

The Muhammad Drawings II : The leading astray of the Left

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In 1989, the (Danish as well as European) Left massively supported Salman Rushdie, condemned to death by Ayatollah Khomeini for The Satanic Verses. In 2005, a large portion of the Left adopted an opposite position when a right-wing newspaper, the *Jyllands-Posten*, published twelve drawings representing Muhammad in order to put to test the hypothesis of the self-censorship of Danish artists fearing Islamist reactions. The *Jyllands-Posten* was then blamed for its "racist provocation" of "immigrants" whose "religious leaders" demanded an apology, a position that was to be maintained throughout the crisis.

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Last spring, I decided to write two articles on the Muhammad Drawings for *Vacarme*. The first entitled "The Small Country that Believed It Was Alone" was published in the Summer issue [and is posted on ESSF website: [Denmark: The little country that thought it was alone \(first part\)](#)] **. It explored Denmark's relationship with its immigrants and showed the recent success, in public opinion, of a form of racism (founded on the exaltation of a common Danish culture - more than on ethnicity) whose exclusive target was "Mahometans". In my opinion, this orientation triumphed in 2001 with the arrival in power of a government of liberals and conservatives who had admitted into their parliamentary coalition an extreme-right party, the Danish People's Party.**

The second article was originally supposed to deal with the affair of the drawings itself. A stay in Denmark, in October and November 2006, would help me put into perspective the written media data that I had collected. Initially, I had believed that the newspaper that instigated the scandal, the *Jyllands-Posten*, supported the new government. However, in the September 30, 2005 issue where the incriminating drawings were published, the newspaper did not attack Muslim immigrants nor Islam as such but only Islamists who, instantly, replied to this "provocation". They turned it into an international protest against the *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish government's supposed Islamophobia. They were supported by politicians and intellectuals who, whether left-wing or right-wing, denied that freedom of expression was at stake and that this affair had been blown all proportion by Islamists. To hear them, nothing would have happened if the newspaper had not wounded the religious feelings of "Muslims" and if the government had not had such a "racist" immigration and integration policy.

While in Denmark, I wished to meet certain protagonists in this affair, as well as intellectuals,

journalists or politicians who had understood the challenge to freedom of expression, particularly among the Left, where they were few in number. To initiate the debate, I sent them an English translation of "The Small Country that Believed Itself All Alone". To my astonishment, almost everyone blamed, with extreme severity, my use of the word "racist" to qualify their country - particularly in the article's subtitle, "Racism in Power". According to them, neither the Rasmussen Government nor even the Danish People's Party could be qualified as "racist", except perhaps, for the DPP, its Youth Section and several marginal individuals. One should, on the contrary, be thankful that its founder, Pia Kjaersgaard, had fought against the politically correct spirit of public debate on integration and initiated a new perspective on the problem. These criticisms call forth two remarks.

I would like to begin by pointing out that in "The Small Country that Believed Itself All Alone", I indeed naively confused the governmental position (Liberal-Conservative) and the Danish People's Party: a liberal integration policy does not, in fact, have to be "racist". I will give two examples. First, during the 2001 electoral campaign, Fogh Rasmussen cleverly announced his future immigration policy to a public of Pakistani immigrants, gathered together in the city hall to celebrate the Independence Day of Pakistan: "You are really welcome in Denmark if you want to work there and bring your contribution to society, not if you come here to live on the dole". And he defined the spirit of the laws he intended to promulgate: "New immigrants will have only limited access to social rights. But those who work and contribute to the system will have the same rights as the Danes". He was thoroughly applauded. Second example: throughout the 2001 campaign, and constantly since his election, Fogh Rasmussen has regularly rejected legislative proposals on immigration which he believes to be unconstitutional, or in contradiction with international treaties signed by Denmark, or finally simply discriminatory - aimed at a specific fraction of inhabitants defined by their ethnic origin. Most of these legislative proposals come from the DPP, but some of them come from the Liberal Party, which is the party of the candidate who became Prime Minister.

A second general remark has to do with my critics' inability to grasp the distinction between classical forms of racism (according to which the hereditary features of a group of people determine their behaviour) and a differential or cultural racism, that would, for instance, make the supposed religious belonging of "immigrants" into a destiny that would irrevocably determine their behaviour. They forcefully denied that Pia Kjaersgaard adheres to a classical form of racism, something if need be I can admit, but they reached a dead end concerning her constant commitment to the second. [1] As to Kjaersgaard's relations with her "dissident minority" (who are adepts of a classical racism), I maintain that the officials that I quoted do not specifically belong to the fringe, and that their leader defends them systematically whenever they are accused of being "racists".

