democratic goals, but utterly reactionary ones.

Is it a fair comparison? Of course, Germany in the early 20th century was an imperialist country. Yet after World War 1 it was crushed and dominated by the victorious Allies. That famously created the conditions for the rise of ultra-right nationalist movements, including Nazism, which inspired similar movements across Europe – yet of course right-wing nationalism was not the only possible or the only actual response to the experience of capitalist crisis and imperialist domination. That Islamism would rise to such prominence in the Muslim world was no more automatic than right nationalism coming to dominate Europe in the 1930s.

To dismiss fascism as just “a product of the capitalist regime”, wrote Trotsky against the Stalinists in 1934, “means we have to renounce the whole struggle, for all contemporary social evils are ‘products of the capitalist system’... When the fascists kill a revolutionist, or burn down the building of a proletarian newspaper, the workers are to sigh philosophically: ‘Alas! Murders and arson are products of the capitalist system’, and go home with easy consciences. Fatalist prostration is substituted for the militant theory of Marx, to the sole advantage of the class enemy. The ruin of the petty bourgeoisie is, of course, the product of capitalism. The growth of the fascist bands is, in turn, a product of the ruin of the petty bourgeoisie. But on the other hand, the

increase in the misery and the revolt of the proletariat are also products of capitalism...”

We should not make the same mistake, or anything like it, with Islamist movements and Western imperialism.

At one point, the forerunners of today's pro-Islamist left were more sober about such realities. In 1946, in the heat of Egyptians' struggle against the British empire, Tony Cliff denounced the Muslim Brotherhood as a “clerical-fascist organisation”. Yet in 2012, the SWP called for a vote for the Brotherhood in Egypt's presidential election. What does the ISN think of that now?

Accommodation to Islamism in Britain

More generally, the ISN has yet to come to grips with the SWP's poisonous legacy of accommodation to Islamism and to Islamic reaction – not only apologies for Islamist brutality in other countries, but the alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood's British offshoot in the anti-Iraq war movement, the endorsement of gender-segregated meetings during that movement, the disastrous Respect adventure, the sidelining of women's and LGBT rights, support for religious schools, the betrayal of secularists, feminists, LGBT activists, etc in Muslim communities and so on. These sorts of questions, and not whether to defend Muslims against racism, are the real disagreements.

Simon's denial that Islamism is a force in some European cities suggests he is struggling to get to grips with these questions too. Naturally no one is suggesting that British Islamists are a power comparable to their counterparts in Indonesia, or that they can win elections. But Simon seems to have forgotten that at his former university, Westminster, the Islamist group whose Indonesian cousin he cites, Hizb ut-Tahrir, are the biggest political force on campus, strong enough to win student union elections. He writes as if blissfully unaware that the East London Mosque's core leaders are Islamists, organised around people who in 1971 actively supported Pakistan's genocidal war against Bangladesh. These forces organise homophobic and anti-abortion campaigns in local schools with the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child. Meanwhile, cases like that of Mohammed Monzur Rahman, who was left partially blind after being attacked for smoking during Ramadan in 2010, are at the sharp end of what seems like a wider problem of intimidation of Muslim people in the area by Islamists and those influenced by them.

Whatever the ups and downs of Islamist organisations proper, what seems indisputable is that religious-inspired political and social reaction has grown in British Muslim communities (this is not the same thing as religious observance, which in any case may even be declining). Of course this growth is rooted in poverty and racism, including the rise of the anti-Muslim right and far right. And of course, unlike extreme-right nationalism and Christian reaction, there is no possibility of Islamism or Islamic reaction taking power in Britain. That does not mean their spread should be a matter of denial or indifference for socialists.

Defending Muslims

Workers' Liberty's record of 'defending Muslims' against oppression is actually better than those of the groups criticising us. On many of the issues involved, we have - contrary to widespread misrepresentation - no real differences with most of the left.

The actual differences, over decades, have been in our favour.

There has been great anger recently about the shocking record of the SWP's Unite Against Fascism front in actually fighting fascism. Yet such problems are not new. UAF's predecessor, the Anti-Nazi League, began its career with a particularly shameful episode in 1978, when the SWP refused to cancel or modify a mass "anti-fascist" carnival to mobilise forces for the defence of Brick Lane against a National Front attack. While a hundred thousand rocked against racism in South London, the NF successfully marched in Tower Hamlets and gangs of racist thugs wreaked havoc. As we put it at the time: "the Bengali community is paying the price for this defeat" - a defeat that was easily avoidable.

The AWL has always said that, while maintaining sharp political lines, we will stand even with reactionary mosque leaderships and Islamists to repulse racist assaults on Muslim communities (so much for Simon's idea that for us "opposition to political Islam always seems to be prioritised over everything else"). As Sean Matgamna put it in 2002:

"Of course socialists will stand side by side with the priests and Islamic bigots to defend their neighbourhoods against racist attack. We have done that (in my direct experience, in East London). It is very different from standing side by side with those reactionaries against the more emancipated segments of their own communities."

Or as we put it in 2003, while we were opposing the SWP's alliance with the Muslim Association of Britain in the anti-war movement: "We would ally even with the MAB in a practical action to defend mosques against racists out to firebomb or pillage them." We have repeated this point again and again. Contrast: in 1978, at a high point for the National Front, the SWP would not even jeopardise a recruitment jamboree to defend the Muslim community of Tower Hamlets under attack.

What about the 'IS tradition' of anti-imperialism?

The first British war I was politically active during was the 1999 NATO-Serbia-Kosova conflict, where the SWP concentrated solely on opposing NATO, shamefully dismissing calls to back the oppressed, mainly-Muslim Kosovars in their fight for national survival. In 1995 the SWP took a similar position over Bosnia, refusing to support the Bosnian Muslims in their battle for self-determination against the onslaught of Serbia and Serb chauvinist militias. (This seems like the place to point out that Simon's suggestion that Sean regards the "country people" who attacked Dubrovnik, as part of the Serbian army, in 1991 as other than bloodthirsty reactionaries is more than a little weird.) In Britain in 1999, the SWP built an 'anti-war' alliance with Serb nationalists, Islamophobes if ever Islamophobes existed. Does the

ISN still believe this was right?

The record of Simon's former group, Workers Power, is also dubious. Talk about the role of imperialism in boosting Islamism rings hollow from a tradition that supported Russian imperialism's Vietnam war in Afghanistan, which by devastating Afghan society prepared the way for the Taliban.

In 1979, when the Stalinist USSR invaded Afghanistan because its client regime was faltering, both the SWP and the forerunner of AWL denounced it and called for immediate Russian withdrawal. (The main forces fighting the Russians were, tragically, Islamist ultras - more evidence that we do not prioritise anti-Islamism above everything else.) Workers Power, on the other hand, virtually supported the Russians.

Simon condemns the AWL because, between 2004 and the final withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011, we did not use the slogan 'Troops out now'. Our argument was not that the occupation provided a "bulwark against Islamism", but that given the sectarian nature of the main "resistance" militias and their strength relative to the central Iraqi state, immediate US-UK withdrawal would have resulted in sectarian civil war and Iraqi society collapsing into warlordism. We supported the new Iraqi workers' movement, the only socialist organisation in Britain to actively do so, and unsparingly denounced the occupation forces. We still maintain active links with Iraqi socialists which originated in that period.

