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The role of specific identities – Peter Drucker

1. Lenin, "The discussion on self-determination summed up"
Collected Works Volume 22, pp.355-356, 1916
2. Johanna Brenner, "Intersectionality from a Marxist Perspective"
From: Women and the Politics of Class, 2000
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"The discussion on self-determination summed up"
Lenin, Collected Works, Volume 22, pp.355-356

To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc. -to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So one army lines up in one place and says, "We are for socialism", and another, somewhere else and says, "We are for imperialism", and that will be a social revolution!

Only those who hold such a ridiculously pedantic view could vilify the Irish rebellion by calling it a "putsch". Whoever expects a "pure" social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.

Johanna Brenner, "Intersectionality from a Marxist Perspective"
From: Women and the Politics of Class, Monthly Review Press, New York 2000

In feminist theory 'intersectionality' has emerged as an analytic strategy to address the interrelation of multiple, crosscutting institutionalized power relations defined by race, class, gender, and sexuality (and other axes of domination).

[...] If feminism is to become a powerful movement again, working-class women will have to organize across the divides of race/ethnicity and sexuality. Therefore, it is of political importance to understand how class locations, in intersection with race/ethnicity and sexuality, shape women's survival projects [...]

Class Locations and Intersections

Intersectional analysis, developed primarily by feminist women-of-color scholars and writers, demonstrates that race and gender oppressions do not build on each other in any simple additive way. White feminists' failure to understand this has contributed significantly to missed opportunities for building an inclusive feminist movement. [...] Class locations are difficult to define [...] Defining class locations becomes especially fraught for intersectional analysis, because in most instances we are not comparing those who own capital with those who do not, but are trying rather to understand relations of power and relative privilege among those who do wage and salaried work. [...]

Capitalist Class Power and the Politics of Resistance

The civil rights and feminist movements combined revolutionary and reformist aims, their radical wings seeking to redistribute economic and political power. Though falling far short of this goal, the movements did dismantle the old gender and racial orders and opened the field for other movements against oppression (for example, gay/lesbian rights, disability rights). They have made it possible for a new left challenge, when it develops, to be far more self-consciously and powerfully anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-heterosexist than any that has gone before. On the other hand, by almost any measure, neither racial oppression nor male domination has disappeared from the scene. They have, however, been fundamentally reorganized. Both operate, now, not through an explicit, legally and culturally authorized system of exclusion, but through a process of incorporation that systemically reproduces disadvantage. [...]

To understand [...] both the gains and impasses of the civil rights and women's movements, their ability to challenge so thoroughly and to change ways of thinking about race and gender and their inability to sustain this challenge, it is helpful to put them in the context of the periods of capitalist economic transformation. The economic changes that were already reshaping the political landscape in the 1970 and 1980 accelerated in the 1990s: the expansion of markets and production, the increase in labor migration both within and across national borders, the flexibility and mobility of investment/production, the penetration of global firms into the U.S. economy not only in goods but in services, the increasing freeing of global firms from control and regulation by national states. The capitalist restructuring that first undermined the conditions of blue-collar workers in core manufacturing industries now threatens security and stability of jobs in many sectors - from middle managers and supervisors to production workers.

At the core of these changes are not simply globalization but capital's increasing flexibility, mobility, and concentrated power, as well as the intensity of capitalist competition and the employers' drive to squeeze ever more out of the workforce. [...] As in the significant periods of capitalist restructuring that preceded this one, the institutions of working-class political and economic defense that had been built up under the old paradigm and that might have worked (although not all that well) previously are now utterly unable to respond to new conditions. Until some alternatives develop, the political hegemony of the modernizing right can be expected to remain in place.

[Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières] - <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article7016>

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Self-organization, self-emancipation and identity: What can we learn from indigenous peoples, blacks and lesbians?

DRUCKER Peter

November 1999

Whenever we as Marxists talk about self-organization and self-emancipation, we must remind ourselves and others that Marx and Engels invented self-organization and self-emancipation as the central element of a strategy for human liberation. The tragedy of 20th-century Marxism is that Marxism became identified with movements that had hardly anything to do with self-emancipation. The most important task for Marxists at this start of the 21st century is to reinvent the concepts and tools for self-organization and democratic control. [1]

I'll begin with a citation from Lenin, that I want to use as a sort of motto for my presentation. The citation is of course from a polemic, in this case a polemic against Dutch and Polish revolutionary leftists. The piece is called 'The discussion on self-determination summed up'; the year is 1916; and the occasion for it is the Irish Easter Rising that took place that year. Lenin says:

*To imagine that social revolution is **conceivable** without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie **with all its prejudices**, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.-to imagine all this is to **repudiate social revolution**.*

Here we see an essential aspect of Lenin's thought. Lenin was definitely a Marxist, and he saw the strategic role of the working class in a socialist revolution as central and indispensable. But he was the first major Marxist who also saw semi-proletarian and non-proletarian movements as indispensable to a revolutionary strategy. This evening I want to examine the issues of self-organization and democratic

control from that point of view, to talk about self-organization of movements other than the workers' movement and democratic control by social groups other than the working class. The question is then, What relationship can the workers' movement and must the workers' movement in general, and revolutionary organizations in particular, have to these other movements? In our time as in Lenin's time, I think, this is a central strategic question.

As examples I will cite movements in three different categories: movements of Indians, indigenous peoples, in Latin America, with the Chiapas uprising as a major recent case; movements of blacks and immigrants in the United States and Western Europe; and movements of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, also in the US and Western Europe. These examples sometimes bring us very close to the present. This means that we often lack the advantage of historical distance, so that my conclusions necessarily have a provisional character. I do have some ideas about how we should approach these movements, but I also have doubts. My main goal here is to help stimulate discussion.

My argument is in any case that specific forms of self-organization and democratic control can never be set in stone for us, but rather must continually be reinvented. Our goal is to build a bridge between the forms taken spontaneously by actually existing movements and the overarching institutions of grassroots democracy that must become the centres of power of a new, socialist society. The closer we get to a moment of revolutionary crisis, the more cohesive these structures can become, the more closely they can be linked to each other, and the more they can be centralized.

In this historical period, unfortunately — I hope that we agree on this — we are still very far from a moment of revolutionary crisis of this kind. This means that the forms of self-organization of different movements are very different, very diverse, and very distinct. We need to pay attention to the many specificities and the unique — though sometimes very young — traditions of the various movements. This means that the content of a concept like 'democratic control' is rather different right now than it would be in a period with a very strong and dynamic workers' movement. The question that people ask in many movements right now is not so much, 'How can we control those powerful workers' institutions?' as, 'How can we safeguard the forms, the places, and even the atmosphere in which *we* feel comfortable as a specific oppressed group?' In other words, at this historical moment democratic control is often seen less as a matter of power and effectiveness, and more as a matter of identity. We need to be sensitive to this.

I think it will be easier to understand what I'm getting at if I talk concretely about particular examples. I'll begin with indigenous peoples in Latin America. This example shows how important Lenin and the Bolsheviks' influence was. Only pressure from the Third International made socialists in many parts of the world begin to think about the role of oppressed nationalities in revolutions in colonial and semi-colonial countries. Lenin and the Bolsheviks often had to swim against the current: in Russia itself, where the first soviets in Central Asia in 1918 and '19 for example were virtual apartheid soviets, from which Muslims were excluded; in South Africa, where even whites who considered themselves communists chanted the workers must 'unite and fight to keep South Africa white'; and in the US, where even a left-wing socialist like Eugene V. Debs considered that African-American oppression was not a topic of special interest for socialists. In Latin America, also in the 1920s, a founder of revolutionary Marxism like José Carlos Mariáteguí had to swim against the current in order to maintain that Indians would be a crucial force for revolution in a country like Peru.

The rise of Stalinism ensured that Mariáteguí's lesson would not be fully learned for a long time. In countries like Bolivia and Guatemala, countries with Indian majorities where major revolutionary processes unfolded in the 1950s and later, indigenous people were often marginalized within those processes and on the left. There were honourable exceptions, such as the Peruvian peasant movement under the leadership of our comrade Hugo Blanco, but they were only exceptions.

Only in the 1980s and '90s did this situation really begin to change, mainly I think because of three major experiences. The first was the trouble that the Sandinistas went through on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, from which they and the whole Latin American left learned a lot. Unlike in Russia, in Nicaragua taken as a whole self-emancipation did to a large extent remain a central aspect of the Sandinista revolution throughout its brief course. But in that one particular region and among some indigenous peoples, the revolution was not experienced in that way. The contras benefited considerably from that failing.

The second major experience was the upsurge of Indian movements around 1992, when 500 years of indigenous oppression were commemorated. As a rule the Latin American left sees itself as the defender of its nations against the US, imperialism, the IMF, etc. So it was a hard adjustment for the Latin American left to get used to the idea that all these nations are themselves based on five centuries of genocide and oppression. The consequences of this experience, in organizational as well as ideological terms, have sometimes gone very deep. Our comrades in Ecuador for example have taken part in a regroupment, Pachakutik/Nuevo País, which began as a federation of left parties *alongside* social movements and independent Indian organizations. That was something new. The model in which *the* revolutionary party or even *the* revolutionary front plays a leading role in all progressive movements apparently did not carry enough conviction, at least not in this particular country in that particular period in these particular circumstances.

The third major experience of Indian self-organization was of course the Zapatista uprising. The Zapatistas were the first leftist movement in Latin America in which indigenous people have played an absolutely central role. They have a self-image as defenders of the Mexican nation and simultaneously as champions of Indian autonomy. At the same time the Zapatista movement has had significant limitations: the dire poverty of the Indians in Chiapas, among whom a civil society barely exists; the fact that the working class in Mexico was still almost entirely under the thumb of the ruling single party, which made formulating a national strategy much more difficult; and the international conjuncture, which made the idea of taking power seem implausible.