However, this strange situation raises the following question: why do my critics - particularly those on the Left - refuse to recognize the existence of differential racism in Denmark? Everybody knows that for the last forty years it constitutes the most common (because it is the most palatable) form of racism in Europe. That we find it in Denmark should not come as a surprise. Moreover, the people I interviewed are not those naïve individuals who assure that the Danes revoked "racism", once and for all, in the 1930s.

My analysis posits that the objections to my work came after the Muhammad Drawings affair, after numerous debates that have progressively led those who criticize Islamists to reject any cultural racism and to build a political position that manages to avoid it. This is what needs to be recorded as the main result of these events.

My stay in Denmark took place at the very moment - in October and November 2006 - when these new orientations were expressed and received widespread public support, as Karen Jespersen and Ralf Pittelkow's book entitled *Islamister og naivister - et anklageskrift* (Islamists and Naivists. An Accusation Act) [2] demonstrates. Both authors have been eminent members of the Social-

Democratic Party: Karen Jespersen was Home Secretary and Ralf Pittelkow, an advisor to the Prime Minister before the fall of the Left in 2001. For years, they unsuccessfully opposed their government's bumpy policy in terms of immigration. As is frequent in Denmark, the Liberal-Conservative cabinet that followed the Social-Democrat one, leaned, among others, on a report by Karen Jespersen, written a short time before the 2001 elections, and on the files she had prepared in view of an alternative policy. [3] Jespersen's and Pittelkow's book, published at the beginning of September, was reprinted six times in three months. It fostered many public debates in which the old differential positions seemed to be abandoned: from now on, all foreigners would be welcome to Denmark as long as they accepted its fundamental political values, as defined by its Constitution.

While admitting that my critics have reached a turning point, I must however note that some of them - particularly male and female politicians - have not always made speeches devoid of any discriminatory connotations. [4] They were undoubtedly struggling with particularly difficult subjects.

The people I met already perceived the growing need for an immigration and integration policy that attacked the social causes of Islamism. It is a long list: immigrant concentration in districts according to ethnic origin; ghettoization of populations living exclusively on welfare (social rights); identical reproduction of traditional structures of authority between sexes and generations; ignorance of the Danish language; unemployment; ascendancy of fundamentalist imams; and activism of Islamist groups. Yet the compassionate discourse on immigration, carried forth during three decades by cultural relativists - from the Left as well as from the Right - constituted the first obstacle to the edification of such a policy. Left-wing intellectuals with whom I spoke never supported any form of racism, but nobody listened to them when they denounced Islamism. Others - more likely male or female politicians - have spoken loud and clear, but were instantly called racists and rejected towards the Right. [5] One must admit that only the Danish People's Party succeeded in getting these arguments through to the general public, even though they sprinkled them with differential racism.

Given the limited space of this article, I cannot demonstrate here the way the Muhammad Drawings affair led those who criticize Islamism to abandon, after several months, any form of racism: I will explain myself in a book underway on the subject. Let it suffice to present the beginnings of the affair as they appear to me today, after following developments up through the beginning of November 2006 and meeting some of the main protagonists in Denmark. [6]

Before the scandal

Kaare Bluitgen, a well-known Third-World supporter and extreme-left activist, has been living for thirty years in an immigrant neighbourhood where many Palestinian refugees reside. [7] He is a professor, he directs movies with a conscience, writes novels for teenagers (about young men scandalized by injustice and encouraged to join political struggles in Latin America or in Palestine) and essays on the multicultural aspect of Danish society. In 1998, his essay entitled *For the Benefit of Black People* explored the experience of his own children in the neighbourhood public school: they were too often discriminated against, beaten up and insulted by their immigrant peers. Bluitgen spoke about the progression of Islamists, their ceaseless attacks against fellow Muslims and the timorous silence of the immigrant population.

Kaare Bluitgen's political comrades instantly turn him into a traitor: "He has switched to the Right". Translation: he now refuses to demonstrate with Islamist groups to defend the rights of Palestinians. [8] According to left-wing Third-World supporters, there is no risk of political danger from Islamists

in Denmark. The handful of terrorists present in the country is the responsibility of the Danish special services, and the recent presence of young “descendants of immigrants” can only be explained by Danish “racism”. The rest are considered “persecuted ethnic minorities”: a compact group of “victims” lacking any internal divisions, and which needs to be defended in block. [9] The Left considers as such a lot of fictions created by “racists” and by the “Right”, any word that would ascribe to Islamists precise political objectives: on the one hand, terms used for immigrants issued from Muslim countries (to reduce them to the status of “Muslims” and oblige them to recognize the leadership of fundamentalist imams); on the other hand, terms used by the State and Danish society (to impose a separate management of “Muslims” and the public presence of a fundamentalist Islam).