Contrast Workers Power's attitude to Russia in Afghanistan: it switched its analysis of the USSR from 'state capitalist' to 'workers' state' explicitly in response to the Russian Stalinists' colonial war, and warned against the threat of "treacherous withdrawal". (The Socialist Party's predecessor Militant hailed what it saw as the work of the Russian militarists in dragging Afghanistan's "'dark masses', sunk in the gloom of barbarism" into the 20th century.)

If Simon no longer thinks this was right, he should say so. Workers Power has been the shrillest group denouncing us. With Simon or without, it is pretty rich to hear defenders of the Soviet Union's napalm-armed civilising mission in Central Asia accusing Sean Matgamna of anti-Muslim bigotry because he described Islamist reaction in brutal terms.

Reactionary anti-imperialism

My aim is not tit-for-tat point-scoring, and my point is not that Workers Power, the ISN or Simon are the 'real Islamophobes'. It is that their hopelessly tangled view of imperialism and anti-imperialism - and of socialists' attitude to advanced capitalism more generally - have repeatedly led them to support 'reactionary anti-imperialisms', even when these take the form of actual imperialist powers. The roots of their support for Islamophobic imperialisms and Islamist 'anti-imperialists' are the same.

For Simon, whose politics seem to represent a biodegraded lowest common denominator of these traditions, engaging with our real ideas is no doubt very difficult. He deserves credit for trying, but fails spectacularly. At the end his argument simply collapses, insisting that socialists must defend

Muslims against state-sponsored racism like France's ban on the niqab – when he knows that the AWL opposes such things.

Muslim workers and the fight for socialism

A few of the more malicious or confused responses to Sean's article have implied that we think Muslim workers do not have the potential to engage in class struggle or fight for socialism. On one level this is simply bizarre, but it is also depressing, since it is literally the opposite of what we are saying.

As we put it in our response to the Woolwich killing, the central reality of Islamism is that "it is directed against women, LGBT people, atheists and secularists, dissidents and critical-minded people in Muslim-majority countries and in some Muslim communities in countries like Britain... Islamism is a threat to the working class, in the first instance the Muslim working class." Conversely, independent class organisation and struggle by Muslim workers, in alliance and solidarity with other workers, is the key to defeating the Islamists, along with all bourgeois reaction.

Islamism as a world force will be defeated only by the liberating class struggle of workers in Morocco and Bangladesh, in Nigeria and Indonesia, in Palestine and Egypt, as well as in the cities of Europe. Our task is solidarity with workers' movements and socialists in the Muslim world, and any political concession to Islamism is a barrier to that.

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In defence of comrade Matgamna and Workers' Liberty

By Camila Bassi

These are the rules

A storm should leave in its wake stillness and clarity. Marxism to me works as a method of thinking and application; a body of ideas and a school of experience; a theory to apply to any given reality with an analytical rigour and honesty; and, a process of testing, modifying and evolving ideas and practice in the interests of our class. There are also certain Marxist principles, as Leon Trotsky articulates:

"To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives - these are the rules."

So, a seven-year-old article by Workers' Liberty comrade Sean Matgamna has recently caused great indignation among sections of the British Left, with accusations of racism and Islamophobia. For anyone familiar with this Left, it is hardly news that Workers' Liberty are (supposedly) imperialists, Zionists,

racists and Islamophobes, such are the longstanding accusations. But it would be unfair to label all of the article's critics as mischief-makers; many, for sure, have genuine unease with the piece. And it is to these critics that I address my defence with the hope to convince them otherwise.

Political Islam, Christian Fundamentalism, Marxism and the Left Today is a classic polemical piece by Matgamna. It is an essay that takes effort to read and digest; it provokes emotion and stimulates the mind; and, it pulls no punches.

II. The political context. Politics and Religious Revivalism While Matgamna presents some nuanced analysis based on differential conditions and forces of existence, he draws no essential distinction between East and West in relation to the increasing appeal and influence of religion in politics. His assertion is that we have reached a somewhat unprecedented epoch in which religion - or interests expressed in the name of religion - has become central to political life worldwide.

It seems to me that there is a valid case to make based on empirical observation and evidence that since the early 1990s, there has been a fertile growth of religious fundamentalisms. Take the examples of Hindu fundamentalism in India, the rising role of Jewish fundamentalism and Islamism in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, or (most recently) the bizarre emergence of Buddhist fundamentalism in Burma and Sri Lanka.

Locally, Matgamna problematizes changes to British state law that have blurred the difference between racist and ethnic incitement and expression of hostility to religious ideas. He comments:

"We are in the throes of being thrown back decades, to the not so distant time when people in Britain could be prosecuted for 'disrespectfully' or 'obscenely' depicting Jesus Christ."

The defeat of socialism by Stalinism, fascism and bourgeois democracy has preconditioned this contemporary "social and spiritual malaise", Matgamna observes. That said, he continues, the victory of the working class in the 1917 Russian Revolution remains the beacon and proof that the working class - when "politically armed with Marxism and organised in and by a consistently democratic class-loyal revolutionary party" - can take political power. However, much of the British Left has lost its way, so rather than proudly pioneer a revival of independent, internationalist, consistency democratic socialism, which is capable of envisioning "a rational, humane, enculturating socialist society", it has capitulated to religious revivalism, namely Islamism, through an inverted dual camp politics. For documentation of this, see my journal paper: 'The Anti-Imperialism of Fools': A Cautionary Story on the Revolutionary Socialist Vanguard of England's Post-9/11 Anti-War Movement.

b. On the End of History and the Clash of Civilisations After the Cold War, two (of varying degrees) right-wing theses emerged in academic and public intellectual circles: Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' and Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'.

Frances Fukuyama proclaimed: "The most remarkable development of the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the revelation of enormous weaknesses at the core of the world's seemingly strong dictatorships, whether they be of military-authoritarian Right, or communist-totalitarianism Left. From Latin America to Eastern Europe, from the Soviet Union to the Middle East and Asia, strong governments have been failing over the last two decades. And while they have not given way in all cases to stable liberal democracies, liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration that spans different regions and cultures across the globe. [...] The attractive power of this world creates a very strong disposition for all human societies to participate in it, while success in this participation requires the adoption of the principles of economic liberalism."

Samuel Huntington depicted a new global order of civilisations: Sinic (Chinese), Hindu, Islamic, Japanese, Latin American, orthodox, Western, and possibly African. The West, he prophesied, will be faced with the growing hegemony of Islamic, East Asian and Chinese civilisations. The West, Huntington concluded, needs a strategy to strengthen its political and cultural values while also seeking alliances with other civilisations.