For these reasons we need to view the EZLN consistently from two different angles. On the one hand it is an ideological current that has had a great power of attraction on a world scale. For us as the Fourth International it has been very important to carry on a dialogue with this current. I think comrades like Daniel Bensaïd have done that well. But on the other hand the Chiapas revolutionary committee is a form of self-organization of oppressed people in a specific region. For their grassroots base in Chiapas, showing respect for their traditions and their achievements means more than strategic debates. One might even think that the Indian communities' struggle to survive might be hard to reconcile at some moments with developing a national or international strategy. Perhaps there has sometimes just been more to lose with manoeuvres in Mexico City with the various tendencies of the PRD and the rest of the Mexican left, or in Madrid or Paris with all those European anarchists or Trotskyists, than the people in Chiapas have had to gain from them. One can hardly reproach the EZLN leadership for thinking of this aspect of things. Perhaps we should consider some of the Zapatistas' statements about 'power' and 'parties' not *only* as theoretical arguments, but also as a way of *avoiding* certain debates and certain risks, so as to safeguard Indian autonomy. We also need to be able to respect that.

The second category of self-organization that I would like to discuss is the self-organization of blacks and immigrants. In this respect too a certain continuity can be seen between the Third International in the 1920s and Marxists today. In the US for example the CP managed to link up in the early 1920s with the revolutionary nationalists of the African Blood Brotherhood. African-Americans' involvement with revolutionary Marxism continued with Malcolm X's relationship with the Socialist Workers Party [then the US section of the Fourth International] in the early 1960s. But unfortunately the negative role of the left was even more important for the development of African-American movements. In the early 1960s social democrats, and in particular the circle around Max Shachtman [earlier a leading figure of the

Fourth International in the 1930s] and Bayard Rustin had substantial influence on leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the radical wing of the civil rights movement. These African-American student leaders became the founders of Black Power after 1964, after having been betrayed by white social democrats whose highest priority was ensuring Lyndon Johnson's victory in the 1964 presidential election. The US left is still suffering the consequences of the divisions between white and black that go back to the 1960s. But there were also some positive lessons learned in those years. The key concept of Black Power still holds true for the US, I think: blacks need to organize their own community first, and only afterwards look for allies. Otherwise they can never ally on an equal footing with whites.

Today in Western Europe the forms of black and immigrant self-organization have not yet entirely crystallized. But it is important to note that while *continuity* has been central to the experience of Indian communities in Latin America, *discontinuity* has been central for black and immigrant communities in Western Europe. This means that specifically African, Arab, Turkish or Caribbean elements take on a different meaning and function in a Western European context. The specifically European experience of racism becomes more important than a particular national origin to a European black or immigrant identity. This is visible in the spread of a cultural form like rap music, which does not come from Africa or the Middle East, which is sung more and more often in French or Dutch [as well as English], and which has been borrowed from another racially oppressed people in another imperialist country. Politically this may mean that immigrant youth in the Netherlands or Belgium will organize, not together with youth in general or as Moroccan or Turkish or Muslim youth, but as immigrant youth. Or perhaps a genuinely multicultural youth culture will develop; today for example many immigrant high school students in big Dutch cities speak a kind of 'smurf language', which incorporates many Turkish, Berber and Surinamese expressions. But this youth culture would then have to become an explicitly, actively anti-racist culture; otherwise it cannot really be multicultural. [2]

In any event, these developments are still not very much reflected inside our organizations in Europe. We must be aware that immigrants are severely under-represented in our ranks. In a city like Amsterdam, where a majority of public school students consists of immigrants, we do not have a single immigrant in our youth organization. Evidently the solutions to this problem cannot be primarily organizational. But I am convinced that the solutions will be partly related to democracy, in the broadest sense of the word: in the sense that people see their experience reflected in an organization and see the organization as their own. I pose the question: could it be that young immigrants will not be won over to the revolutionary movement purely as individuals, but rather as *immigrants*, as such, organized autonomously in immigrant groups? Or at least organized in youth groups in which a very substantial minority consists of immigrants? These are important questions — we are talking about a big part of the new generation of the working class.

I can give more organizational examples from a third category of autonomous organizations, of 'lesbigays': lesbians, bisexuals and gay men. We cannot say as much about Lenin and the Bolsheviks' opinions about this category — though we can say more than you might think. The Bolsheviks played an important role in the 1920s in the congresses of the World League for Sexual Reform, which German and Dutch gay groups took part in. But this history is only *very* indirectly relevant to contemporary lesbian and gay movements. Thanks to Stalinism, fascism and further waves of anti-gay repression in the 1950s and '60s, the discontinuity in lesbian and gay movements has been particularly pronounced. This discontinuity is in fact even more characteristic of lesbian and gay movements than of immigrant movements, because almost no one is born into a lesbian and gay community. Lesbian and gay communities are only a product of the development of capitalism since the late 19th century, and in their contemporary form since the 1960s. This makes it all the more remarkable that strong movements, in which self-organization and a distinctive lesbian and gay identity play a central role, have emerged from these communities.

The turnouts for lesbigay pride marches can even seem improbable to people on the left who are unfamiliar with the lesbigay world. In the US, for example, between half a million and a million people turned out each time for lesbigay demonstrations in 1987, 1993 and 1994. In Paris in 1998, there were 150,000 participants; in Berlin in 1998, 200,000; in Paris for Europride in 1997, 350,000. [3] Nor can they be seen entirely as apolitical parades, although every big political demonstration takes on this character to some extent. In general they are organized by political associations, in some cases with quite radical political programmes. The organization has always been done independently, without any significant support from existing labour or left organizations. In this way independent lesbigay organizations have arisen.

The left can sometimes learn things from the forms of democratic control that the lesbigay movement: positive lessons as well as negative ones. One positive example is the organizational structure of the three national demonstrations in the US [in 1979, 1987 and 1993]. The structure showed how essential it was that all elements of the community felt themselves fully represented. The most important decisions were made each time by big national conferences, in which representation was carefully allocated in advance: each time 50 per cent women, 25 per cent people of colour, fixed quotas for each region, and so on. And the structure worked, because all parts of the community mobilized for these marches. [4]

The downside of this positive example is that a political culture has developed, above all in the US but also I think increasingly in Europe, in where people who do *not* feel represented in a particular organization can very quickly lose patience with it and adopt very confrontational tactics. The forms of action that have given the French *sans papiers* for example such a great success in the media can sometimes be used when differences of opinion arise within progressive movements. That happened for example at a Labor Notes conference in the US. These conferences, which are always the most important gatherings of the class struggle wing of the North American trade unions, are to a large extent organized under the leadership of members of the Marxist organization Solidarity. [5] Nonetheless a conflict broke out at the 1992 Labor Notes conference between the organizers and the lesbigay caucus. The details are of secondary importance. The important point is that the lesbigay caucus, which did not feel represented by the organizers, at a certain point simply ignored the decisions that the organizers had taken, seized the microphone, and explained its point of view to the roughly thousand participants — who incidentally responded quite positively. All this took place inside the framework of the labour movement: the members of the lesbigay caucus were all union activists or even staffers.

This is only one example of the kind of tactic that has become more common, in organizations like Act Up in (for example) Paris, among immigrant youth, etc. Marxists cannot take comfort in the assumption that we would never be targeted by this kind of tactic, because we're on the left and everyone understands that. If class struggle enters a new ascendant period, if the labour movement recognizes its responsibility to defend all oppressed people, and if everyone gets to know each other better in the framework of a broad movement, *then* people will be able to see more clearly who is trustworthy, who is on the left and who isn't. But for the new generations that are now emerging nothing can be assumed; everything must be demonstrated in practice at *each* decisive moment. For us Marxists much will depend on what we look like, who our spokespeople are, and how much we have learned from the organizational forms that have been developing around us. [6]

All of us have to learn this in order to be able to intervene effectively — as revolutionary Marxists, of course — in the independent organizations of oppressed people. To the extent we manage to educate ourselves, our own organizational forms in our own organizations will inevitably change. This process has been under way for 30 years now. I haven't mentioned the women's movement yet in this talk, but feminism provides the best examples of how we have had to change. Well into the 1970s we held to the

tradition (which incidentally was Lenin's tradition and the tradition of the whole Marxist current) that we were not feminists, that there were no central contradictions between men and women, and that fully independent organization of women was not appropriate within Leninist organizations. You can still find that position in the Fourth International's resolution on women's liberation from 1979, which in many other respects was a crucial moment of cultural transformation for us. Fortunately we've changed our position since then, and we are continuing to change.

In order to create organizations that are truly welcoming to and inclusive of women, lesbians, blacks and immigrants, we will have to continue to change our organizations. The process will not always be easy. But as Lenin observed over 80 years ago, if you really want a social revolution, you have to learn how to intervene in all sorts of movements and earn a leading role in them. By means of this process the workers' movement itself can be rebuilt, and the revolutionary current within it can be rebuilt. What's at stake is building the organizations that we would all like to see: organizations that can lead the revolutions of the 21st century.

[1] This article originated in August 1998 as a presentation to the summer school of the Belgian Socialist Workers Party, and was published in the Dutch-language journal *De Internationale* no. 67, Winter 1999. A later version of this paper, more developed, exists in French: [Auto-émancipation et identités à l'heure de la mondialisation](#)

[2] Today, after 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia, I would add that Muslim identity, which has clearly become more important to many immigrants in Europe, should not be seen simply as an aspect of the culture that immigrants brought with them to Europe, but primarily as a reaction to the particular form that European racism has taken.

[3] Since this article was written larger European pride marches have occurred in Paris and Berlin, while an estimated half million people attended Europride in Rome in 2000 and an estimated 600,000 the US national lesbian demonstration that same year.

[4] Unfortunately the fourth national march, in 2000, was a top-down operation, dominated politically by the conservative Human Rights Campaign Fund and Metropolitan Community Churches, and had none of the democratic representation characteristic of the three earlier marches. In this case the high turnout came largely from more conservative lesbians from areas of the southern and western US whom the earlier marches had not mobilized to the same extent. The 1994 march mentioned earlier was strictly speaking an international lesbian march on the UN.