In 2005, Kaare Bluitgen wrote a book aimed at teaching Danish teenagers Muhammad’s life, with the idea of contributing to the intercultural understanding. But the book illustrators’ trade-union, consulted on the choice of an illustrator, found no one who would accept to do it. One of them was told by an Islamist that Muhammad’s representation is forbidden to all, Muslims and non-Muslims alike; another feared ending up like the Dutch movie-director, Theo van Gogh, murdered in the Netherlands in 2004; a third remembered the misadventure of a university assistant in 2004, who was kidnapped and violently beaten up by Islamists because he had read aloud from the Koran during one of his classes.

This last event deserves closer examination. The university assistant was a Moroccan Jewish immigrant. He wanted to show his students the various ways in which a sacred text can be chanted. Not long after, a group of men kidnapped him on campus, imprisoned him in a van and beat him up. He was found the following night lying in his own blood. The aggressors were never identified but, what is far more serious, the University did not issue any kind of protest nor did it express any kind of solidarity towards the teacher. This attitude provoked the reaction of an intellectual of great repute, Fredrik Stjernfelt, the director of *Kritik*, and a professor of Nordic Literature at the University. He declared in the media that all Danish professors should read Koranic verses to their students, to show that they have the right to do so. [10] In the same article Stjernfelt gave the example of two cases of violence practiced by Islamists against immigrants coming from Muslim countries. But this theme was taken up by neither the Left nor the faculty – a great defender of cultural relativism and therefore closed the reality of Islamism.

Let’s come back to Kaare Bluitgen. In September 2005, he recounted in an interview with the Danish Press Agency his difficulties in finding an illustrator for his book. He has finally found one who, cautiously, refused to sign his work. That these fears may be provoked in artists by direct or fantasized threats is not relevant. What is, is that there exists in Denmark a fear of Muslim fundamentalists. The *Jyllands-Posten* sent a journalist to visit Kaare Bluitgen, who still smiles about this meeting: “In the beginning, he did not believe me. Not at all.” The writer sees in this reaction the proof that the newspaper was not in search of a sensational scoop. The editor in chief put to work a team of reporters who “carried out a precise and very professional investigation”. They discovered that Bluitgen’s case was not unique: for instance, the Danish translators of an essay by the Dutch member of Parliament Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who had herself been condemned by Theo van Gogh’s murderers, refused to sign their work. (The list of the cases of artistic self-censorship recorded at the time by the *Jyllands-Posten* has been repeatedly published in the media, so I will not insist).

At this point the newspaper decided to carry out an experiment: in order to put to test the hypothesis according to which Danish artists self-censored themselves out of fear of Islamists, the *Jyllands-Posten* wrote to the members of the trade-union of press cartoonists to ask them to draw Muhammad “as they saw him”, but not necessarily in the form of caricatures. Among forty cartoonists, twelve sent their drawings, which were published on September 30, 2005, together with a series of articles which constituted the series on “Muhammad’s Faces”.

“Muhammad’s Faces”

After the fashion of the government, the *Jyllands-Posten* has always spoken of immigration in a “firm and just” tone. [11] The newspaper salutes immigrants’ successes – which is why it won a European Union Prize in 2003 – and flays alive all those who put obstacles in the way of integration.

Fundamentalist imams are the first target. The newspaper underscores the refusals by some of them to clearly condemn Osama Ben Laden or Muhammad Bouyeri, Theo van Gogh’s murderer. It quotes those who on Internet websites contradict official discourses, including some particularly sexist sermons in mosques; or a meeting between imams and the Prime Minister, supposed to be dedicated to integration, and during which they ask him to censor the media. In short, when the Muhammad Drawings affair began, the *Jyllands-Posten* had already been at war with these fundamentalist imams for a long time.