Matgamna alludes to the lack of traction Fukuyama's thesis has with empirical reality. Moreover, any reading of Matgamna's essay as echoing Huntington's thesis is, frankly, a misreading of Matgamna's political method and motivation, context, analysis and conclusion. One can argue that Huntington, for right-wing political ends, racially essentialises civilisations and promotes within this a naturalised hierarchical order. If Matgamna is guilty of any kind of essentialism too, then surely the only case that could be made would be on 'class'? He is steered by a belief that workers across the world have a collective interest in opposition to both their bourgeoisies and the growth of religious fundamentalisms. Does this then make him an economic determinist and class reductionist? No. As Friedrich Engel's states:

"if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the only determining one, [she or] he is transforming that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. We make history ourselves, but first of all, under very definite assumptions and conditions [...] history is made in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between individual wills, of which each in turn has been made what it is by a variety of particular conditions of life."

c. On Orientalism and Racism Leftist Edward Said (1978), in his book *Orientalism*, describes how the scholars who studied what used to be called the Orient (mostly Asia) disregarded the views of those they actually studied. Instead, such scholars preferred to rely on their Western intellectual superiority - an attitude forged by European imperialism. In addition to the complicity of European governments and scholars in the colonial Empire-building of the Arab world, Said identifies Marx and Marxism as guilty of an orientalist distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'.

Could one make a case that Matgamna's essay is orientalist? Actually, I think the question itself is wrong on the basis that Said's thesis is flawed. The critique of 'a Western' framing of the 'Orient' and the 'Occident', i.e. the 'West' and the 'Rest', appears to me to replace one form of essentialism with another (or one dualism with another dualism). The French Orientalist and independent Marxist scholar, Maxime Rodinson (himself praised by Said as a scholar who proved "perfectly capable of freeing [himself] from the old ideological straitjacket" of the Orientalist disciplines) states of Orientalism: "as usual, [Said's] militant stand leads him repeatedly to make excessive statements", which are made further problematic by the fact that Said is "inadequately versed in the practical work of the Orientalists". Rodinson cautions that Orientalism is "a polemic against orientalism written in a style that was a bit Stalinist", that is, in its dual camp delineation of allies and adversaries.

Subsequent postcolonial theory tends to remain silent on past Islamic imperialism and present-day regional imperialisms outside of the US-Euro-Israeli triangle. Is it surprising then that during a plenary of an anti-war teach-in at Berkeley in 2006, the queer theorist Judith Butler stated: "Understanding Hamas, Hezbollah, as social movements that are progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of a global Left, is extremely important, that does not stop us from being critical of certain dimensions of both movements [...]."

Furthermore, 'orientalism', whether one rejects this thesis or not, is not a concept to be conflated with the concept of 'racism' - the latter (when sharply defined) has far more spatial and temporal sensitivity to analyse, explain and respond to any given reality. For Robert Miles (1989), racism is a process of signification:

"racism 'works' by attributing meanings to certain phenotypical and/or genetic characteristics of human beings in such a way as to create a system of categorisation, and by attributing additional (negatively evaluated) characteristics to the people sorted into those categories. This process of signification is therefore the basis for the creation of a hierarchy of groups, and for establishing criteria by which to include and exclude groups of people in the process of allocating resources and services."

I contend that post-9/11 there has been a collapse of religion into a racial category vis-à-vis British Muslims, hence it makes sense to analyse a sharp increase in 'anti-Muslim racism'. For me, the term Islamophobia lacks serious explanatory power.

Any accusation that Matgamna's essay is racist only works on the premise that either one cannot criticise or one should tame down one's critique of Islam and/or Islamism because otherwise one is categorising all Muslim people negatively and from a racially elitist vantage point. This is the muddle that much of the British Left finds itself in, and it is their muddle not Matgamna's. Is it with any wonder then that Matgamna states:

"the first result on the kitsch-left of the present foetid regrowth of religion has been to expose the terrible lack of ideological and political self-

confidence and the all-round weakness of mind and spirit that pervades that 'left'."

III. The political analysis and conclusionThe following are Matgamna's central points that compose his overall line of argument in Political Islam, Christian Fundamentalism, Marxism and the Left Today. To pull sentences out of this narrative is to subsequently evade dealing with the narrative's politics, i.e., identifying what products of capitalism to base ourselves on (namely the working class) in opposition with what other products of capitalism.

POINT ONEThe 'war on terror' is not crudely a 'put up job' in which the external enemy has been invented (as the pseudo-Left claim). Whilst it is the case that key 'Western' imperialist and regional imperialist powers have fostered Islamism, for example, the Israeli state for the purpose of dividing Palestinians and jeopardising the prospect of a two nations settlement, and the US state in the financing and arming of Islamist forces during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, Islamism has its own indigenous roots. The roots of Islamism lie in the space that was created from the collapse of Arab nationalism, in which a solution to the failings of Arab nationalism "is not an earthly, but a heavenly one".

POINT TWOThe 'war on terror' is both "a war on civil liberties of ordinary citizens" and: "is shaped around a US war against terrorists whose whole world outlook and motive to action is shaped by Islam and by their Islamic view of an afterlife in which a special place in a peculiarly fleshy paradise, with the harems of virgins with which Allah rewards those who kill innocent people as well as themselves, is the preordained heavenly payment for Muslim suicide bombers."

In an era when ICT has dramatically compressed our sense of space and time, Islamism provides an expression to the disappointments and frustrations of a mass of people at the fringe of the prosperous, advanced capitalist world. Islamism's response is a moral righteous (and essentialised) rejection of 'the West'. It is in this context that Matgamna writes: "Like desert tribes of primitive Muslim simplicity and purity [a historical reference to the 7th century that Islamism draws inspiration from] enviously eyeing a rich and decadent walled city and sharpening their knives, or country folk in former Yugoslavia eyeing a city like Dubrovnik, so, now, much of the Islamic world looks with envy, covetousness, religious self-righteousness and active hostility on the rich, decadent, infidel-ridden, sexually sinful advanced capitalist societies."

A general religious revivalism and rise of religious fundamentalisms worldwide appears to have coincided with the rapid spread of ICT and cheap air travel (the infrastructure of globalisation) and particular geographical shifts in global capital over the past twenty years or so. I don't think one should play down the significance of this period in which satellite TV and the internet, and a sharp rise in economic growth (and with that more plain inequality), sell the relative freedoms of life in the cities and beyond. This seems to be a major factor in bringing to a head the acute tensions of religious

tradition, duty and honour. Visiting my extended family in the Punjab villages during the late 1990s and 2000s, anecdotal evidence talked of a new prevalent phenomenon of suicide among pre-marital young women (in a majority of cases, by drinking weedkiller). The wave of protests in India during late 2012 and early 2013, triggered by the 16th December Delhi gang-rape case, again demonstrated (amongst other things) a collision or confrontation between globalisation and patriarchal religious revivalism. See my piece and podcast, Historic moment for India? and Sexual violence: a global analysis.

POINT THREE

In Europe itself, there is a political battle for Muslim minds, and therein Islamism is a growing force. See, for example, research by the world's foremost expert on Islamism, political scientist Professor Gilles Kepel, for empirical substantiation of points one to three.

POINT FOUR

The growth of militant "primitive Christianity", especially in the USA, is noteworthy in its new offensive against Darwinism: "The savage joke is that the USA, the main international bulwark against political Islam, is itself riddled with its own ignorant fundamentalism. Christians in the half-demented grip of an eyes-put-out dogmatic faith in the Bible as the literal word of God, and an impervious belief that their own religious feelings, aspirations, and wishes are truths superior to reason and modern science, are an assertive and increasingly active political force in the USA. A 'fundamentalist' Christianity, as primitive and anti-rational as anything in the Muslim world, is a growing force in what is, technologically, the most advanced society on Earth!" There has also been a simultaneous process in which, on the one hand, organised, theologically sophisticated and hierarchical Christian churches have declined in influence, and, on the other hand, mass/half beliefs in "primitive" superstitions (such as tarot cards, horoscopes and witchcraft) have increased in appeal.