[5] The predominance of Solidarity members among Labor Notes organizers has gradually decreased since this article was written, though without any particular conflict or break.

[6] Arguably the rise of the global justice movement since 1999 has created a framework in which many young activists in different movements have gotten to know each other better. To what extent indigenous peoples, blacks, immigrants and lesbians feel included in and represented by the global justice movement today is a different question.

K. Marx, excerpts from Chapter II From: The Communist Manifesto, 1848

The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality. The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.

National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster. United action, of the leading civilised countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.

In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another will also be put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end.

Chapter 5 from Michael Löwy - Fatherland or Mother Earth

CHAPTER 5

Over 200 years after the call for a universal brotherhood of all humankind issued by the great French Revolution and 80 years after the foundation of the Communist International, what remains of the great dream of internationalist solidarity of the oppressed? Hasn't nationalism always been the main moving force of world politics? And how should socialists relate to it?

The contradictory role of nationalism is one of the great paradoxes in the history of the twentieth century. At the service of the state and of reactionary forces, the ideology of nationalism fostered and legitimised some of the worst crimes of the century: two world wars, the genocide of Armenians, Jews and Gypsies, colonialist wars, the rise of fascism and military dictatorship, the brutal repression of progressive or revolutionary movements from China in the 1920s to Indonesia in the 1960s and Argentina in the 1970s.

On the other hand, in the name of national liberation, colonised peoples gained their independence and some of the most important and radical revolutionary socialist movements were able to win popular support and triumph: in Yugoslavia, China, Indochina, Cuba and Nicaragua.

Another puzzling paradox: although nationalism has been the dominant factor in shaping twentieth-century politics, the greatest revolution of our times, October 1917, owed nothing to nationalism and was explicitly directed against the 'national defence of the fatherland' in the war with imperial Germany.

Moreover, there has never been in the history of the labour and socialist movement a mass world organisation so thoroughly committed to internationalism as in the twentieth century: the Third International (at least during its first years of existence). How should we understand these paradoxes? Can Marxism furnish the theoretical tools for such an understanding? Do the workers and the exploited really have no fatherland, as Marx thought in 1848? How far can Mother Earth become the concrete horizon for social liberation? And what are the perspectives for nationalism and internationalism in the twenty-first century?

Any attempt to answer these questions has to start with a dialectical approach to the problem: the national question is contradictory, and its contradictions are not the expression of some eternal trait of human nature, but of concrete historical conditions.

It is important to distinguish very carefully between the feeling of national identity, the attachment to a national culture, the consciousness of belonging to a national community with its own historical past — and nationalism. Nationalism as an ideology is composed of all these elements but also of something else, which is its decisive ingredient: the choice of the nation as the primary, fundamental and most important social and political value, to which all others are — in one way or another — subordinated. Hans Kohn, the well-known historian of modern nationalism, defined it as ‘a state of mind, in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation-state’. This is a quite adequate definition — if one includes in it also the struggle for the establishment of the nation-state — even if one has to admit that there exist at least some (moderate) nationalist movements who aim only at cultural or territorial autonomy. It is not easy to find out exactly how and when nationalism was born. Some authors see it as contemporary with the emergence of the modern nation-state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Machiavelli!). Others, like Kohn, relate it to the first great bourgeois revolutions: in England in the seventeenth century and France in 1789 for the first time the state ‘ceased to be the king’s state: it became the people’s state, a national state, a fatherland’.

More recently Tom Nairn tried to prove that nationalism emerged in the nineteenth century (as a result of the uneven development of capitalism) in the peripheral countries (Germany, Italy and Japan) and only later reached the ‘core areas’ (England and France); but this strange chronology is too arbitrary and seems to ignore such well known historical facts as the patriotic dimension of the French Revolution and of the Napoleonic wars.

In any case there is no doubt that for many centuries the political ideal was not the nation or the nation-state, but other forms of social and political organisation: the clan, the city-state, the feudal lord, the church, the dynastic kingdom and the multi-national empire. And although some precedents can be found in the past (the ancient Hebrews or the ancient Greeks), they are of a quite different nature and substance from modern nationalism.

Marxist socialism is fundamentally opposed to nationalism.

First of all because it refuses to see the nation as an undifferentiated bloc: all nations are divided into different social classes, with different interests and different conceptions of national identity. But above all it rejects the nationalist ideology and its scale of values because its supreme loyalty is not to any nation, but to an international historical subject (the proletariat) and to an international historical aim: the socialist transformation of the world. It is internationalist both for ethical and for material reasons.

The ethical motives are important: for the Marxist world view, materialist and atheistic, the only value which can be considered ‘sacred’ — absolute — is humanity itself (of which the exploited and the oppressed are the emancipatory force). In this sense, the motto ‘Workers of the world, unite!’ is not only a practical proposal for action, but also the socialist ethical response to the ‘sacred love of country’ of nationalist ideology. Socialism is therefore an internationalist movement by virtue of the universalist and humanist character of its values and aims. Without this ethical appeal it is impossible to understand the total commitment and sacrifice of many generations of activists from the labour movements of many countries to international socialism (or communism).

As the Old Bolshevik Adolf Yoffe wrote in his last letter to Trotsky in 1927 (before committing suicide): ‘Human life has no meaning unless it is at the service of an infinite, which for us is humanity’.

However, if internationalism were only a moral principle, a categorical imperative, it would be easy to dismiss it as a beautiful utopia. If this is not the case, it is because proletarian internationalism draws its political force from objective, concrete and material conditions, already analysed by Marx in the Manifesto: the economic unification of the world by the capitalist system. Like any dialectical totality,

world capitalism is not the sum total of its parts, the national economies; nor is the international class struggle the sum total of national struggles. They constitute an organic whole, with its own forms of motion, distinct from the peculiarities of its component elements. Georg Lukacs insisted in *History and Class Consciousness* that the category of totality was, on the methodological level, the carrier of the revolutionary principle. From the dialectical standpoint of totality, no local or national situation can be grasped in theory or transformed in practice if one ignores its links with the whole: with the world economic, social and political movement.

As a matter of fact, far from being anachronistic, Marx's analysis in the *Manifesto* is much more adequate in our times than in 1848. Imperialism has imposed on the world capitalist system a much higher degree of integration, the control of the market by multinational monopolies is incomparably greater; in short, the unification of the planet by the capitalist mode of production has achieved today a qualitatively higher level than in 1848. And this economic unity also has a political and military expression in Western Atlanticism, US interventionism, etc. This means that internationalism has its roots in the structure of the world economy and world politics. Socialist internationalism is also the consciousness of this objective reality.

'What is the decisive factor in class struggle: national or international conditions? Should one privilege the importance of the world process or, as Mao once wrote, the internal factors and the national (endogenous) causes? In this problematic, the question itself is misleading. It supposes an abstract, metaphysical and static separation between the national and the international, the 'internal' and the 'external', the 'inside' and the 'outside'. The dialectical stand point is precisely based on the understanding of the contradictory unity between the national economy and world market, national and international class struggle — unity which is visible already in the fact that (economic and social) national specificity is the product of the unequal development of international capitalism.

What is wrong in the *Manifesto* and others of Marx's writings is the idea that modern industrial capitalism is essentially a homogenising force, creating identical conditions of life and struggle among the exploited of all countries. His statement in 1845 that 'the nationality of the worker is neither French, nor English, nor German, it is labour, free slavery, self-huckstering' has a large share of truth; but it ignores not only the cultural specificities of each nation (which capitalism does not abolish at all) but also socioeconomic differences between proletarians of different nations, which result from the uneven and combined development of the world capitalist system. Moreover, one cannot neglect the importance of national peculiarities for the 'making of the working class' in each country and for the development of its own tradition of anti-capitalist resistance and struggle.

In other words, although capitalism creates both in the industrial metropolis and in the dominated countries a modern proletariat which fights against the same enemy and has the same objective historical interests, this does not mean at all that its material and social conditions of life (not to mention its national cultures) are identical. As Leon Trotsky once wrote: 'If we take Britain and India as polarised varieties of the capitalist type, then we are obliged to say that the internationalism of the British and Indian proletariats does not at all rest on an identity of conditions, tasks and methods, but on their indivisible interdependence.'⁵ World capitalism creates incredible inequalities and brutal differences in life conditions between the centre and periphery of the system: only the complementarity, the reciprocal relation of the struggles in the different countries can generate internationalist solidarity. Thus the anti-war movements in France in the 1950s and in the US in the 1960s and 1970s were a powerful contribution to the struggle of the Algerians and of the Indochinese people — and vice versa: these colonial struggles helped to ignite radical contestation in the metropolitan centres.

To sum up, internationalism is not the expression of the identity in life conditions of the exploited and oppressed of all countries, but of a dialectical relationship of complementarity between at least three very different kinds of struggles: the socialist labour movement in advanced capitalist societies; social and national liberation movements in dependent (or colonial) capitalist countries; and movements for democracy and against market 'reforms' in the former East Bloc countries. [edit] The Many Roots of Nationalism

Marxists have often underestimated the importance of the national question, the decisive significance of national liberation for the dominated peoples. This is part of a general pattern of blindness, neglect or at least insufficient attention to non-class forms of oppression: national, racial or sexual. It is not that Marxism as such is unable to take into account these dimensions, but the economistic approach which dominated much of Marxist thinking (and also some of Marx's own writings) led to a tendency to disregard them. Marxists have also very frequently underestimated the power of nationalism. A peculiar combination of economism and illusions of linear progress (inherited from the Enlightenment) led to the wrong belief that nationalism would inevitably and quickly decline. The Second International in particular believed that nationalism belonged to the past, and Karl Kautsky dreamed of a socialist future without nations and with one single language: 'In a painless way, the nations will fuse with each other, more or less in the same fashion as the Romansh inhabitants of the Grisons canton in Switzerland, who, insensibly and without resistance, are slowly germanising themselves as they discover that it is more advantageous to speak a language that everybody understands in a vast area rather than a language that is only spoken in a few valleys.' Obviously, equipped with such ideas, Marxists were little prepared to confront the fantastic upsurge of nationalism after August 1914, which took over the labour movement and led to 'Sacred Unity in Defence of the Fatherland' — and to the mutual slaughter of the workers of all countries. Kautsky himself rallied to the 'national defence' of imperial Germany, arguing that the Socialist International was an instrument suited only for peacetime and had to be put gently aside during the war.

