

After Trump's election: To fight xenophobia, we must claim the legacy of this insurgent universality

In the US, Muslims don't need allies. We need comrades

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For the past decade and a half, my family has reacted to every terrorist attack with a special kind of anxiety.

Setting aside any concern about falling victim to an explosion, we cross our fingers and speculate creatively on the identity of the perpetrator. Perhaps, this time, it was simply a white paranoid schizophrenic. Or maybe a laid-off gun nut with no release valve for his rage. Or, better yet, a run-of-the-mill neo-Nazi who would direct public indignation in an appropriate direction.

Regrettably, the perpetrators of these attacks often turn out to be Muslims. The ensuing phone conversations with my parents — secular Pakistani immigrants whose piety does not extend beyond a distaste for pork — revolve around admonitions to be careful what streets I walk on and to avoid arguments with white people.

They're not just being overprotective. Since the San Bernardino shooting in 2015, hate crimes against Muslims, or those perceived as Muslims, rose 78 percent [1].

After the shooting in Florida, Aziz Ansari described in the *New York Times* [2] how such anxieties were amplified by the hate speech of now president-elect Donald Trump. "It makes me afraid for my family," Ansari wrote, and remembered the months after September 11 when it had become routine to walk down the street and be called a terrorist by a stranger.

Already the 2000 election of George W. Bush — one that liberals today, gnashing their teeth over the Electoral College and the white voter, are fond of recalling — had put us on alert. But the collapse of the Twin Towers, which we watched over and over again that day in school with disbelief, seemed to reverberate in the everyday experience of immigrants who had, until then, learned to live with a culture of condescending and occasionally exclusionary toleration.

Now, for some of those tolerant individuals, the mere presence of my family became an issue of homeland security. I found myself being called "Osama" by my classmates while the teacher watched with either apathy or agreement. I was seized with unexpected fear at the ice cream shop

when an avuncular old white man suddenly scowled at the sight of my family and began ranting in our direction about “terrorists from Iraq” as we made our way to a table, threateningly wielding cones of cookies and cream.

I do not often recall these experiences. Although racial identity, for a time, framed most of my social interactions, white people grew more civilized in the years that followed, going as far as to elect a black man named “Hussein” as their president.

Recounting my experiences of discrimination seemed to draw reactions of pity — the pity of the condescending white liberal who is now called an “ally.” In the post-9/11 political reality I was coming to understand, this was clearly not a salutary reaction.

Just after the attacks, white Americans acted as though 9/11 represented a historically unprecedented scale of suffering. But I had spent my childhood summers in Pakistan, where I saw the streets filled with children like me — homeless, starving, too weak to bat the flies off of their bodies. Something in the political geometry was out of alignment.

I proceeded to arm myself with an obsessive reading of Noam Chomsky. I dove headfirst into the movement against the Iraq War which mushroomed at the nearby Penn State campus, and I became convinced that the only solution to the violence and suffering that assaulted us in our daily news was an end to American imperialism and therefore global capitalism.

I remain convinced. And I hope that after the experiences of Bush and Obama, the movement against Donald Trump will not be satisfied with partial solutions. But I worry that in the name of Muslim-Americans like me, white liberals will lose sight of the fundamental political responsibility they have today.

An Old Paradox

To be sure, the hatred of Muslim immigrants is a deeply political problem, but it is not a new phenomenon engineered by Trump and his associates. We are dealing with a problem as old the nation-state itself — the fundamental contradiction of the nation state, which, as Étienne Balibar has pointed out [3], implies the confrontation and reciprocal interaction “between the two notions of the people”: First, “*ethnos*, the ‘people’ as an imagined community of membership and filiation.” And second, “*demos*, the ‘people’ as the collective subject of representation, decision making, and rights.”

The first sense of the “people” internalizes the national border — it is the wall Trump hopes to build inside the American’s head. It is a feeling of belonging to a “fictive ethnicity,” an imaginary community that is constituted by national borders, but in reality consists of heterogeneous populations brought together by migration and movement — a plurality that is suppressed by the fantasy of a unitary racial and spiritual essence.