POINT FIVEIn Britain there has been the emergence of faith schools and a rise in the militancy of various religions. For instance, Matgamna notes: "When Sikhs in Birmingham rioted against a play (by a woman of Sikh background) which they did not like, and succeeded in closing it down, other religions rallied to justify them." Ironically, thereafter, they will be at conflict with one another. I vividly remember the Sikh protesters of 2004 who succeeded in banning the play Behzti. Members of my family (of Sikh background) debated the issues frankly. We felt both heavily burdened by the media coverage of Sikh fundamentalists (who've been a growing repressive presence in our communities), and a sense of injustice that Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play wasn't aired.

That her play depicted a rape in a Gurdwara was a brave, pioneering move to opening up a culture (to itself and others) to critical scrutiny. Whereas Dr Jasdev Singh Rai of the Sikh Human Rights Group argued, "free speech is a relic of colonialism". Cultural relativism won the day, and a sad day it was.

POINT SIXThe roots of the revival of Christian fundamentalism are not exactly the same as those reviving Islamism. For the former: "It is the spiritual emptiness of prosperous capitalism that draws people to primitive religion or keeps them mired in it – though, of course, by no means all American citizens share in that prosperity; vast numbers of people there, too, are beggars shut out from the rich people's feastings." But, Matgamna observes, American populist-evangelical religion and Islamism have in common an aspect of "protest against capitalism, commercialism and money power"

POINT SEVENIn sum, Matgamna asserts: "Socialism proposes practical and rational action to achieve the aspirations that religion perverts into mysticism, unreason, and often into self-spiting and self-hatred."

IV. And over to Karl Marx for the final word

From A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843):

"For Germany, the criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism. [...] man [sic] is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. 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. The abolition 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. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man [sic] shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusions man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself. It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into

the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics."

Camila Bassi blogs at
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Reply to Yassamine Mather

by Martin Thomas

Our 2006 introduction to Workers' Liberty 3/1, about Marxism and religion, has been much reviled on Facebook, but little criticised. Of the three attempts at a critique - by Simon Hardy of the ACI, Marcus Halaby of Workers' Power, and Yassamine Mather for Weekly Worker - Yassamine Mather's was first - <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/984/awl-matgamnas-chauvinistic-tirade>.

Her objection is that our introduction depicts political Islam as a reactionary anti-imperialist force with its own roots, its own dynamic, and its own autonomy, not just something "installed" or "deployed" or "facilitated" or "opted for" or "promoted" or used as a "tool" by the USA.

We have to clear some flak out of the way before addressing that main issue.

When the 2006 article was recycled to prominence on our website - as part of a routine circulation of content which we do in order to make less ephemeral articles from our large archives more available - some excited Facebookers claimed to see a "racism" in it which no reader, however hostile, had seen in 2006.

Like Simon Hardy's article, Yassamine Mather's does not even try to justify the charge of "racism".

Marcus Halaby, by the time he came to write, was under some obligation to try to justify that claim. His organisation had already officially made the charge of "racism". He discharged his obligation to "put the line" only in a token way.

"The argument that the 'existence of large Muslim minorities in Europe is making political Islam a force... in the great cities of Europe' by itself is a racist slur, not least because it is simply not true. 'Political Islam', the project of establishing a state based on Islamic Sharia law, is quite visibly only a tiny minority trend in Europe's immigrant and immigrant-descended Muslim minorities..."

Racism? Suppose our introduction overestimated the strength of political Islam in Europe. Overestimation is not racism.

And did it overestimate? It is true that since January 2006 (when the article was written) the Muslim Association of Britain and the British Muslim Initiative have lost profile, and Hizb-ut Tahrir too. But the article said only that political Islam had become "a force". Not a majority force, not a dominant force, not an inexorably rising force, just... a force.

As Sacha Ismail wrote in reply to Simon Hardy: "Simon seems to have forgotten that at his former

university, Westminster, the Islamist group... Hizb ut-Tahrir are... strong enough to win student union elections. He writes as if blissfully unaware that the East London Mosque's core leaders are Islamists..."

So we can lay to rest the talk of "racism".

Yassamine Mather has other harsh words for the introduction: "chauvinistic", "ignorant", "illiterate", "neo-conservative", "garbage", "philistine", "offensive". She is writing for a group, the Weekly Worker, which in September 2013 moved for AWL to be banned from a meeting of the Socialist Platform of Left Unity on charges of which the liveliest was that we support the US bombing Syria. The issue of our paper on sale at that very meeting headlined its article on Syria: "Against US bombs".

Back in 2008 the same group devoted the front cover of its newspaper (and much newsprint thereafter) to the charge that we "excused" an Israeli nuclear-bomb strike on Iran. As Sean Matgamna commented at the time: "Never mind that I stated my opposition to an attack [any Israeli bombing of Iran, let alone a nuclear strike], in terms of both principle... and of the immediate likely consequences in the Middle East".

Yassamine Mather did not dissociate from either of those far-fetched libels. The reader can deduce that she is unhappy about them. If she really believed them, and wanted to prove us "chauvinistic", then our alleged support for the US bombing Syria or Israel bombing Iran would be Exhibit A.

The drift of her article is less strident than the summary epithets. It is that our introduction underestimated the extent to which political Islam is a tool of the US and its allies and a product of their action, and overestimated the extent to which it has its own dynamic and vitality.

Her most dramatic charge against the introduction targets the sentence ripped from context and reviled by Facebookers: "Like desert tribes of primitive Muslim simplicity and purity enviously eyeing a rich and decadent walled city and sharpening their knives, or country folk in former Yugoslavia eyeing a city like Dubrovnik, so, now, much of the Islamic world looks with envy, covetousness, religious self-righteousness and active hostility on the rich, decadent, infidel-ridden, sexually sinful advanced capitalist societies".

She comments: "Matgamna's comparison of 'desert tribes of primitive Muslim simplicity and purity enviously eyeing a rich and decadent walled city and sharpening their knives' with contemporary political Islam is not simply chauvinistically offensive: it is oddly reminiscent of passages one might have read in a mid-19th century history text book, possibly taught in a (second-rate) public school..."

"Applying a category of 'primitive Muslim simplicity' either to the Islamic societies of the past or to the thoroughly modern phenomenon of political Islam implies some sort of genetic deficiency amongst Muslims - almost an organic inability to understand or accept 'democracy'."

But the political Islamists themselves (the flow of the introduction shows that "much of the Islamic world" denotes the Islamists) see Muhammad and his

companions and followers - the 7th century desert tribes who embodied original (or primitive) Muslim virtue and made the first great Muslim conquests - as a model!

Yassamine Mather thinks that the comparison to mythologised early Islam made in our introduction (and in their own way by Islamists) might come from "a mid-19th century history text book, possibly taught in a (second-rate) public school". How such teaching might have filtered through to the actual alma mater of our introduction's writer, St Peter's Catholic Elementary School in Manchester, is a puzzle, but one we do not need to solve. The writer's source is identifiable. It is Frederick Engels.

"In the Mohammedan world... 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..." (On the History of Early Christianity).