The first condition for an effective confrontation with nationalism is therefore to give up illusions about linear progress, that is, naive expectations of peaceful evolution and of a gradual 'withering way' of nationalism and national wars, thanks to the modernisation and democratisation of industrial societies, the internationalisation of productive forces, etc. How can one explain the incredible force of nationalism in the course of twentieth-century history? A first answer would be the classic Marxist argument: nationalism is a bourgeois ideology and its power over the popular masses is one of the main forms taken by the ideological domination of the bourgeoisie in capitalist societies. This analysis is not wrong, but insufficient to explain the power of attraction of nationalism, sometimes over significant sections of the labour movement.

Other causes have to be taken into consideration. First, concrete material and economic conditions: competition among workers of different nations (or states), resulting from the very nature of capitalism. It is a question of short term interests — for instance, to prevent the entrance of foreign commodities which can provoke unemployment — but their real weight can blind competing workers to their common historical interest in abolishing exploitation. This, incidentally, also happens inside one single nation, when unemployed workers volunteer to replace striking ones. Marx himself recognised in the Manifesto that the competition among workers constantly threatens to divide and destroy their common organisation. Second, irrational tendencies, similar in chauvinist nationalism, religious fanaticism, racism and fascism: a complex psychic phenomenon, which still has to be studied. Wilhelm Reich's work on the mass psychology of fascism, Erich Fromm's on 'escape from freedom' and Theodor Adorno's on the authoritarian personality are among the first important contributions to an explanation. Nationalism is by its very nature an irrationalist ideology: it cannot legitimate the privilege of one

nation over the others with any rational criteria — since substantive (that is, not purely instrumental) rationality is always tendentially universal. It must therefore appeal to non-rational myths like the divine mission attributed to the nation, the innate and eternal superiority of a people, the to occupy a larger geographical Lebensraum, etc. However, it may also make use of pseudo-rational and pseudo-scientific forms of legitimation, such as geopolitics or racial anthropology. Often it does not correspond to any deep historical and cultural unity, being just the official ideology of more or less artificial states, whose borders are the accidental product of colonisation and/or decolonisation (in Africa and Latin America for instance).

But there is another reason for the upsurge of nationalism, which has to be taken very seriously by Marxists and socialists: the struggle for liberation of oppressed or colonised nations. Although Marxism is as such opposed to nationalist ideology, it must very clearly distinguish between the nationalism of the oppressors and the nationalism of the oppressed. It has to support all struggles for national liberation or for oppressed nations' right to self-determination, even if their ideology (or the ideology of their leaders) is nationalist. Of course, Marxist internationalists taking part in a movement for national liberation should keep their independence and try to persuade the exploited popular masses of the need to develop the struggle (in an uninterrupted way) beyond national aims, towards a revolutionary socialist transformation. But they cannot ignore or underrate the significance of the popular demand for national self-determination.

The reason for this is not only that socialists are opposed to all forms of oppression (national, racial, sexual or class) but also because there is a dialectical relationship between internationalism and national rights. Socialist internationalism cannot develop without recognition by the socialist movement of the equal rights of all nations. In the same way as the unity and solidarity of the workers of one and the same nation cannot be established except on an egalitarian basis — without any distinctions or privileges based on occupation, religion, race, sex or branch of production — internationalist unity of the exploited can only be built on the recognition of the national rights and in particular the right to self-determination for all people. When Lenin insisted that the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party should recognise Poland's right to self-determination — the right of the Polish people to decide for themselves if they wanted to establish a separate state or not — he did it not only because the struggle of the Polish nation against tsarism was historically progressive (the argument used by Marx and Engels) but above all because it was a pre-condition for the establishment of an internationalist alliance between Russian and Polish workers. Recognition of national rights is an essential condition for international solidarity, in so far as it permits the dissolution of suspicions, hatreds and fears which set nations against each other and nourish chauvinism. As Lenin wrote, without the right to divorce — to have a separate state — there can be no truly free marriage — unity or federation among nations. Unfortunately, the policy of the Bolshevik government (including Lenin) after October 1917 did not always correspond to this principle: for example, witness the invasion of Poland in 1920 and the occupation of Georgia in 1921.

By making the capital distinction between nationalism of the oppressed and of the oppressor, socialist internationalists do not have to adhere to the former. But they perceive its contradictory nature: its emancipatory dimension as a rebellion against unjust oppression and its limits as a particularistic ideology. It is therefore logical that all truly social revolutionary movements in an oppressed nation necessarily put national liberation at the centre of their struggle, while linking it to the social emancipation from capitalist exploitation — Nicaragua is a major recent example — while in the imperialist metropolis it is the rejection of nationalism which is at the heart of all radical confrontation with the established order, from the anti-war movement in the US to the French in May 1968 (whose main slogan was 'les frontieres on s'en fout!' — 'Frontiers, the hell with them!'). This being said, it

should be stressed that the distinction between the two kinds of nationalism is a relative and not an absolute one. First, because yesterday's oppressed very easily become today's oppressors: there is no lack of historical evidence for this in our own times. Second, because the nationalist ideology (or movement) of oppressed nations has often a double cutting edge: liberating against their oppressors, but oppressive towards their own national minorities. And third, because one can find in both forms of nationalism elements of chauvinism, global rejection of the 'other' and (sometimes) racism. Lenin was probably the 'classic' Marxist thinker who best understood the dialectics between internationalism and national rights. However, in certain passages of his writings he presents the democratic rights of the nations as a part which has to be subordinated to the whole which is the world democratic and socialist movement. This formulation seems to me dangerous and somewhat mechanistic. If socialist revolution is the self-emancipation of the proletariat — in alliance with all the other exploited and oppressed social groups — it is intimately linked with the democratic self-determination of the nation. A people on whom 'socialism' was imposed from outside, against its will, would only know a caricature of socialism, inevitably doomed to bureaucratic degeneration. (Many Eastern European countries illustrate this rule!) In my opinion it would be more adequate — and corresponding better to the spirit of most of Lenin's writings on the national question — to conceive the socialist revolution and the international fraternity of the proletariat as Marxists' aim and national self-determination as a necessary means for implementing it. Means and ends are dialectically linked, in such a way that the subordination of the national dimension to internationalism excludes the possibility of 'sacrificing' the former to the latter. [edit] Beyond Nations?

If socialist internationalism is opposed to nationalist ideology, this does not at all mean that it rejects nations' historical and cultural traditions. In the same way as internationalist movements in each country have to speak the national language, they have also to speak the language of national history and culture; particularly, of course, when this culture is being oppressed. As Lenin acknowledged, each culture and each national history contain democratic, progressive, revolutionary elements which have to be incorporated by the socialist culture of the labour movement, and reactionary, chauvinistic and obscurantist elements which have to be uncompromisingly fought. Internationalists' task is to fuse the historical and cultural heritage of the world socialist movement with the culture and the tradition of their people, in its radical and subversive dimension — often deformed by bourgeois ideology or hidden and buried by the official culture of the ruling classes. In the same way as Marxists must take into consideration, in their revolutionary struggle, the decisive importance of the national specificity of their social formation, in their ideological struggle they cannot ignore the national peculiarity of their own culture and history. This is what the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) did in Nicaragua, linking Marxism with Sandino's heritage, a radical tradition alive in the collective memory of the Nicaraguan people. A similar process took place in Cuba with the democratic and anti-imperialist tradition represented by Jose Marti and in South America with the Indian rebellious past embodied by Tupac-Amaru. If socialism, in the Marxian sense — a classless and stateless society — can exist only on a world scale, what would be the place of nations in a future 'Socialist Mother Earth'? This is not a purely utopian and irrelevant question, since the internationalist nature of the ultimate revolutionary socialist aim should inspire, to a certain extent at least, present forms of struggle. For historical materialism, the nation-state is not an eternal category: it is not the result of 'human nature' nor of any biological law of nature (a thesis advocated by certain ultra-reactionary 'sociobiologists' who pretend to deduce the nation from the 'territorial principle' of certain animal species). It did not always exist in the past and nothing forces one to believe that it will always exist in the future. In short, it is a historical product and can be historically superseded. The necessity of some form of structured (or 'institutional') organisation is a universal need of all civilised human societies. This organisation can just as well take national forms as infra national (clans, tribes) or supranational ones (religious civilisations). Medieval Europe was a characteristic example of a social and political organisation combining local structures

which were 'pre-national' (fiefs, principalities, etc.) and universalistic structures which were 'trans-national' (the Holy Roman Empire, the Church). The modern nation-state emerged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries — with the rise of capitalism and the formation of the national market — precisely through the destruction/decomposition of these two non-national structures. There is therefore no a priori reason to deny the possibility in the future of a new supranational organisation of human society, a World Socialist Republic, which, unifying economically and politically the human species, would reduce the nation essentially to its cultural dimension. The universal culture which would arise in such a framework would peacefully co-exist with the rich multiplicity of the national cultures.

This issue has been quite controversial in twentieth-century Marxism. One can find basically two tendencies: 1. Those who favoured (or considered inevitable) the future assimilation of all nations in a universal common socialist culture: Kautsky, Lenin, Stalin, Pannekoek, Strasser. Kautsky's theory of the single international language is a coherent expression of this position.

