On Sunday, November 15, police respond to reports of gunfire at Place de la Republique, where people had gathered at a memorial for the victims of Friday’s terrorist attack. Believing there was a gunman among them, the crowd panicked, but it turned out to be a false alarm. (Jeff J. Mitchell / Getty)

Slavoj Zizek: In the Wake of Paris Attacks the Left Must Embrace Its Radical Western Roots

Zizek responds to his critics on the refugee crisis.

BY Slavoj Žižek

There should be no “deeper understanding” of the ISIS terrorists (in the sense of “their deplorable acts are nonetheless reactions to European brutal interventions”); they should be characterized as what they are: the Islamo-Fascist counterpart of the European anti-immigrant racists.

In the first half of 2015, Europe was preoccupied by radical emancipatory movements (Syriza and Podemos), while in the second half the attention shifted to the “humanitarian” topic of the refugees. Class struggle was literally repressed and replaced by the liberal-cultural topic of tolerance and solidarity. With the Paris terror killings on Friday, November 13, even this topic (which still refers to large socio-economic issues) is now eclipsed by the simple opposition of all democratic forces caught in a merciless war with forces of terror.

It is easy to imagine what will follow: paranoiac search for ISIS agents among the
refugees. (Media already gleefully reported that two of the terrorists entered Europe through Greece as refugees.) The greatest victims of the Paris terror attacks will be refugees themselves, and the true winners, behind the platitudes in the style of je suis Paris, will be simply the partisans of total war on both sides. This is how we should really condemn the Paris killings: not just to engage in shows of anti-terrorist solidarity but to insist on the simple cui bono (for whose benefit?) question.

There should be no “deeper understanding” of the ISIS terrorists (in the sense of “their deplorable acts are nonetheless reactions to European brutal interventions”); they should be characterized as what they are: the Islamo-Fascist counterpart of the European anti-immigrant racists—the two are the two sides of the same coin. Let’s bring class struggle back—and the only way to do it is to insist on global solidarity of the exploited.

The deadlock that global capitalism finds itself in is more and more palpable. How to break out of it? Fredric Jameson recently proposed global militarization of society as a mode of emancipation: Democratically motivated grassroots movements are seemingly doomed to failure, so perhaps it’s best to break global capitalism’s vicious cycle through “militarization,” which means suspending the power of self-regulating economies. Perhaps the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe provides an opportunity to test this option.

It is at least clear that what is needed to stop the chaos is large-scale coordination and organization, which includes but is not limited to: reception centers near to the crisis (Turkey, Lebanon, the Libyan coast), transportation of those granted entrance to European way stations, and their redistribution to potential settlements. The military is the only agent that can do such a big task in an organized way. To claim that such a role for the military smells of a state of emergency is redundant. When you have tens of thousands of people passing through densely populated areas without organization you have an emergency state—and it is in a state of emergency that parts of Europe are right now. Therefore, it is madness to think that such a process can be left to unwind freely. If nothing else, refugees need provisions and medical care.

Taking control of the refugee crisis will mean breaking leftist taboos.

For instance, the right to “free movement” should be limited, if for no other reason than the fact that it doesn’t exist among the refugees, whose freedom of movement is already dependent on their class. Thus, the criteria of acceptance and settlement have to be formulated in a clear and explicit way—whom and how many to accept, where to relocate them, etc. The art here is to find the middle road between following the desires of the refugees (taking into account their wish to move to countries where they already have relatives, etc.) and the capacities of different countries.

Another taboo we must address concerns norms and rules. It is a fact that most of the refugees come from a culture that is incompatible with Western European notions of human rights. Tolerance as a solution (mutual respect of each other’s sensitivities) obviously doesn’t work: fundamentalist Muslims find it impossible to bear our blasphemous images and reckless humor, which we consider a part of our freedoms. Western liberals, likewise, find it impossible to bear many practices of Muslim culture.

In short, things explode when members of a religious community consider the very way of life of another community as blasphemous or injurious, whether or not it constitutes a direct attack on their religion. This is the case when Muslim extremists attack gays and
lesbians in the Netherlands and Germany, and it is the case when traditional French citizens view a woman covered by a burka as an attack on their French identity, which is exactly why they find it *impossible to remain silent* when they encounter a covered woman in their midst.