The term "Mohammedan" was then conventional and not objected to. (See Irfan Habib on this). Far from Engels being "Islamophobic" here, it looks as if he adapted his idea from the 14th century Muslim writer Ibn Khaldun (summarised, for example, in the Prologue to Albert Hourani's History of the Arab Peoples).

Sayyid Qutb, in a classic text of modern political Islam, confirms that the pattern outlined by Engels remains a model for modern Islamists:

"As soon as a command is given, the heads are bowed, and nothing more is required for its implementation except to hear it. In this manner [in the days of the prophet Muhammad], drinking was forbidden, usury was prohibited, and gambling was proscribed, and all the habits of the Days of Ignorance were abolished - abolished by a few verses of the Qur'an or by a few words from the lips of the Prophet..."

"Compare this with the efforts of secular governments. At every stage they have to rely on legislation, administrative institutions, police and military power, propaganda and the press, and yet they can at most control what is done publicly, and society remains full of illegal and forbidden things".

Qutb considered "private property" an essential means of "the freedom to express individuality"; but he censured the "individual freedom" which he observed on the visit to the USA which converted him to Islamist militancy as "devoid of human sympathy and responsibility for relatives except under the force of law".

He condemned individual freedom especially in sexual matters. "In... modern jahili [un-Islamic] societies... illegitimate sexual relationships, even homosexuality, are not considered immoral... Writers, journalists, and editors advise both married and unmarried people that free sexual relationships are not immoral... Such societies are not civilised..."

Of course modern political Islam is modern. Yassamine Mather claims to be making a point against our introduction in asserting that, but it can only be because of factional zeal fogging her eyes as she reads.

Our introduction stressed the novelty of the rise of global political Islam. It is a modern movement - but one which responds to modern problems by invoking bygone times as a model. That political Islamists hark back to the caliphate (Islamic empire) and to what they see as original Muslim virtue is not a "chauvinistically offensive" slur on them, but what they pride themselves on.

And that our introduction "implies some sort of genetic deficiency amongst Muslims - almost an organic inability to understand or accept 'democracy'" - where does Yassamine Mather get that from? The introduction's denunciation of political Islam "implies" that no more than its denunciation of militant Christianity in the US and Europe "implies" that people in the US and Europe are "genetically" Christian and "genetically" unable to understand democracy...

Yassamine Mather's next sentence after her claim that we "imply some genetic deficiency among Muslims" takes us directly to real differences rather than concocted arguments about what words "imply".

"The reality is that the lack of democratic experience of the masses is a direct consequence of decades of imperialist intervention - direct and indirect - and the continuing subordination of these countries to the interests of the US and its allies".

So, she says, Muslims are in fact unable to "understand or accept democracy". Only, this is not for genetic reasons. It is because of their "lack of democratic experience", which in turn is due to "imperialist intervention".

So long as "imperialist intervention" continues, better than Islamism can scarcely be expected in poorer countries. There is no effective way to oppose Islamism other than just to oppose "imperialist intervention".

She goes on to criticise us over Iraq in 2003-8. Our slogan was "solidarity with the Iraqi labour movement against both the US/UK occupation and the sectarian militias". Yassamine Mather interprets that as "effective support for the occupation". That's her affair. Substantively, she rejects the argument that triumph for the various anti-US sectarian militias should be opposed because it would mean full-scale sectarian civil war between those militias; the annihilation of chances for the self-determination of the people of Iraq; and the extermination of the labour movement.

No: "the Baghdad regime installed by the US itself ended up as an Islamist clerical-reactionary regime... the US-installed Shia occupation government... took on [the] task [of]... massacring the workers' movement".

The Maliki government in Iraq is soft-Islamist. It is a threat to the workers' movement. But it is hemmed round by conditions and institutions. Thus the

workers' movement in Iraq is still alive. The labour movement is weak and harassed. It does not follow that the harder-Islamist sectarian militias (currently increasing their sectarian slaughter of Shias in Iraq) were, or are, no problem!

Yassamine Mather ideologically reinterprets reality so as to construct a sort of political two-for-one offer: buy calls for US troop withdrawal, get opposition to the Islamists free. The Islamists are what the US installs, and what the US does is install Islamists.

In fact the USA invaded Iraq not in order to install the current pro-Iranian regime, led by soft Islamists, but rather to get someone like the relatively-secular former CIA agent Iyad Allawi in charge. It failed. Opposing the US and opposing the sectarian Islamist militias were distinct tasks, and both necessary.

Yassamine Mather opposes Islamism, but, in this polemic, fades out, or minimises, every dimension to it other than two: it being "installed" or "deployed" or "facilitated" or "opted for" or "promoted" or used as a "tool" by the US and its allies; and masses of people being pushed towards it by "destitution", "ruin", etc.

"Overwhelmingly", Yassamine Mather claims, "the emphasis [in our introduction]... has the effect of excusing the West" (over the "war on terror").

But she notes that the introduction describes the "war on terror" as "in practice very much a war on the civil liberties of ordinary citizens". And that not in an "aside", as she describes it, but in its very first reference to the "war on terror"!

Yassamine Mather's argument here is rather like that of the socialists who used to condemn as "cold warriors" those Trotskyists who argued that Stalinism, besides the deals it did with and the concessions it made to the global bourgeoisie, also had its own reactionary dynamic.

Before the USSR collapsed, there were many on the left who sincerely disliked Stalinism, but preferred to criticise the Stalinists only for their compromises and accommodations with the US and their allies, and not for what remained reactionary about the Stalinists even when militant against the USA. (See Robert Fine's article on this in Workers' Liberty 14).

Yassamine Mather's argument on political Islam is similar to that old argument on Stalinism.

Western capitalist policy, she writes, has been not only "the financing of this or that Islamic group" but also "conscious deployment [of political Islam] from the early years of the 20th century as a tool to intervene, conquer, and frustrate".

"The US and its allies did not crudely conjure the Iranian Islamic movement out of thin air, but they did facilitate its rise and... opted for a transfer of power to [it]".

"The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has clear, direct connections, both financial and political, with Saudi Arabia and other... allies of the US. If the US had not switched post-Iraq to a foreign policy of encouraging Sunni Islam as a means of weakening the growing Shia influence of Iran, I doubt if the Muslim Brotherhood would have achieved its spectacular electoral successes..."

She describes the Maliki government in Iraq as "the Baghdad regime installed by the US".

"The US, UK and imperialism in general may not have invented political Islam... but they have promoted it from its inception... financially supported it... help[ed] deploy it..."

The other side of it, as she describes it, is that "Islamism... is... at its core a response... to mass unemployment, destitution and hopelessness brought about by the modern state under global capital... Those thrown on the rubbish heap of history claw at the nearest available ideology". "The support for political Islamic movements is, essentially, derived from the uprooted... to whom the new structures [of global capital] have brought nothing but ruin".

She contends that Islamism gripped the majority in Iran even before 1978, describing her "realisation when I was 14 that the overwhelming majority of [Iranians] despised every aspect of our [better-off Iranians'] secular, relatively privileged, 'western' private lives".

I do not suppose she means that poorer Iranians despised better food or housing, or relative leisure. But her previous sentence tells us that she does mean that "the overwhelming majority" of Iranians despised more secular Iranians' disregard for Shia religious rituals of whipping and cutting oneself to show solidarity with Husayn, the third Shia imam, killed in battle in the year 680.