2. Those who believed in the free development of all national cultures in an integrated universal community: Bauer, Trotsky and Luxemburg. For instance, Trotsky wrote in a 1915 essay: 'The nation is an active and permanent factor of human culture. And in a socialist regime the nation, liberated from the chains of political and economic dependence, will be called to play a fundamental role in historical development.'

3. A third position, 'national neutrality', is implicitly sketched by Vladimir Medem, the leader of the Jewish Bund: it is impossible to predict whether future historical development will or not lead to the assimilation of the Jewish nation. In any case, Marxists should neither prevent nor stimulate this process of assimilation, but remain neutral. If one generalises this position to all national cultures (which Medem did not) one would have an original and new conception of the problem.

4. In any case, the most important, from a socialist, revolutionary and democratic viewpoint, is that no internationalist politics can be based on the denial, repression, neglect or limitation of the national right to self-determination and self-development.

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Marxists and Religion - yesterday and today. A key challenge for socialists.

Wednesday, 16 March 2005

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Three levels of attitude should be considered here: Classical Marxism, i.e. the Marxism of the Founders, did not require the inscription of atheism in the programme of social movements. On the contrary, in his critique of the Blanquist émigrés from the Commune (1874), Engels mocked their pretensions to abolish religion by decree. His clear-sightedness has been completely confirmed by the

experiences of the 20th Century, as when he asserted that "persecutions are the best means of promoting disliked convictions" and that "the only service, which may still be rendered to God today, is that of declaring atheism an article of faith to be enforced."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To be sure, the religious practices of colonised peoples can appear as very retrograde in the eyes of the metropolitan populations, whose material and scientific superiority was in line with the very fact of colonisation. Nevertheless, it is not by imposing their way of life on the colonised populations, against their will, that the cause of the latter's emancipation will be served. The road to the hell of racist

oppression is paved with good 'civilising' intentions, and we know how much the workers' movement itself was contaminated by charitable pretensions and philanthropic illusions in the colonial era.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, the emancipatory struggle would be gravely compromised if it sought to 'free' women by

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. The duty of Marxists in France is to fight unfailingly racist and religious oppression conducted by the imperial bourgeoisie and its state, before fighting religious prejudice in the midst of the immigrant populations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

more effective than prohibition."

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

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

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

"To this concealment and rejection is added the colonial heritage ... bearer of a deep and long-lasting tradition of violence, inequality and racism, which the difficulties of de-colonisation, and then the rifts of the Algerian war amplified and reinforced. The ethnic, social, cultural, and religious oppression of the indigenous Muslim populations of the French colonies was a constant practice, to the point that it is echoed in limitations to its legal status. It is thus that Islam was considered as an element of the personal statute and not as a religion coming under the 1905 Law of Separation (of Church and State - trans).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Indeed as with religion in general, Islamic fundamentalism can be "at one and the same time, the expression of real misery and a protest against real misery", with the difference that in this case the

protest is active: it is not "the opium" of the people, but rather "the heroin" of one part of the people, derived from 'the opium' and substituting its ecstatic effect for the narcotic effect of the latter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The British far-left has the merit of having displayed a greater openness to the Muslim populations than the French far-left. It has organised impressive mobilisations with the massive participation of people originating from Muslim immigration against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the

government of its country participated. In the anti-war movement, it even went as far as allying itself with a Muslim organisation of fundamentalist inspiration, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), the British arm of the main 'moderate' Islamic fundamentalist movement in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood (represented in the parliaments of some countries).

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

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

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

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

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

Of course, continued Lindsey German, some Muslims - and non-Muslims - hold views on some social

issues that are more conservative than those of the socialist and liberal left. But that should not be a barrier to collaboration over common concerns. Would a campaign for gay rights, for example, insist that all those who took part share the same view of the war in Iraq?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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A first version of this article appeared in the French review ContreTemps, whose director is Daniel Bensaïd. Thanks to Peter Cooper for kindly translating this article into English and to Jane Kelly for her helpful editing and comments.

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Against Tolerance. Islam, sexuality, and the politics of belonging in the Netherlands
Monday, 8 June 2009 Paul Mepschen

Sex seems to play a key role in the Dutch politics of belonging. Sex – especially homosexuality – is instrumentalized by the nationalist right who uses it to represent immigrants as ‘strangers’ who threaten tolerant, modern, Dutch society. Tolerance, power, and xenophobia come to be increasingly entwined in the Netherlands. A plea against ‘tolerance’ as the foundation for political and social struggle.

The Slovenian philosopher and sociologist Slavoj Žižek argues that tolerance constitutes a mystifying discourse veiling what is really at the heart of political and social struggle. There is good reason, Žižek argues, that someone like Martin Luther King didn’t make use of the concept. The struggle against racism is not a struggle for tolerance, but for social, economic, political, and cultural rights, and for changing unjust and undemocratic power relations. Žižek makes a parallel with feminism, asking if feminists struggle to be ‘tolerated’ by men. Of course not – from this perspective the concept of tolerance even becomes rather ridiculous.

Tolerance, in other words, does not work as an imperative for political struggle. As the American left political philosopher Wendy Brown argues, tolerance is a discourse of power which possesses a certain “magnanimity” and plays a key role in dynamics of in- and exclusion in liberal societies. Moreover, holding on to tolerance as the foundation for one’s engagement in struggle is what may keep the LGBT-movement from reinventing itself in an era in which globalization, the global spread of neoliberal capitalism, and the rise of Islamophobia, are radically changing what is demanded of our movements; how our struggles relate to other struggles; to the state; and to dominant liberal discourses. While the situation in the Netherlands provides perhaps the most cardinal example of the entanglement of LGBT-politics with racism and Islamophobia, the challenges we face in the Netherlands because of this strange co-optation of homosexuality by nationalists and Islam-bashers are mirrored in other parts of the world and cannot be understood without taking into account the ideologies embellishing the global onslaught against Islam.

The El-Moumni affair and beyond

In the Netherlands, LGBT-politics has largely come to be reduced to the question of a perceived lack of tolerance toward homosexuals among Muslims. The discourse that is put forward is one in which native Dutch citizens are construed as tolerant while society’s cultural ‘others’, especially Muslims, are represented as intolerant. Homophobia is construed to be alien to Dutch, modern, secular, society. The structural heteronormativity of society has almost completely disappeared from the movement’s discourse and from the struggle, while the question of Islam and tolerance has taken front-stage.

What could be wrong with tolerance? Would I perhaps prefer intolerance? Of course not, but if we would take a harder look at the concept and the way it was employed, we would be able to see that tolerance has a paradoxical meaning in present day society. It is accompanied, in fact, by virulent forms of intolerance and exclusion. To illustrate, we may have a look at the debate about Islam in the Netherlands starting in 2001. The Rotterdam imam El-Moumni, of Moroccan descent, in May 2001 made comments on national television arguing that homosexuality was an illness threatening reproduction and thus society in more general terms: classic patriarchal views. The comments caused enormous upheaval in Dutch society, in which people especially took offense because these views came

from a cultural other, from 'the outside'. The imam's expressed views were taken to be comments on Dutch secular and modern society. In fact, only three years earlier, in 1998, during the Gay Games in Amsterdam, public homosexuality was fiercely debated in the Dutch public sphere. Several Dutch conservatives participated in that debate, arguing, among other things, that homosexuality was shameful and that they felt uncomfortable or offended by the public display of homosexuality during the games. Interestingly, Muslims played no role in this debate, and neither did the question of Islam in more general terms.

In 2001, on the other hand, the comments of El-Moumni were framed as 'intolerant', diametrically opposed to Dutch values, and construed as symbolic of the lack on cultural integration of Muslim communities in Dutch societies. The imam's views, characteristic of conservative views on homosexuality in orthodox religious circles, were framed as representative of the whole of the Muslim community instead as the views of a specific, radical, current in Islam (El-Moumni belongs to a notoriously conservative mosque in Rotterdam). In public discourse, Islam became construed as completely and utterly antagonistic to modern, tolerant, Dutch 'values' and all the imams active in the Netherlands – including imams from the liberal Alavite community who have nothing whatsoever in common with orthodox figures like El-Moumni – were 'invited' for a lesson in tolerance by the liberal democratic minister of 'large cities-affairs'. One of the prime participants in the attack on public homosexuality in 1998, the conservative columnist Van der List, who called homosexuality disgusting, in 2001 embraced the homosexual community that now needed protection against the horrible Muslim hordes who were a threat to liberal, tolerant, Dutchness.

A visibly uncomfortable prime-minister Kok spent the full ten minutes of his weekly interview on national television explaining to Muslims that they were to tolerate homosexuals, as this "was the Dutch way". In a poll on the website of the largest Gay magazine, the mainstream, liberal populist Gay Krant, 91 percent of participants agreed with the statement that "Muslims should accept our tolerance or leave". The widely read right-wing daily Telegraaf spoke of ideas coming from "the medieval deserts of Northern Africa" and gay members of the conservative liberal party VVD in Amsterdam published a pamphlet arguing that Muslims were threatening the liberal freedoms that were so characteristic to Dutch society.

Aesthetics of homosexuality

The message was clear: to be Dutch meant to adjust to certain 'norms and values' and to assimilate into the moral universe that constituted modern, tolerant Dutch society. Tolerance became one of the prime markers of 'autochthony'. Helped by the events of 9/11, the single most successful right-wing populist in Dutch history, Pim Fortuyn, who as the reader may recall was brutally killed in 2002, instrumentalized this discourse of tolerant Dutchness to make his spectacular political staging possible. As a columnist, publicist, and public speaker, Fortuyn had tried for many years to get the Islamophobic, xenophobic, and nationalist view across that Muslims were retarded, that Dutch identity and modernity needed to be reappraised, and that the borders needed to be closed to immigrants, especially Muslims. For a long time, his views were seen as rather ludicrous and marginal, but during the 1990's they slowly moved from the far right margins to the center of Dutch politics.