To curb this propensity, one has to do two things. First, formulate a minimum set of norms obligatory for everyone that includes religious freedom, protection of individual freedom against group pressure, the rights of women, etc.—without fear that such norms will appear “Eurocentric.” Second, within these limits, unconditionally insist on the tolerance of different ways of life. And if norms and communication don’t work, then the force of law should be applied in all its forms.

Another taboo that must be overcome involves the equation of any reference to the European emancipatory legacy to cultural imperialism and racism. In spite of the (partial) responsibility of Europe for the situation from which refugees are fleeing, the time has come to drop leftist mantras critiquing Eurocentrism.

The lessons of the post-9/11 world are that the Francis Fukuyama dream of global liberal democracy is at an end and that, at the level of the world economy, corporate capitalism has triumphed worldwide. In fact, the Third World nations that embrace this world order are those now growing at a spectacular rate. The mask of cultural diversity is sustained by the actual universalism of global capital; even better if global capitalism’s political supplement relies on so-called “Asian values.”

Global capitalism has no problem in accommodating itself to a plurality of local religions, cultures and traditions. So the irony of anti-Eurocentrism is that, on behalf of anti-colonialism, one criticizes the West at the very historical moment when global capitalism no longer needs Western cultural values in order to smoothly function. In short, one tends to reject Western cultural values at the very time when, critically reinterpreted, many of those values (egalitarianism, fundamental rights, freedom of the press, the welfare-state, etc.) can serve as a weapon against capitalist globalization. Did we already forget that the entire idea of Communist emancipation as envisaged by Marx is a thoroughly “Eurocentric” one?

The next taboo worth leaving behind is that any critique of the Islamic right is an example of “Islamophobia.” Enough of this pathological fear of many Western liberal leftists who worry about being deemed guilty of Islamophobia. For example, Salman Rushdie was denounced for unnecessarily provoking Muslims and thus (partially, at least) responsible for the *fatwa* condemning him to death. The result of such a stance is what one can expect in such cases: The more Western liberal leftists wallow in their guilt, the more they are accused by Muslim fundamentalists of being hypocrites who try to conceal their hatred of Islam.

This constellation perfectly reproduces the paradox of the superego: The more you obey what the pseudo-moral agency that the sadistic and primitive superego demands of you, the more guilty you are of moral masochism and identification with the aggressor. Thus, it is as if the more you tolerate Islamic fundamentalism, the stronger its pressure on you will be.

And one can be sure that the same holds for the influx of immigrants: The more Western Europe will be open to them, the more it will be made to feel guilty that it did not accept even more of them. There will never be enough of them. And with those who
are here, the more tolerance one displays towards their way of life, the more one will be
made guilty for not practicing enough tolerance.

**The political economy of the refugees: Global capitalism and military intervention**

As a long-term strategy, we should focus on what one cannot but call the “political
economy of refugees,” which means focusing on the ultimate causes underlying the
dynamics of global capitalism and military interventions. The ongoing disorder should
be treated as the true face of the New World Order. Consider the food crisis now
plaguing the “developing” world. None other than Bill Clinton made it clear in his
comments, at a 2008 UN gathering marking World Food Day, that the food crisis in
many Third World countries cannot be put on the usual suspects like corruption,
inefficiency and state interventionism—the crisis is directly dependent on the
globalization of agriculture. The gist of Clinton’s speech was that today’s global food
crisis shows how “we all blew it, including me when I was president,” by treating food
crops as commodities instead of as a vital right of the world’s poor.

Clinton was very clear in putting blame not on individual states or governments but on
U.S. and EU long-term global policies carried out for decades by the World Bank, the
International Monetary Fund and other international economic institutions. Such
policies pressured African and Asian countries into dropping government subsidies for
fertilizer, improved seed and other farm inputs. This allowed the best land to be used for
export crops, which effectively compromised the countries’ self-sufficiency. The
integration of local agriculture into global economy was the result of such “structural
adjustments,” and the effect was devastating: Farmers were thrown out of their land
and pushed into slums fitted for sweat-shop labor, while countries had to rely more and
more on imported food. In this way, they are kept in postcolonial dependence and
became more and more vulnerable to market fluctuations. For instance, grain prices
skyrocketed last year in countries like Haiti and Ethiopia, both of which export crops for
biofuel and consequently starve their populations.

In order to approach these problems properly, one will have to invent new forms of
large-scale collective action; neither the standard state intervention nor the
much-praised local self-organization can do the job. If the problem will not be solved,
one should seriously consider that we are approaching a new era of apartheid in which
secluded, resource-abundant parts of the world will be separated from the starved-
and-permanently-at-war parts. What should people in Haiti and other places with food
shortages do? Do they not have the full right to violently rebel? Or, to become refugees?
Despite all the critiques of economic neo-colonialism, we are still not fully aware of the
devastating effects of the global market on many local economies.