The second sense of the “people” is the political one, the one which appears to be manifested in our Bill of Rights. It is meant to apply regardless of identity; it is the song of the Statue of Liberty, which offers its freedoms to all the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, indifferent to their particularities.

The contradiction between these two notions is the original sin of the American nation. It is stated in the first sentence of its first official document: “We, the People,” says the preamble of the Constitution, written by slaveowners. As Balibar puts it:

“this construction also closely associates the democratic universality of human rights ... with particular national belonging. This is why the democratic composition of people in the form of the nation led inevitably to systems of exclusion: the divide between “majorities” and “minorities” and, more profoundly still, between populations considered native and those considered foreign, heterogeneous, who are racially or culturally stigmatized.”

This democratic contradiction came clearly to the surface in the French Revolution, with its Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. In 1843 a young Karl Marx subjected this declaration to critical scrutiny.

In “On the Jewish Question,” Marx was responding first and foremost to Bruno Bauer’s rejection of the demand for Jewish emancipation. According to Bauer [4], since this demand was based on the particular identity of the Jew, it was necessarily exclusionary. Political emancipation requires the universality of rights, and is thus incompatible with a particularistic identity.

Like Richard Dawkins [5], Bauer believed that it was only by casting off every religious superstition that oppression could be overcome. And also like Dawkins, whose fanatical hatred of Islam blinds him to any understanding of social and political inequalities, Bauer thought that the particularism of the Jewish minority was even worse than the more “evolved” religious consciousness of Christianity.

But Marx pointed out that secular political emancipation, the separation of church and state in the name of universal rights, had not actually overcome religious superstition in practice. Famously and prophetically, he cited the United States as an example. This was because rights were granted to individuals, Marx argued, and were therefore “the rights of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community.”

Protecting the individual’s rights in the political sphere did not mean the end of oppression by religious authorities and the owners of property. Therefore neither Bauer’s supersessionist universalism, nor the particularism of a minority, could lead to real, human emancipation. This would involve going beyond political emancipation and overcoming the exploitation of the market.

In *States of Injury* [6], Wendy Brown summarized Marx’s argument:

“Historically, rights emerged in modernity both as a vehicle of emancipation from political disenfranchisement or institutionalized servitude and as a means of privileging an emerging bourgeois class within a discourse of formal egalitarianism and universal citizenship. Thus, they emerged both as a means of protection against arbitrary use and abuse by sovereign and social power and as a mode of securing and naturalizing dominant social powers.”

This implies a “paradox” for liberalism that persists to this day. When rights are granted to “empty,” abstract individuals, they ignore the real, social forms of inequality and oppression that appear to be outside the political sphere. Yet when the particularities of injured identities are brought into the content of rights, they are “more likely to become sites of the production and regulation of identity as injury than vehicles of emancipation.”

In other words, when the liberal language of rights is used to defend a concrete identity group from injury, physical or verbal, that group ends up defined by its victimhood, and individuals end up reduced to their victimized belonging.

Brown shows how this logic undermines the logic behind an influential (albeit controversial) strand of feminism: Catherine MacKinnon’s attempt to redress the masculine bias of the law. MacKinnon’s anti-pornography feminism was based on the premise that the right to free speech conflicted with the right of women to be free from sexual subordination.

But as Brown asks, “does a definition of women as sexual subordination, and the encoding of this definition in law, work to liberate women from sexual subordination, or does it, paradoxically, reinscribe femaleness as sexual violability?”

Brown’s critique suggests that when rights are demanded by a particular identity, and the whole horizon of politics is the defense of this category, its members end up fixed as victims. Rights themselves end up reduced to a reaction to an injury inflicted on this victim. Their emancipatory content disappears.

So by presenting a legal argument which tries to give rights a substantial content, the content of particular identities, MacKinnon ends up producing a fixed category of “woman” — as helpless victims.

This is precisely the problem which comes to the forefront in the contemporary “Muslim question.”