The right-wing populist party Livable Netherlands catapulted Fortuyn into the political arena in 2001. Fortuyn combined a personal, almost erotic, political aesthetic and charisma with neonationalist and Islamophobic political ideas and fulfilled a deep desire for belonging, meaning, direction, a closed and clear identity, and an ever more strictly defined definition of 'the other'. Fortuyn wanted to embody the modern, free, tolerant, Dutch nation and did so by liberating the sexual norms and the aesthetics of part

of the international and Dutch gay male community from the gay ghetto and bringing them into the Dutch public domain. As an essential part of this political discourse, Muslims were represented by Fortuyn as the exact opposites of the free, liberal, modern Dutch person. The former were represented as intolerant, primitive, and traditional, a triangle of alterity that made them quite incongruous with Dutch society. Obviously, the mass mediation of the homophobic comments of various orthodox Islamic figures in Dutch society like El-Moumni, and various affairs concerning visceral forms of homophobia in Muslim circles, helped Fortuyn greatly by reinforcing his point. Fortuyn's recipe against what he dubbed 'the agrarian backwardness' of Islam: getting Dutch society back on the path of modernity and secularism through harsh integration policies and closed borders. Power and tolerance became completely entangled and emerged as a weapon in the hands of the populist and Islamophobic right.

Everyday homophobia

Would we turn our attention to the nationalist right in the Netherlands today, the politics of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party or several populist right-wing media and Internet publications, we would see that tolerance is not quite characteristic of the politics of the far right. The tolerance towards homosexuality, merely discursive as opposed to practiced in everyday life, is accompanied by a growing intolerance toward Muslims and other immigrants, social outsiders, the poor. The culture of the Muslim minority is framed as an essential, natural, uniform, and a-historical whole while homophobia is construed to be alien to Dutch society. That narrative has rooted itself ever more deeply into Dutch society. As opposed to 1998, during the gay games – not very long ago – it is almost impossible today to imagine discussing LGBT-rights without bashing Islam and Muslims. The hegemonic narrative is that gay and lesbian emancipation is almost complete – as gays and lesbians are 'tolerated' – and that the only problem left is the lack of integration of Muslims into Dutch society. However, the facts are quite different. Research shows that the official tolerance informing the self-image of the Dutch and 'Dutch pride' is not always congruous with the facts. Confronted with public homosexuality – like two men kissing – a large part of the population still responds with disgust and distaste. Sometimes this disgust leads to violence. While it is true that young Moroccan men are overrepresented among the perpetrators of homophobic violence in Amsterdam, research shows that this behavior cannot be reduced to the culture or religion of the young men involved. In fact, it is their social exclusion and marginality that is a more prominent candidate for blame.

Normalization

What causes the disgust mentioned above is heteronormativity, which is still a structural, essential aspect of Dutch society and moral order. In other words, heterosexuality remains the self-evident norm, a normativity which is reproduced through the family, in the educational system, popular culture, and media. The tolerated homosexual fits this heteronormativity very well: in almost every way he behaves according to heteronormative norms. As Steven Seidman says, the emphasis on tolerance has normalized homosexuality. The modern homosexual changed from a deviant, excluded other into the mirror-image of the ideal heterosexual. In a 2001 article on normalization, Seidman argues: "Normalization is made possible because it simultaneously reproduces a dominant order of gender, intimate, economic, and national practices". He warns: "[L]egitimation through normalization leaves in place the polluted status of these marginal sexualities and all the norms that regulate our sexual intimate conduct apart from the norm of heterosexuality". He also points out: "Ultimately, normalization [renders] sexual difference a minor, superficial aspect of a self who in every other way reproduces an ideal of a national citizen".

As argued, many people in the Netherlands still look the other way, disgusted, shamed, when confronted with homosexuality in public. In such a heteronormative culture it needs not surprise that many homosexual men and women are depressed; that suicide rates among young gays and lesbians remain high; that transgenderism and other forms of gender nonconformity are ridiculed and transgenders are excluded; that violence keeps threatening the lgbt-community. The solution for such problems is not a politics based on tolerance, but on the struggle against heteronormativity.

In recent articles, the feminist philosopher Judith Butler rightly and harshly criticizes the confusion of sexual politics with the politics of empire and argues for a kind of sexual politics that resists Islamophobia, racism, and imperialism and that tries to find convergence points of antiracism and lgbt-struggles. Unfortunately, Butler doesn't elaborate much. It is the task, it seems to me, of critical, antiracist, queer movements to think about and develop on forms of sexual politics beyond tolerance, against tolerance. The heteronormative society radical queers are fighting is the very society that excludes and discriminates against immigrants. Convergence points exist, for instance in the field of education where there is every reason to fight against both implicit heterosexuality as well as against the structural disadvantaging of girls and immigrant kids. Antiracists and lgbt-activists may also find each other in solidarity with lgbt's from minority communities and in solidarity with homosexual refugees and their rights.

The reader may perhaps ask herself whether the author of the present article has gone mad. Isn't the Netherlands in fact one of the 'best' countries to live in for lesbians or gay men, because they have in fact gained rights and a certain amount of acceptance and demanded their place in the public domain? Of course, this is true, and the gains of lgbt's in the Netherlands must be defended and the public kiss-ins and similar actions organized by queers in response to homophobia must be supported and participated in. But we need a movement that is more than just responsive but that tries to constantly reinvent itself to fight the exclusion of deviant sexualities as effectively as possible, while doing everything to resist the instrumentalization of our struggles in the 'war against terror' and the ongoing onslaught against the Muslim community. I do not argue for intolerance, but for re-imagining political struggles in such a way that the structural causes of exclusion, discrimination, and violence assume center-stage again, for a queer movement that takes up the struggle against heterosexual normativity. Tolerance is ideology. We do not fight to become tolerated but to change the world. Tolerance is an ideological construct that disarms the lgbt-movement and positions us against as opposed to alongside 'other' oppressed minorities.

Arab Sexualities — Peter Drucker

Desiring Arabs
by Joseph A. Massad
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007,
444 pages, \$35 hardcover.

THE ISSUE OF same-sex sexualities in the Arab world is a political and intellectual minefield, and more so since 9/11 than before. In a bizarre twist, neoconservatives and other rightists who were hostile for decades to the lesbian/gay movement(1) have repackaged themselves as defenders of oppressed Arab women and gays. Responses from the left have been divided.

When international human rights or LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) groups have issued alerts lately about persecution of Middle Eastern LGBT people (most often in Iran), some anti-imperialist gays have denounced the critics for contributing to the Republicans' (and some prominent Democrats') war drive. Others, closer to the politics of Against the Current, have insisted on the importance both of opposition to U.S. intervention and of solidarity with LGBTs.

The arguments have rarely shown much knowledge of the sexual cultures of the Arab world, however, or included much analysis of how imperialism and sexuality interact. Overcoming this lack of understanding is a crucial and urgent task.

The right's reliance on arguments about women's and sexual freedom makes it increasingly difficult to be an anti-imperialist or antiracist in the United States without integrating gender and sexual analysis. Similarly, international feminist and LGBT movements are hamstrung by their relative weakness in and ignorance of the Arab world. They badly need to take up the task of linking imperialism, gender and sexuality.

This task is not made any easier by the paucity of serious scholarship on sexualities in the Arab world. Lesbian/gay studies has focused mostly on modern Europe and North America. Fortunately more work has been done in recent years on dependent-world LGBTs. But Africa and the Middle East are the parts of the world where LGBT communities are least visible and LGBT movements most harshly repressed.

This helps explain why scholarship on Arab same-sex sexualities has been relatively thin on the ground. People outside the Arab world, who often don't know it well or even speak Arabic, have published most of what exists in English. While academics in North America and Europe have many times more resources, the knowledge and experience of researchers in and from the Arab world are indispensable.

Joseph Massad, an associate professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia University, has now walked out boldly into this minefield with his book *Desiring Arabs*. Massad is no stranger to controversy. His earlier work concentrated on Jordan and Palestine, not exactly fields where calm, collegial discussion is the rule in U.S. academe - least of all at Columbia, a hotbed of right-wing Zionist hate campaigns of which Massad has been a prime target. Naturally and rightly, the left and defenders of Palestinian rights have come to his defense.

Desiring Arabs has brought Massad a new crowd of detractors. His criticisms of North American and European efforts to identify, defend and free gay people in Arab countries(2) have been met with a wave of accusations. An online review of *Desiring Arabs* by a staff member of *The New Republic*, after

describing police torture of a Palestinian gay man in graphic detail, charged Massad with an "insidious attempt to convince the world that men like [this one] are somehow figments of the Western world's imagination."(3)

Another review by Brian Whitaker, former Middle East editor of the London Guardian, accused Massad of reflecting "essentially the same ideas" as the Jordanian Islamic Action Front when it denounced women's rights as an "American and Zionist" attack on the nation's "identity and values."(4) These are excerpts from the relatively nuanced attacks; other diatribes on the net have been more scurrilous.

No Homophobe

Massad is clearly no homophobe and has no sympathy with torturers or fundamentalists. On the contrary, *Desiring Arabs* is an important resource for serious students of sexualities in the Arab world. It confirms that same-sex sexual desire and behavior were widespread in Arabic literature during the centuries when Arab civilization was at its height.

Above all, the book does a service to scholarship comparable to what Kate Millett did in *Sexual Politics* or Dennis Altman in *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*: it analyses the sexual ideologies of a wide range of 19th- and 20th-century literary works, many of them inaccessible to non-Arabic speakers. In the process Massad shows respect for and familiarity with queer theory, the dominant current today in LGBT studies.

For all its merits, however, *Desiring Arabs* has major flaws. Like many queer theorists, Massad seems more interested in literature than in reality. He leaves crucial questions about Arabs' sexual behavior and identities not only unanswered - answers admittedly hard to come by in countries where mass surveys or in-depth interviews about sexuality are rarely feasible - but largely unaddressed.