Yassamine Mather has in the past written of strong "traditions of secularism in urban society in Iran" (<http://www.iran-bulletin.org/women/yassamin.html>). I'd incline to her old opinion rather than the new; but if the new opinion is right, then the circle is closed.

In her polemic Yassamine Mather attacks our introduction for allegedly seeing Iran 1978-9 as only an "Islamic" revolution, and fading out the other, defeated, possibilities. But her account, here though not in her previous writings, fades out other possibilities. Iranian Trotskyists say that a factor in Khomeiny's rapid assertion of control (and an avoidable one) was that most of the Iranian left gave credence to his "anti-imperialism". Yassamine Mather (here) says that only marginal elements of the left did that, and yet Khomeiny quickly won out.

If the majority in Muslim countries, even before open Islamist agitation develops, "despise every aspect" of secularism - and if they moulder in "mass destitution", "ruin", and "hopelessness" - then they can scarcely avoid becoming prey to the Islamists "consciously deployed", "installed", etc., by the US and its allies.

Oddly, this picture of political Islam is like... what Patrick Smith in his "emergency motion" to AWL conference on 26-27 October claimed our introduction said! Given Patrick Smith's quick shift to the Weekly Worker after the conference, we must assume his "emergency motion" was written in cooperation with or by WW people.

So the WW group, with one voice, denounces the introduction for allegedly seeing political Islam as a product of mass destitution, as contrasted with

"secular, relatively privileged, 'western' lives"; with another voice, it denounces the introduction for not seeing it as that product...

The cadres of political Islam, once formed, win recruits among the pauperised in cities like Cairo, through the health centres, welfare projects, etc. which their wealthier supporters can finance. But Yassamine Mather's scheme fades out those central cadres, who are mostly middle-class.

Iran in the later years of the Shah's regime was not a place left in "nothing but ruin" after a "downward trend in the price of... oil".

Oil prices went from less than \$2 a barrel in 1971 to \$15 in 1978, and then higher. They decreased in the early 1980s, but remained higher than pre-1973, stabilised and then rose again, from 1999, to over \$90 currently.

Oil prices, US\$ per barrel (log scale)



In "Iran: dictatorship and development" (second edition 1978), Fred Halliday reported that "in the decade 1965-75 industry grew at an average rate of 15% per annum...". By the late 1970s, two-thirds of the population were in cities, where only 25% had lived in 1946. "The living standards of a section of the working class [had] certainly improved in recent years...", but inequality had risen.

The rise of the Islamists came not out of flat stagnation, but out of the tumult of unequal capitalist development.

In Iran, according to most accounts, the cadres of political Islam were the Shia clergy and the bazaaris -

relatively well-off sections, but ones being elbowed out in the race for the tantalising fruits of capitalist development.

Elsewhere the Islamist cadres are often young men who have been hoisted to within close view of modern capitalist prosperity by the rise of oil revenues and such limited but real achievements of Arab nationalism as expansion of higher education, and then seen the prizes reserved for others. Even Egypt, relatively poor in capitalist economic success, saw GNI per capita rise from US\$480 in 1980 to \$2760 in 2011.

The cadres of Islamism have their own autonomous social roots and political aims. They are not only, or mainly, tools of the USA. They do not represent the only materially possible response to the inequality and poverty in their countries. They represent a reactionary anti-imperialist response. They stand in opposition to other responses, including democratic and socialist responses. Whether the Islamist response becomes hegemonic or not depends on political struggles.

Our aim and our task is to contribute to those political struggles - in the first place to redirect the international left towards supporting working-class socialists against the Islamists, in the mainly-Muslim countries and within Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries.

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The Universality of Marx

by Loren Goldner

(The following article originally appeared in New Politics, 1989)

A strange anomaly dominates the current social, political and cultural climate. World capitalism has for over fifteen years been sinking into its worst systemic crisis since the 1930's, and one which in its biospheric dimensions is much worse than the 1930's. At the same time, the social stratum which calls itself the left in Europe and the U.S. is in full retreat. In many advanced capitalist countries, and particularly in the U.S., that stratum increasingly suspects the world outlook of Karl Marx, which postulates that capitalism brings such crises as storm clouds bring the rain, of being a "white male" mode of thought. Stranger still is the fact that the relative eclipse of Marx has been carried out largely in the name of a "race/gender/class" ideology that can sound, to the uninitiated, both radical and vaguely Marxian. What this "discourse" (to use its own word) has done, however, is to strip the idea of class of exactly that element which, for Marx, made it radical: its status as a universal oppression whose emancipation required (and was also the key to) the abolition of all oppression.

This question of the status of universality,

whether attacked by its opponents as "white male", or "Eurocentric", or a "master discourse", is today at the center of the current ideological debate, as one major manifestation of the broader world crisis of the waning 20th century.

The writings of Marx and Engels include assertions that the quality of relations between men and women is the surest expression of the humanity of a given society, that the communal forms of association of peoples such as the North American Iroquois were anticipations of communism, and that the suppression of matriarchal by patriarchal forms of kinship in ancient Greece was simultaneous with the generalization of commodity production, that is, with proto-capitalism. Marx also wrote, against the Enlightenment's simple-minded linear view of progress that, short of the establishment of communism, all historical progress was accompanied by simultaneous retrogressions. But most of this is fairly well known; this is not what bothers contemporaries. What bothers them is that the concept of universality of Marx and Engels was ultimately grounded neither in cultural constructs or even in relations of "power", which is the currency in which today's fashion trades.

The universalism of Marx rests on a notion of humanity as a species distinct from other species by its capacity to periodically revolutionize its means of extracting wealth from nature, and therefore as free from the relatively fixed laws of population which nature imposes on other species. "Animals reproduce only their own nature", Marx wrote in the 1844 Manuscripts, "but humanity reproduces all of nature". Nearly 150 years later, the understanding of ecology contained in that line remains in advance of most of the contemporary movements known by that name. Human beings, in contrast to other species, are not fixed in their relations with the environment by biology, but rather possess an infinite capacity to create new environments and new selves in the process. Human history, in this view, is the history of these repeated revolutions in nature and thus in "human nature".

What bothers contemporary leftist opinion about Marx is that the latter presents a formidable (and, in my opinion, unanswerable) challenge to the currently dominant culturalism, which is so pervasive that it does not even know its own name.

Today, the idea that there is any meaningful universality based on human beings as a species is under a cloud, even if the opponents of such a view rarely state their case in so many words (or are even aware that this is the issue). For them, such an idea, like the idea that Western Europe from the Renaissance onward was a revolutionary social formation unique in history, that there is any meaning to the idea of progress, or that there exist criteria from which one can judge the humanity or inhumanity of different "cultures", are "white male" "Eurocentric" constructs designed to deny to women, peoples of color, gays or ecologists the "difference" of their "identity".