Beyond the Liberty of Circumstance

In France, this question was debated in 2004 when the hijab was outlawed in public schools. The question then became: should the hijab be defended because Muslims are defined by the fact of wearing it? Does the freedom of the French migrant population consist in a defensive response to the injury inflicted by the banning of the headscarf?

Surely, the racism implied by the banning of a Muslim accessory should be condemned and attacked. But to the extent that this is framed as a defense of the rights of Muslims, the perspective of liberal tolerance traps the Muslims it claims to defend within a victimized identity rather than joining them in a project of collective emancipation.

We can take this discussion further by understanding the “paradox” of rights as a concrete political antagonism, as Massimiliano Tomba does in his comparison of the two versions of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man [7]. The first, 1789 Declaration, Tomba argues, grounds rights in a juridical universalism: “the universalism that comes from above and that implies a subject of right who is either passive or a victim who requires protection.”

Whether it is a woman to be protected from pornographic speech or a Muslim to be protected from religious prejudice, juridical universalism grants no agency to these subjects — their only political existence is mediated by their protection by the state.

The 1793 Declaration, in contrast, manifests an insurgent universality, one which is brought onto the historical stage by the slave uprisings of the Haitian Revolution [8], the intervention of women into the political process which had excluded them [9], and the demands of the *sans-culottes* for a right to food and life [10].

It “does not presuppose any abstract bearer of rights,” but instead “refers to particular and concrete individuals — women, the poor, and slaves — and their political and social agency.” Here we encounter a new paradox: “the universality of these particular and concrete individuals acting in their specific situation is more universal than the juridical universalism of the abstract bearers of rights.”

In 1799 Toussaint Louverture was asked by France to write on the banners of his army, “Brave blacks, remember that the French people alone recognize your liberty and the equality of your rights.” [11] He refused, pointing to the slavery which persisted in France’s other colonies, and

replied in a letter to Bonaparte: “It is not a liberty of circumstance, conceded to us alone, that we wish; it is the adoption absolute of the principle that no man, born red, black or white, can be the property of his fellow man.”

To fight the xenophobia rising with Trump’s election, we must still claim the legacy of this insurgent universality, which says that we are not passive victims but active agents of a politics that demands freedom for *everyone*. The view of a Muslim as the passive victim of an injury, who must be protected by the benevolence of a white liberal, is to be rejected as ruthlessly as the hate speech of Trump.

In Trump’s America, I am afraid. Because of my name, because of my skin color, I am in danger. But more profound than my fear is my anger. I am outraged not at the risk I experience as an individual, but at the sharpening and deepening of the obscene inequality of the capitalist system, at the daily violence of deprivation that will be visited most harshly on the poor of this country — including the white poor — and at the divisions cultivated among us by fear, anger, and manipulation, that prevent us from forming the collective power that can overcome our subordination.

I am not interested in allies, in sympathy or protection. I am interested in comrades, of every complexion, who will fight alongside me for a better world.

Asad Haider

P.S.

* “Trump and the Muslim Question”. Jacobin. 11.16.16:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/11/trump-and-the-muslim-question/>

* Asad Haider is co-editor of *Viewpoint*.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/us/politics/hate-crimes-american-muslims-rise.html>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/opinion/sunday/aziz-ansari-why-trump-makes-me-scared-for-my-family.html>

[3] <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s7628.html>

[4] <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521854979>

[5] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/new-atheism-old-empire/>

[6] <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/5715.html>

[7] http://www.academia.edu/22163376/1793_The_Neglected_Legacy_of_Insurgent_Universality_History_of_the_Present._A_Journal_of_Critical_History_Vol._5_n._2_2015_pp._109-136

[8] ESSF (article 39516), [Inalienable rights of all human beings: Haitian inspiration - On the bicentenary of Haiti's independence](#).

[9] ESSF (article v, [The Declaration of the Rights of Woman \(September 1791\)](#)).

[10] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sans-culottes>

[11] <https://archive.org/details/haitianrevoluti00stewgoog>