While his criticisms of activists' and academics' Eurocentrism are often justified, he seems to suggest that the international lesbian/gay rights movement is largely to blame for the persecution of people engaged in same-sex sexualities in the Middle East today. Yet his own research shows that this persecution predated international LGBT activism by many decades.

Massad rightly rejects many lesbians and gays' essentialism ("we were born this way" and "we are everywhere"). However, he does not engage seriously enough with the more substantial scholarly work that has been done on global same-sex sexualities. As a result, he doesn't recognize that LGBT studies have not always shared the essentialist impulses of many ordinary LGBT people. On the contrary, many theorists have emphasized that same-sex sexualities have been socially constructed in the course of history, and that these sexualities were and are extraordinarily diverse in different parts of the world.

Edward Said warned in his classic book *Orientalism* against notions that "there is such a thing as a real or true Orient (Islam, Arab or whatever)" or "that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants."(5) Massad describes Said not only as "a mentor, a friend, and a colleague" but also as "a surrogate father" (xiii) and seems to heed Said's warning when he writes, "My point here is not to argue in favor of non-Western nativism and of some blissful existence prior to the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the non-West." (42)

Nonetheless, his book tends to idealize the indigenous sexual culture of the Arab world. He repeatedly dismisses signs of lesbian or gay life in the Arab world as outside impositions, fabrications or shameful

attempts by Arabs to mimic Europeans or Americans. He fails to come to terms with the reality that the Arab world too is increasingly part of a global capitalist order and that its contemporary sexualities are likely to be hybrid and diverse.

Beyond Gay and Straight

On one central issue Massad is right: his insistence that traditional Arab sexualities were not based on a "hetero-homo binary." (40) This will be a difficult point for many U.S. readers to grasp, given how deeply the division between "gay people" and "straight people" has shaped our common-sense understanding of sexuality. Most scholars agree, however, that this binary conception is a fairly recent development, and that there have been innumerable other ways of conceiving sexuality.

Massad's reading of the Koran, later Islamic religious texts and medieval Arabic love poetry confirms what other historians have found: that Arabs in the first centuries of Islam simply did not classify human beings in this way. It is less clear how much continuity there is between this traditional Arab sexual culture and the sexual culture of the contemporary Arab world.

Despite Massad's skepticism, there are self-identified lesbians and gay men in the Arab world today. But distinctive lesbian/gay identities as they exist in North America and Europe do seem less visible in Arab countries than in most other regions. Many Arab men who have sex with other men do not identify at all as gay, transgender or even bisexual. Some of them fuck transgender or other males, concealing this sex from public knowledge; others simply have discrete sex with one another.(6)

As Massad points out, this means that the tactics that LGBT movements have used elsewhere cannot simply be imported unchanged into the Arab world. For example, in a culture where people can engage in same-sex sexual behavior without necessarily identifying as gay, it is doubtful what it means to call on them to "come out." People whose lives include both same-sex and different-sex relationships have to be free to decide when, where and how they speak up.

Massad has strong arguments for rejecting the insistence that desire is "embedded in the body [and] can only be freed in an individualist project of liberation through public confessionals" (365) - though even in the Arab world, transgender people and others do sometimes feel that their desire is embedded in their bodies.

The scholars in LGBT studies who laid the foundations for a social constructionist approach should be sensitive to the pitfalls of binary thinking. Yet as Massad shows, when it comes to the Arab world some of the most distinguished theorists can succumb to Eurocentrism. This Eurocentrism contradicts the main thrust of the history of sexuality since the 1970s. Even worse, it ignores the key lesson of 20th-century liberation struggles: that each oppressed people needs to find its own way to free itself through understanding and transforming its own unique social formation.

Massad is better at showing how Arab sexual cultures do not work and cannot be freed, however, than in analyzing how they do work and can be freed. There is still an enormous amount of work to be done before this question can be answered. Nonetheless, Massad could have benefited a bit more from analyses by other scholars.

Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe's anthology *Islamic Homosexualities*, for example, contains more useful insights than Massad allows in his passing, cutting reference to it. (170-71) A reader who knew the book only from Massad's comments would never guess that Roscoe and Murray denounce

Eurocentrism and the tendency to tell the "history of homosexuality as a progressive, even teleological, evolution from pre-modern repression, silence, and invisibility to modern visibility and sexual freedom." They even contrast the relative uniformity of modern "Western" homosexuality to the "variety, distribution, and longevity of same-sex patterns in Islamic societies."(7)

Massad barely discusses the social relations that made up classical Arab sexual culture. For example, his account of classical Arabic poetry makes clear, as others have, that boy love was an important theme for a major Abbasid poet like Abu Nuwas. But he casts little light on the dynamics of what Murray and Roscoe call "age-differentiated homosexuality," either in classical times or in the Arab world today.

He also devotes virtually no attention to another component of Arab sexual culture: transgender. Studies have shown transgender's importance as a form of same-sex sexual expression in many parts of the underdeveloped world, including Muslim countries like Pakistan and Indonesia. There is evidence from several continents that working-class and poor people in particular are more likely than middle-class people to engage in transgender relationships as opposed to lesbian/gay relationships.(8)

Transgender people have shown an impressive capacity for radical organizing and action, to the point of virtually taking over the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004. Forms of transgender have been identified in at least some Arab countries, as among the hassas of Morocco and khanith of Oman.

Yet Massad passes over the subject in virtual silence. He denounces the International Lesbian and Gay Association for saying that transvestite dancers are popular in Egypt; he comments that this was "a nineteenth-century phenomenon" and complains that time "is never factored in when the topic is Arabs and Muslims." (167) But elsewhere he mentions the popularity of female impersonators as singers in Cairo in the 1920s and '30s, and of a female impersonator on Syrian TV as late as the 1980s. (364)

Massad's snipe is one example of how he tends to substitute discussions of ideology (Is time a factor in discussing Arabs?) for discussions of reality (Is transgender still a significant phenomenon in the Arab world?).

Empire and Culture

Imperialist domination of the Arab world is increasingly politicizing sexuality. Is Massad open to sexual politics within Arab countries, or only to a defense of Arab sexual culture against imperialism? Can Arab anti-imperialists opt for solidarity with women, transgender people and youth in their own region, with all this implies for transforming the existing sexual culture? The Islamist political movements that currently have hegemony over the oppositions to U.S.-backed regimes clearly prefer the defense of tradition - as they selectively define it. But the choice remains open.

There is neither a historical nor a logical connection between anti-imperialism and cultural nativism. The British Empire was careful not to interfere with Islamic domination of civil society in countries it ruled like Egypt and Pakistan. By contrast, Muslim Turkey's fierce resistance to colonization after the First World War and Muslim Indonesia's struggle for independence after the Second World War involved far-reaching secularization. It is no accident that Turkey and Indonesia have stronger LGBT communities and movements today than almost any Arab country.(9)

Still today in the Arab world, repressive regimes linked to imperialism use sexual repression as a cover. Many of the Arab regimes whose repression of same-sex sexuality is most notorious, like the Saudi

kingdom and Egypt, are among the closest U.S. allies in the region and among the Arab countries best integrated into the neoliberal world economic order. And U.S. right-wing lip service to lesbian/gay rights is worse than useless to LGBT Arab people.

The Shiite parties, militias and gangs that dominate Iraq today are guilty of vicious repression of people engaged in same-sex sexualities, which the U.S. occupiers have hardly lifted a finger to stop. In one incident in 2007, an Iraqi LGBT activist heard Americans talking in the next room while Iraqi police were torturing him.(10)

Massad consistently assumes that the presence of lesbian/gay identities in the Arab world is a result of European and North American cultural influence. His wide-ranging analysis of 19th- and 20th-century literature does show, as he says, that "cultural production as a whole has been marshaled, consciously and unconsciously, toward ... shaming non-Europe into assimilation." (416) But he hardly tries to make a case for cultural causes of gay identity as opposed to other factors; he only occasionally puts forward a class or economic analysis.(11)

In fact, the spread of lesbian/gay identities in the dependent world probably owes less to outside cultural influences than to social causes like mass migration to cities, more waged labor by women, higher wages, commodification of everyday life, assumption of some traditional family functions by the state, and the spread of modern medicine with its penchant for classification.(12) The relative scarcity of lesbian/gay identities in Arab countries would then be due less to weaker European and North American influence (which seems doubtful) than to factors like the region's relatively low rate of female-paid employment.

Another factor is probably what Gilbert Achcar calls "the Arab despotic exception": the fact that the United States has continued to back dictatorships in the Middle East, due to its vital economic and geopolitical interests there, rather than risk the kind of transitions to nominal democracy that it has allowed in much of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of Asia.(13) The result has been less freedom for political and social organizing, and specifically for LGBT organizing, in the Arab world.

Repression

Massad makes clear at many points in *Desiring Arabs* that he deplores the repression of same-sex sexuality by Arab governments. What has generated most of the controversy around the book is the chapter (by far the shortest one) where he blames this repression largely on the lesbian/gay groups, human rights organizations and "discourse" that he calls the "Gay International."(14)

Speaking of the crackdown on same-sex sexual activity in Egypt following the 2001 Queen Boat raid, for example, Massad says, "The Gay International and its activities are largely responsible for the intensity of this repressive campaign." (184)

"By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary," he says. (188) The "sexual rights agenda ... has led to much repression and oppression in the contemporary Arab world." (375) He even says that Islamic fundamentalism has an "unwitting alliance" with the "crusading Gay International in identifying people who practice certain forms of sex." (265)

The irony of this line of argument is that Massad provides so much evidence that hostility to same-sex

sexualities in the Arab world long predated the arrival of LGBT movements. He describes a host of modern Arab attempts to deny, downplay or condemn traditional Arab openness to same-sex sexual desire.