Edward Said, for example, has written a popular book called *Orientalism* which presents the relations between the West and the Orient (and implicitly

between any two cultures) as the encounter of hermetically-sealed "texts" which inevitably distort and degrade. In this encounter, according to Said, the West from early modern times counterposed a "discourse" of a "dynamic West" to a "decadent, stagnant" Orient. Since Said does not even entertain the possibility of world-historical progress, the idea that Renaissance Europe represented an historical breakthrough for humanity, which was, by the 15th century, superior to the social formations of the Islamic world is not even worth discussing. Such a view not only trivializes the breakthrough of Renaissance Europe; it also trivializes the achievements of the Islamic world, which from the 8th to the 13th centuries towered over the barbaric West, as well as the achievements of T'ang and Sung China, which during the same centuries probably towered over both of them. One would also never know, reading Said, that in the 13th century the flower of Islamic civilization was irreversibly snuffed out by a "text" of Mongol hordes (presumably also Oriental) who levelled Bagdad three times. Were Said somehow transported back to the wonder that was Islamic civilization under the Abbasid caliphate, the Arabs and Persians who helped lay the foundations for the European Renaissance would have found his culturalism strange indeed, given the importance of Plato and Aristotle in their philosophy and of the line of prophets from Moses to Jesus in their theology. Said's text-bound view of the hermetically-sealed relations between societies and in world history (which for him does not meaningfully exist) is the quintessential statement of a culturalism that, which a pretense of radicalism, has become rampant in the past two decades.

Martin Bernal has written a book called *Black Athena* which current fashion likes to lump with Said's, even though it rests on the opposite view of the relations between cultures, and does not deny the existence of progress in history. Bernal's book is sub-titled "The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization", and is an attempt to show precisely how Egyptian (and therefore African) and Phoenician (and therefore Semitic) cultures influence the Greek achievement in antiquity. For Bernal, this is not an attempt to trivialize the Greek breakthrough, but rather, as he states from the outset, to restore it to the true dimension which modern racist and anti-Semitic classicism had obfuscated, by setting it against its real backdrop of dialogue with other cultures. If Said had titled his book "The Hellenistic Roots of Islamic Civilization" or "The Islamic Roots of the European Renaissance", he would be much closer to Bernal than he is, but then he would have written a different, and far better book, one not likely to become popular in the "era of Foucault".

In such a climate, then, it is quite refreshing to read Samir Amin's *Eurocentrism*, a book by an Egyptian Marxist intellectual whose critique of Western ethnocentrism, including actually Eurocentric variants of Marxism, is not made from a relativizing discourse of cultural "difference" incapable of making critical judgements. Amin's critique of Eurocentric Marxism is not aimed at the latter's (unfulfilled) aspirations to universality, but rather on the premise that such Marxism IS NOT UNIVERSAL ENOUGH. Amin seeks a "way to

strengthen the universalist dimension of historical materialism". He has plenty of problems of his own, though they are of another order. But his book has merits which should be highlighted before people read no further than the title and assimilate it too quick to the genre established by Said (whose world view Amin characterizes, drawing on the earlier critique by Sadek Jalal el-Azm, as "provincial").

Amin, who understands the "species" dimension of Marx's thought, believes many unfashionable things. He believes that there has been progress in world history, that such progress obviously antedated the emergence of the West, that the social formation that engendered Renaissance Europe was revolutionary, unique in world history, and superior to any that had preceded it, and that its achievements, including science and rationality, had laid the foundations for further historical progress, which must clearly go BEYOND the West.

In the first section of the book, presenting an overview of the mainly Mediterranean "tributary" (pre-capitalist) societies prior to the Renaissance, Amin lays out a theory of successive innovations, from ancient Egypt onward, which were breakthroughs for humanity as a whole, and which made possible further universal breakthroughs. "The universalist moral breakthrough of the Egyptians", writes Amin, "is the keystone of subsequent human thought". Later, in ancient Greece, there was "an explosion in the fields of scientific abstraction" in which "empiricist practice-- as old as humankind itself--finally came to pose questions of the human mind that required a more systematic effort of abstraction". The accomplishments of ancient Egypt, moreover, later evolved to an all-encompassing metaphysics that furnishes Hellenism, and later Islam and Christianity, with their point of departure, as the thinkers of the period themselves recognized."

One might quarrel, even substantially, with the specific emphases of Amin's account of the creation, over several millennia, of what he characterizes as the general synthesis of "medieval metaphysics" in which the (Moslem) Averroes, the (Jew) Maimonides and the (Christian) Aquinas without qualms read, critique and borrowed from each other. But Amin is certainly right that the origins of Eurocentrism came from reading out of history the common Eastern Mediterranean origins of the medieval era in which Islam was long superior to barbaric Western Christendom, and out of which the capitalist West emerged. This artificial isolation of the Greek breakthrough from its broader context made it possible to forget both the earlier phase in ancient Egypt and particularly the later contribution of Hellenistic Alexandria upon which both Christianity and Islam drew so heavily, and later transmitted to Europe. In Amin's view, it was precisely the backwardness of Europe relative to the Islamic Mediterranean that made the next breakthrough possible there, where it did not have to confront the sophisticated medieval metaphysics of Islam. And presumably no one will call Amin an "Orientalist" when he notes "the reduction of human reason to its single deductive dimension" by Christian and Islamic metaphysics and when he regrets that "contemporary Arab thought has still not escaped from it".

Amin's critique of Eurocentrism is not, as we said, the latter's affirmation of modern capitalism's uniqueness and, for a certain historical period, (now long over) its contribution to human progress. He aims his fire at capitalism's rewriting of history to create an imaginary "West" which could alone have produced its breakthroughs. By rejecting the attempt to discover universal historical laws that would accurately situate the West's achievement with respect to all the societies who helped build its foundations (in the way that Bernal does for ancient Greece) the West created a powerful ideology denying the global historical laws that produced it, thereby undermining the very universal character of its achievement, and "eternalizing" progress as unique to the West, past, present and future. In Amin's own words, worth quoting at length:

"The dominant ideology and culture of the capitalist system cannot be reduced solely to Eurocentrism... But if Eurocentrism does not have, strictly speaking, the status of a theory, neither is it simply the sum of the prejudices, errors and blunders of Westerners with respect to other peoples. If that were the case, it would only be one of the banal forms of ethnocentrism shared by all peoples at all times. The Eurocentric distortion that marks the dominant capitalist culture negates the universalist ambition on which that culture claims to be founded... Enlightenment culture confronted a real contradiction that it could not overcome by its own means. For it was self-evident that nascent capitalism which produced capitalism had unfolded in Europe. Moreover, this embryonic new world was in fact superior, both materially and in many other aspects, to earlier societies, both in its own territories (feudal Europe) and in other regions of the world (the neighboring Islamic Orient and the more distant Orientals...) The culture of the Enlightenment was unable to reconcile the fact of this superiority with its universalist ambition. On the contrary, it gradually drifted toward racism as an explanation for the contrast between it and other cultures... The culture of the Enlightenment thus drifted, beginning in the nineteenth century, in nationalistic directions, impoverished in comparison with its earlier cosmopolitanism."

In light of the above, it goes without saying that Amin has no use for Islamic fundamentalism and other Third Worldist culturalisms, which he diagnoses as an anti-universalist provincialism existing in counterpoint to the provincialism of Said and of the post-modern critics of "white male thinking" (Amin does not use the latter term; I do). This conflation of "white male" with the humanist universalism produced by world history actually reproduces dominant ideology by denying that the Renaissance was a breakthrough in a broader human history and by failing to recognize the contributions of "non-whites" to key aspects of "Western" culture, as Bernal showed in *Black Athena*. (Bernal leaves to black nationalists the problem of putting together his corroboration of the African dimension of ancient Egypt, which they have always maintained, with his claim that it had an important influence on Greek culture, which they have always denounced as "white".) Neither Eurocentric provincialism nor anti-Western provincialism draws much solace from a

truly universalist approach to history.