On September 30, 2005, Carsten Juste, who is editor-in-chief, attacked them frontally in his editorial – them, and not Islam as such: “Muslims responsible for the public image of Islam – a huge majority, silent and reasonable – have a common feature: a gigantic, inordinate feeling of their own importance. This self-importance leads them to show exacerbated sensitivity in front of any demonstration of disagreement, which they interpret as a provocation.” Now, these “pompous mullahs” convert the criticism of their personal behaviour into an insult to the sacred Book, and it happens that some faithful, in good conscience, attempt to revenge the attack made to religion. It should be noted that the editor-in-chief questions artists’ self-censorship in a clearly defined conceptual framework: fundamentalist imams are neither all Muslims, nor Islam, nor even those who murder in the name of Islam. Admittedly, he considers that they remain stranded in the “age of Darkness”, and that they should take advantage of the Enlightenment in order to emerge: Western arrogance, by all means, but there is nothing here that can be considered, properly speaking, as “racist” or “Islamophobic”.

As for the Muhammad Drawings, I will only consider one of them, the most problematic: the Prophet’s head covered by a turban that contains a bomb with a lit wick. The *Jyllands-Posten*’s adversaries in Denmark (and in Europe), as well as public opinion in the Muslim world, have understood this as a “racist” message: Islam is terrorism. Three times in a row, Danish courts, have rejected this interpretation of the drawing. Its author, Kurt Westergaard, explained himself in an interview: even though an atheist, he feels no contempt towards Islam or the Prophet. However, he explained, “I have no respect for the version of Islam that serves as spiritual nourishment for terrorists. When parts of a religion evolve towards totalitarianism and violence, it is necessary to protest. We *cartoonists* have done it against all other “isms”, Nazism, Fascism, Communism. We must fight against this, with a caricaturist’s weapon – his pen and his indignation.”

Is he nevertheless a “Racist”? One just needs to meet the cartoonist for this hypothesis to crumble to pieces. [12] At the beginning of October 2005, when death threats began to rain on the cartoonists and fundamentalist imams began to demand excuses from the newspaper, Kurt Westergaard preferred to confront the situation. Instead of hiding, he invited Ahmad Kassem, one of leader Abu Laban’s deputies to his home. “We talked at length of the Middle-East, and we agreed on almost everything. Except concerning the *Jyllands-Posten*: this man truly believed that the newspaper was in the hands of very evil forces – the Jews and the Americans – and that he had to demolish it so that it would stop attacking Muslims. I told him that in 2003 it had been awarded the European Prize for Struggle against discrimination because of the way it had spoken of immigrants. This did not impress him. When I attempted to speak about the drawings, he closed himself up within his inner ghetto and slammed the door.” Westergaard understood then that the die was cast, that the drawings were going to provide a pretext for a political operation of great scope. Overall, he considers “normal, that people who do not like democracy live in a democracy” and, on October 14,

2005, he approved the pacific demonstration of “angry Muslims” against the *Jyllands-Posten*. But ever since, he has been angry – a political anger, which has protected him from fear.

I Jeanne Favret-Saada: [Denmark: The little country that thought it was alone \(first part\)](#)

Notes

1 Many of my interviewees even contest that the term “extreme-right” can be applied to the Danish People’s Party. I note, however, that the Copenhagen Post, which is not a leftist newspaper, often uses it.

2 Since I do not speak Danish, I have not read this book. I did however speak with Ralf Pittelkow at length on November 19, 2006.

3 In the same way, the new government has used files of the vanquished left-wing coalition to elaborate its employment policy, this famous flexi-security that the rest of Europe envies.

4 I have not met officials from the Danish People’s Party, in spite of an evening spent debating with Soren Krarup’s wife. I would guard against betting on the ideological future of the DPP: I record only that Pia Kjaersgaard has enjoined her militants to avoid using any discriminatory language.

5 Some have rushed, such as this Trotskyite who recently converted to the sombre prognosis of British ideologist Bat’Yeor on “Eurabia”, Islamized Europe. Others have maintained a left-wing position.

6 Concerning the sequence of events, cf. M. Sifaoui, *L’affaire des caricatures, Dessins et manipulations*, Eds Privé, Paris, 2006.

7 Meeting on November 3, 2006 in Copenhagen ; and *Le Monde*, February 5, 2006, “Kaare Bluitgen, celui par qui tout est arrive” (O. Truc).

8 During half of our conversation, we reviewed the story of our mutual political commitments: Kaare Bluitgen changed only on one point, the collaboration with Islamists.

9 On this issue, I owe a lot to M. Hélie Lucas, founder of the International Network of Solidarity/Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML).

10 Meeting of November 7, 2006 in Copenhagen. Fredrik Stjernfelt says that he considers himself politically “centre-left”.

11 Slogan of the Prime Minister’s electoral campaign in 2001.

12 Meeting of November 16, 2006.

P.S.

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