He notes that erotic poetry focusing on youths or men "disappeared completely as a poetic genre" around the late 19th century. (35) He devotes almost 20 pages to 20th-century Arab critics' denunciation of the poet Abu Nuwas' praise of youthful male beauty. (76-94)

He describes a paradigm shift in the work of Egyptian Nobel Prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz, from the 1947 novel *Midaq Alley*, which portrays same-sex sexuality as commonplace but public awareness of it as shameful, to the 1957 novel *Sugar Street*, which portrays male same-sex desire as an "illness." (272-90) And he shows how Arab literature since the defeat in the 1967 war with Israel has been pervaded by images of humiliating, emasculating penetration of Arab men.

Taken as a whole, this suggests a drastic, century-long transformation of Arab sexual culture, in large measure completed before the modern lesbian/gay movement was born with the 1969 Stonewall rebellion.

European influence undoubtedly played some role in this transformation, as shown by colonial laws against "sodomy" still on the books in many former European colonies. Doubtless other factors, neglected by Massad, played a role as well, as in the case of modernizing, nationalist and Stalinist regimes elsewhere in the dependent world.(15) But protests by international LGBT and human rights groups have undoubtedly been more a reaction than a contributing factor.

The power of these organizations is derisible compared to that of the former colonial empires, the U.S. military, major multinationals or the international financial institutions. Imperialist governments have shown virtually no interest in supporting them with more than an occasional press release. Arab governments may vilify these organizations in their propaganda, but Massad provides little evidence that they have had any significant effect on law or policy, even negatively.

Furthermore, while international LGBT organizations are largely European-led and often Eurocentrist in their thinking, they are far from having a unified agenda for the Arab world, as the 2001 Egyptian Queen Boat raid showed.

For example, Act Up Paris responded to the raid with a protest at the Egyptian embassy, whose slogans included a demand to "free our lovers." This slogan would hardly have been welcomed by the Egyptian defendants, who were not defending themselves as open gay men, let alone as men with European lovers.

If this were typical of the European movement, Massad's charges would be vindicated. But in fact, at the next Euromediterranean Summer University on Homosexualities, an annual LGBT gathering in Marseille, a lone representative of Act Up Paris faced a barrage of criticism from virtually every other participant in the discussion for his group's insensitivity and counterproductive tactics.

Massad's argument becomes even less plausible when he asserts that the Egyptian police "do not seek to, and cannot if they were so inclined, arrest men practicing same-sex contact but rather are pursuing those among them who identify as 'gay.'" (183) This is the opposite of the truth: the police rarely know whether the people they harass, arrest or torture identify as gay. There is hardly a law or policy on earth that uses this as a criterion for police repression.

The sequence of cause and effect is the reverse, as historians have shown: the common experience of repression can contribute to the development of transgender, gay and lesbian identities. In any case, the dominant sexual ideology that Arab states have developed over the past century has increasingly led to repressive practices against same-sex sexual behavior, and did so before lesbian or gay identities had begun to emerge. Clearly the identities are not the cause of the repression.

Love and Solidarity

In at least a few Arab countries, some people engaging in same-sex sexuality have begun responding to repression by assuming LGBT identities and even organizing LGBT groups. The Lebanese group Helem is one example. Interestingly, it suspended its LGBT advocacy in 2006 to turn its headquarters over to relief efforts for victims of the Israeli invasion, working with a range of other Lebanese organizations.(16)

Among Palestinians in the West Bank and pre-1967 Israel, the LGBTQ [the Q here stands for "Questioning" - ed.] group Al-Qaws has been working since 2001 "not simply to mimic an existing model of queer identity/community, but to provide a social space for LGBTQ Palestinians to independently engage in a dialogue about our own visions and ideals for a community."(17)

As Arabs engaged in same-sex sexualities begin adopting LGBT identities, they may form more lasting relationships and speak more of their love for one another. This would cast doubt on Massad's assertion that in the Arab world the goal of sexual desire is "consummation and not romantic love." (363)(18)

Contrary to conservative ideologies now gaining ground, sexuality does not require any justification in romantic love or in stable partnerships sanctified by marriage. Pleasure is its own sufficient justification. But neither should same-sex desire necessarily be limited to episodic gratification "on the side." Love too has its rights.

No one can know for sure if, when, how or in what forms Arab LGBT communities and movements will develop.(19) In particular, no one knows for sure what proportion of Arabs who have sex with people of the same sex identity as lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual. But this is no argument against solidarity with them. Nor is it an argument for privileging those who have LGBT identities, as international movements tend to do - or those who have no such identities, as Massad does.

In the age of neoliberal globalization, power relations between colonizers - witting or unwitting - and colonized cut across LGBT movements, anti-imperialist movements and for that matter the Marxist left. The fact remains that all the victims of oppression today badly need allies in the imperialist countries, who have access to far greater resources.

Cultural sensitivity and respect for self-determination are essential. But neither should stand in the way of solidarity with the victims of repression by regimes whose vicious sexual puritanism often goes hand in hand with their subservience to an imperial agenda.

Notes

1 Older readers may remember Midge Decter's notorious article "The Boys on the Beach," Commentary vol. 70 no. 3 (Sept. 1980).

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2 The chapter of *Desiring Arabs* that sets out Massad's criticisms of international LGBT groups is based on his article "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture*

vol. 14 no. 2 (Spring 2002).

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3 James Kirchick, "Queer Theory: The Columbia Professor Who Also Doesn't Think Gay People Exist in the Middle East," *The New Republic* online (www.tnr.com), Oct. 15, 2007.

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4 Brian Whitaker, "Distorting Desire," *Gay City News*, Sept. 13, 2007.

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5 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, 322.

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6 According to Iwan van Grinsven, *Limits to Desire: Obstacles to Gay Male Identity and Subculture Formation in Cairo, Egypt*, Nijmegen: n.p. 1997, 37, some Egyptian men speak of 'face-to-face' sex, meaning that anal intercourse is avoided so as to evade issues of masculine/feminine or active/passive roles.

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7 Will Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray, "Introduction," in Murray and Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, 4-6. Roscoe also gives an interesting account of the sexual culture of pre-Islamic Arabia, and of the emergence of the sexual culture of classic Arab civilization from the interaction between this pre-Islamic culture and sexual cultures of the Persian, Byzantine and Western Roman empires that the Arabs conquered: Roscoe, "Precursors of Islamic Male Homosexualities," in *Islamic Homosexualities*, 55-86. Given the influence of pre-rabbinical Judaism on Islam, the sexual culture of pre-Islamic Arabia might be illuminated by a comparison with the sexual culture of the ancient Hebrews: see Daniel Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality'?" *Journal for the History of Sexuality* vol. 5 no. 3 (1995), 333-55.

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8 I summarize the evidence in my "Introduction: Remapping Sexualities," in Peter Drucker (ed.), *Different Rainbows*, London: GMP, 2000, 24-25.

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9 See my "Introduction" to *Different Rainbows*, 29.

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10 Doug Ireland, "Iraqi Gay Activist Arrested, Tortured," *Gay City News*, May 3, 2007.

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11 In an otherwise vigorous defense of Desiring Arabs, Yoshie Furuhashi has commented that Massad has "relatively little to say about the role [of] the emergence and development of the capitalist mode of production, with its tendency to proletarianize, urbanize, atomize, and commodify people, in the emergence and development of [a] discourse of sexuality under capitalist modernity."

(<http://montages.blogspot.com/2007/10/desiring-arabs.html>)

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12 I make this argument at length in the "Introduction" to *Different Rainbows*, 14-25.

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13 Gilbert Achcar, "The Arab Despotic Exception," in *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, 69-74.

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14 On its face, the term "Gay International" suggests an analogy with the Communist International. It seems like a curious choice of epithet for someone like Massad, who seems in some sense to identify with the left.

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15 See my "Introduction" to *Different Rainbows*, 31-32, 34.

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16 www.helem.net; "Lebanese gay group helping refugee relief," *Pink News*, September 1, 2006.

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17 Haneen Maikey, "Rainbow over Palestine," guardian.co.uk, March 10, 2008.

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18 Massad's assertion may not do justice even to the classical Arab conception of sexual desire. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, 27, notes for example, "In Islamic Sufi literature homosexual eroticism was a major metaphorical expression of the spiritual relationship between God and man."

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19 In my conclusion, "Reinventing Liberation," to *Different Rainbows*, 217-20, I suggest that LGBT movements in the dependent world are likely to often be alliances of a range of groups with distinctive sexualities and identities.

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ATC 137, November-December 2008

"Excerpts of the resolution Role and Tasks of the Fourth International"

Fourth International/16th World Congress: Role and Tasks of the Fourth International

1. We are in a context marked by an unprecedented combination of a global economic crisis and a worldwide ecological crisis, a multidimensional crisis without precedent, that puts capitalist and patriarchal civilization into crisis. This is a major turning point. This dual crisis shows the failure of the capitalist system and puts on the agenda the reorganization and reconstruction of an anti-capitalist workers' movement.

The social and economic attacks and neoliberal counter reforms against the popular classes are going to increase. These attacks will particularly affect women, given that their situation is worse to start with (much higher rates of poverty, unemployment and casualization than men) and they will have to compensate for the cuts in public services and social allowances increasing their unpaid work within the family. There will be more wars and conflicts.

Religious fundamentalism will be increasingly used as the ideological underpinning both for attacks on the popular classes, targeting notably women's control of their own bodies, and wars and conflicts between nations and ethnic groups. A non-Eurocentric approach to sexual oppression and emancipation is important to opposing both Islamic fundamentalism in particular and the Islamophobic ideology of "clash of civilizations" that helps fuel it. Ecological catastrophes will hit millions of people particularly in the poorer regions, making the situation of women who are heads of family disproportionately worse.

A new historical period is on the horizon.

[...]

The crisis has a particularly harsh impact on women and on sexual minorities that are excluded from the family (or choose not to live in it) and are thus cut off from its resources. The crisis is driving many of the most marginalized people, such as transgenders, into even deeper poverty. This is true especially in dependent countries where a welfare state is weak or non-existent.