

# ***The Prophet and the Proletariat***

**Islamic Fundamentalism, Class & Revolution**



***The Prophet and the Proletariat.*** This is the title of a pamphlet published in 1994 by International Socialist, Chris Harman. It is erudite and scholarly – a thorough piece of work, you might think. He outlines the complexity of the Muslim world and the manner in which its internal religious differences and conflicts have constantly evolved in keeping with the movement of economic and social relations throughout history. This enabled him to argue that it is wrong “to simply refer to all Islamists as reactionary”:

So, although Islamism can be presented by both defenders and opponents as a traditionalist doctrine, based on a rejection of the modern world, in reality things are more complicated than this. The aspiration to recreate a mythical past involves not leaving

existing society intact, but recasting it. What is more, the recasting cannot aim to produce a carbon copy of 7th century Islam, since the Islamists do not reject every feature of existing society. By and large they accept modern industry, modern technology and much of the science on which it is based – indeed, they argue that Islam, as a more rational and less superstitious doctrine than Christianity, is more in tune with modern science. And so the “revivalists” are, in fact, trying to bring about something which has never existed before, which fuses ancient traditions and the forms of modern social life. This means it is wrong simply to refer to all Islamists as “reactionary”, or to equate “Islamic fundamentalism” as a whole with the sort of Christian fundamentalism which is the bastion of the right wing of the Republican Party in the US.

Chris Harman wrote at length about the nature of class relations in the Middle East and the manner in which capitalist development along with the pressure of American imperialism has disfigured Arab and Persian societies in the region.

Harman saw the similarities between Islamism and fascism, but viewed Islamism as more akin to Peronism in Argentina, than to Italy in the twenties or thirties of the last century. The absence of a large working class in the Middle East and North Africa had meant that mass movements aimed at limiting the power of trade unions and other labour organisations never arose, and Islamism, while rooted, like fascism, in the lower middle class, never fully developed a fascist character, apart from virulent Jew hatred, which Harman passed over with one brief mention.

Opposition to ‘imperialism’ was not simple either, the reliance of Islamism upon the petit bourgeois masses of shop keepers and small traders had often resulted in a contradictory and uncertain approach. This recognition of Islamism’s contradictory character led into Chris Harman’s ambivalence towards Muslim piety and absolutism that has resulted in the fulness of time in the left’s wretched appeasement of Islamism. This has been a step-by-step process of degeneration which started with Harman’s cautious analysis and has ended up with the absurdity of gay and lesbian groups marching in defence of Hamas, Hezbollah, and murderous Iranian mullahs. Religious leaders

who make no secret of their hatred of homosexuals and their determination to execute as many of us as possible.

In the 'beginning', in 1994, Chris Harman, the Socialist Workers Party, and the left more generally, understood their relationship to Islamism as tentative yet full of promise for the development of socialist consciousness among Persians and Arabs.

The Islamists are not our allies. They are representatives of a class which seeks to influence the working class, and which, in so far as it succeeds, pulls workers either in the direction of futile and disastrous adventurism or in the direction of a reactionary capitulation to the existing system – or often to the first followed by the second.

“The Islamists are not our allies.” Harman could not have been clearer, yet he left enough space for an apparently fertile connection between the left and the Islamists in which the socialists could benefit by pulling Muslim youth into the progressive camp led by independent socialist organisation. Harman’s entire position was based upon this expectation.

The Islamist youth are usually intelligent and articulate products of modern society. They read books and newspapers and watch televisions, and so know all the divisions and clashes within their own movements. However much they may close ranks when faced with “secularists”, whether from the left or from the bourgeoisie, they will argue furiously with each other – just as the pro-Russian and pro-Chinese wings of the apparently monolithic world Stalinist movement did 30 years ago. And these arguments will begin to create secret doubts in the minds of at least some of them.

Socialists can take advantage of these contradictions to begin to make some of the more radical Islamists question their allegiance to its ideas and organisations – but only if we can establish independent organisations of our own, which are not identified with either the Islamists or the state.

On some issues we will find ourselves on the same side as the Islamists against imperialism and the state. This was true, for instance, in many countries during the second Gulf War. It should be true in countries like France or Britain when it comes to combating racism. Where the Islamists are in opposition, our rule should be, “with the Islamists sometimes, with the state never”.

Harman was banking upon the growth of “serious

doubts in the minds of some Islamists”.

There is something tragic about this Marxist intellectual’s reliance upon “serious doubts” arising in the minds of Islamists; when over the years the only serious doubts that have arisen have been doubts on the left concerning how universal the universal values of the socialist tradition actually are. Doubts concerning the applicability or relevance of equal rights, the emancipation of women, of religious freedom, and even homosexuality, in the Arab and Persian worlds. Doubts among many progressives who see Islamist verities on cultural matters as negotiable, or worthy of respect.

As things have turned out the left has entered into solid alliance with Islamists on the importance of destroying of Israel, and the fight against Imperialism. The left has remained largely silent upon Muslim pietism, Muslim opposition to religious freedom, and what Tariq Ali has called the “cultural practices” of the Taliban, which of course he abhors, but regards as a second order issue.

So, it has been the fight against imperialism that has cemented the alliance between Islamists and socialists – everything else – all other matters that might divide them – have been set aside in favour of the war against the Jews and imperialism. It is the struggle against imperialism and its principal ally in the Middle East, the Zionist state, that has resulted in the alliance that Chris Harman warned against in the mid-nineties. It is here that the progressive left has embedded its hatred of the Jewish state, and confirmed its solidarity with those harbouring an enthusiasm for the Caliphate.

This striking degeneration amongst the progressive left has come about because of the left’s inability to build independent working-class organisations, either in the Middle East, or here in Britain. It is this failure of the progressive left that has resulted in their appeasement of Muslim pietism, and their loud chanting of slogans

promoted by Islamist reaction. The result has been the progressive left trailing along behind the Islamists with never a word of criticism aimed at Muslim communities of Islam or its key beliefs regarding religious freedom, the rights of women, or the position of homosexuals in society. The only thing that matters is their common hatred of the Jewish state, and the Western world, led by America.

This reactionary alliance between Muslims and progressives is now slipping out of the control of the Labour Party into the lap of the Green Party where the absurdity of the alliance is finally laid bare. The Green Party is clear about its belief in the rights of homosexuals, transsexuals, the equality of women with men, and its hatred of Zionism. It is only on this last issue that the fragile alliance between the Greens and Muslim 'community leaders' is based. Consequently, this alliance will come apart at the seams the minute that mosque leaders and Muslim organisations become strong enough to dispense with the progressive cover provided by the Green Party, and the left more broadly.

When this happens, the progressive left will find themselves without allies of any sort.

The only solution to this progressive degeneration is the fulsome rejection of Islamism and of Muslim pietism; *only the defence of the superior cultural values of the West will suffice*. Only the separation between theology and law – between 'church' and state – only the bold rejection of Sharia courts, of female genital mutilation, of cousin marriage, of child marriage, of the imprisonment or execution of homosexuals, or the enforced veiling of women, will prove effective in the struggle against the values of the Caliphate and the worldwide ambitions of *The Muslim Brotherhood*.