But despite these undeniable strengths of Amin's Eurocentrism, Amin's book is deeply flawed by its own baggage, of quite another type. What Amin gives brilliantly in his diagnosis, he takes away clumsily in his prescription for treatment. I apply to him the same critique he applies to the Eurocentrists: he is not universal enough. His own universalism is not that of the global class of working people exploited by capitalism, but that of an ideologue of Third World autarchy. He sets out "to strengthen the universal dimension of historical materialism" but winds up only presenting in slightly modified language the kind of Marxism whose debacle in the 1970's helped to spawn post-modernism in the first place. Amin's universalism is not that of the international working class and its allies, but that of the STATE. The post-modernists' point of departure is their assertion that all universalism is necessarily a concealed apology for power, as in the power of the state. Amin, unfortunately, will not disabuse them.

Who is Samir Amin? He is perhaps best remembered as the author of the two-volume *Accumulation on a World Scale*, which, like Eurocentrism and most of his other books, have been translated and published, not accidentally, by Monthly Review Press. He might be less charitably remembered as one of the more outspoken apologists of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia in the years 1975-1978, persisting even when it became known that the Khmer Rouge's near-genocidal policy had killed 1 million of Cambodia's 8 million people. Cambodia is in fact an example of Amin's strategy of "de-linking", which repeated unhappy experience has taught him to call a "national popular democratic" strategy, since neither the Soviet Union nor China nor Pol Pot's Cambodia can be plausibly characterized as "socialist". (Cambodia, significantly, is not mentioned once in *Eurocentrism*.)

Amin belongs to a constellation of thinkers, including Bettelheim, Pailloix, Immanuel and Andre Gunder Frank, who worked off the ideas of Baran and Sweezy and who became known, in the post-World War II period as the partisans (not of course uniformly agreeing among themselves) of the "monopoly capital" school of Marxism. The "Monthly Review" school, which had its forum in the publishing house and journal of the same name, evolved from the 1940's to the 1980's, liked "anti-imperialist" movements and regimes, and believed that "de-linking" (to use Amin's term) was the only road by which such movements and regimes (which they then tended to call socialist) could develop backward countries. This inclination led them from Stalin's Russia to Mao's China, by way of Sukharno's Indonesia, Nkrumah's Ghana, Ben Bella's Algeria to Castro's Cuba. Most of the time, they came away disappointed. They went with China in the Sino-Soviet split. The post-Mao evolution cooled them on China, but this disappointment was quickly followed by Pol Pot's Cambodia, the expulsion of the (ethnic Chinese) boat people from Vietnam, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979, and China's virtual alliance with the

U.S., It was hard, in those years, to be "anti-imperialist" forces were all at war with each other, and when China was being armed by the biggest imperialist of them all. With the fundamentalist turn of the Iranian revolution for good measure, by 1980 a lot of people, including people in the Third World, were coming to the conclusion that that "anti-imperialism" by itself was not enough, and some were even coming to think that there was such a thing as a REACTIONARY anti-imperialism. Finally, around the same time, countries like South Korea and Taiwan emerged as industrial powers, not by autarchy, but by using the world market and the international division of labor, which Amin and his friends had always said was impossible.

De-linking is a fancy name for an idea first developed by Joseph Stalin called "socialism in one country". (Amin thinks that Stalin was too hard on the peasants, but he has never said what he thought about the millions who died during Mao's "Great Leap Forward".) Amin and the school he comes out of base their world strategy on a theory of "uneven development" which they see as a permanent by-product of capitalism. This in itself is fine, and was worked out in more sophisticated fashion by Trotsky 80 years ago. For Amin and his co-thinkers, de-linking is a strategy to break the "weak links" in the chain of international capitalism. Karl Marx also had a theory of "weak links", which he called "permanent revolution", a term significantly never used by Amin, probably, again, because of its Trotskyist connotations. Marx applied it to Germany in 1848, where it explained the ability of the German workers, because of the weakness of the German bourgeoisie, to go beyond bourgeois liberalism to socialism in the struggle for democracy, hence giving the revolution a "permanent" character. Leon Trotsky applied same theory in Russia after 1905, and was alone, prior to 1917, in foreseeing the possibility of a working-class led revolution in backward Russia.

But Marx and Trotsky, unlike Amin, did not propose that the workers in "weak link" countries "de-link" from the rest of the world. They saw the working class as an international class, and saw German and then Russian workers as potential leaders in a world revolutionary process. Following this logic, the Bolshevik revolutionary strategy of 1917 was entirely predicated on a successful revolution in Germany for its survival. When the German revolution failed, the Russian revolution was isolated and besieged. Only when Stalin proposed the previous unheard-of grotesquery of "socialism in one country", and the draconian autarchy it implied, did "de-linking" first enter the arsenal of "socialism".

Although Amin and his Monthly Review colleagues

rarely spell out their origins so clearly, their theory rests on the defeat, not on the victory, of the world revolutionary wave of 1917-1921. Amin's theory takes from Marx's notion of permanent revolution only the "weak link" aspect. Amin thinks that "de-linking" saves the workers and peasants of the de-linked country from the bloody process of primitive accumulation imposed by Western capitalism, but it only legitimates that same process, now carried out by the local "anti-imperialist" elite. The workers and peasants of Cambodia, for example, learned this lesson the hard way. Amin's theory also "de-links" the workers and peasants of the Third World from the one force whose intervention (as the early Bolsheviks understood) could spare them that ordeal: the international working-class movement. (Amin thinks socialist revolution by working people in the West is essentially a pipedream; he at least has the honesty to say so. Amin's theory, finally, links the workers and peasants in the "de-linked" countries, under the auspices of "national popular democracy" (he does not dare call it socialism, as he and others used to) to Mao, Pol Pot and their possible future progeny, who substitute themselves for Western capitalists and carry out that accumulation under the rhetoric of "building socialism". That is why it is appropriate to call Amin's theory that of a Third World bureaucratic elite, and his universalism a universalism of the state.

All of this is stated only allusively in Eurocentrism; Amin's book De-Linking (which appeared in French in 1985, and which will soon appear in English) is more explicit. In the latter book at least, Amin gingerly raises the question of Cambodia, where he speaks (as such people always do) of "errors", but nowhere does he say why "de-linking" will work any better the next time.

One can therefore only regret that Samir Amin's spirited defense of some of the most important aspects of Marx, so maligned in the current climate of post-modern culturalism, as well as his much-needed attempt to go beyond Eurocentric Marxism, conjugates so poorly with his "national popular democratic" strategy of de-linking. "National" and "popular" were also words central to the language of fascism, and none of the regimes Amin has praised over the years for "de-linking" have a trace of democracy about them. The next breakthrough in world history has to go BEYOND the exploitation which characterizes world capitalism, in the "periphery" AND in the "core". Recent history has seen enough cases where "de-linking" has led to autarchic meltdowns that have tragically led millions of people in places like Poland, the Soviet Union, China and Cambodia to think that Western capitalism has something positive to offer them. It doesn't. But neither does Samir Amin.