As for the open (and not-so-open) military interventions, the results have been told
often enough: failed states. No refugees without ISIS and no ISIS without the U.S.
occupation of Iraq, etc. In a gloomy prophecy made before his death, Col. Muammar
Gaddafi said: “Now listen you, people of NATO. You’re bombing a wall, which stood in
the way of African migration to Europe and in the way of al Qaeda terrorists. This wall
was Libya. You’re breaking it. You’re idiots, and you will burn in Hell for thousands of
migrants from Africa.” Was he not stating the obvious?

The Russian story, which basically elaborates Gaddafi, has its element of truth, in spite
of the obvious taste of *pasta putinesca*. Boris Dolgov of the Moscow-based Strategic
Culture Foundation told TASS:

That the refugee crisis is an outcome of US-European policies is clear to the naked eye. ... The destruction of Iraq, the destruction of Libya and attempts to topple Bashar Assad in Syria with the hands of Islamic radicals—that’s what EU and US policies are all about, and the hundreds of thousands of refugees are a result of that policy.

Similarly, Irina Zvyagelskaya, of the oriental studies department at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, told TASS:

The civil war in Syria and tensions in Iraq and Libya keep fueling the flow of migrants, but that is not the only cause. I agree with those who see the current events as a trend towards another mass resettlement of peoples, which leave the weaker countries with ineffective economies. There are systemic problems that cause people to abandon their homes and take to the road. And the liberal European legislation allows many of them to not only stay in Europe, but also to live there on social benefits without seeking employment.

And Yevgeny Grishkovets, the Russian author, playwright and stage director, writing in his blog agrees:

These people are exhausted, angry and humiliated. They have no idea of European values, lifestyles and traditions, multiculturalism or tolerance. They will never agree to abide by European laws. ... They will never feel grateful to the people whose countries they have managed to get into with such problems, because the very same states first turned their own home countries into a bloodbath. ... Angela Merkel vows modern German society and Europe are prepared for problems. ... That’s a lie and nonsense!

However, while there is some general truth in all this, one should not jump from this generality to the empirical fact of refugees flowing into Europe and simply accept full responsibility. The responsibility is shared. First, Turkey is playing a well-planned political game (officially fighting ISIS but effectively bombing the Kurds who are really fighting ISIS). Then we have the class division in the Arab world itself (the ultra-rich Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Emirates accepting almost no refugees). And what about Iraq with its tens of billions of oil reserves? How, out of all this mess, does there emerge a flow of refugees?

What we do know is that a complex economy of refugee transportation is making millions upon millions of dollars profit. Who is financing it? Streamlining it? Where are the European intelligence services? Are they exploring this dark netherworld? The fact that refugees are in a desperate situation in no way excludes the fact that their flow into Europe is part of a well-planned project.

Sure, Norway exists

Let me address my so-called leftist critics who find my breaking of the above-mentioned taboos in articles published in the London Review of Books and In These Times problematic. Nick Riemer, writing in Jacobin, condemns the “reactionary nonsense” I am “promoting”: 
It should be obvious to Zizek that the West can’t intervene militarily in a way that avoids the “neocolonial traps of the recent past.” Refugees, for their part, aren’t wayfarers on someone else’s soil, present only under sufferance and, as such, the objects of “hospitality.” Regardless of the customs they bring with them, they should enjoy the same rights as the members of the diverse communities that make up Europe—a pluralism entirely ignored in Zizek’s astonishing reference to a unique “Western European way of life.”

The claim that underlies this view is much stronger than Alain Badiou’s *qui est ici est d’ici* (those who are here are from here)—it is more something like *qui veut venir ici est d’ici* (those who want to come here are from here). But even if we accept it, it is Riemer who entirely ignores the point of my remark: of course “they should enjoy the same rights as the members of the diverse communities that make up Europe,” but which exactly are these “same rights” refugees should enjoy?

While Europe is now fighting for full gay and woman’s rights (the right to abortion, the rights of same-sex married couples, etc.), should these rights also be extended to gays and women among the refugees even if they are in conflicts with “the customs they bring with them” (as they often obviously are)? And this aspect should in no way be dismissed as marginal: from Boko Haram to Robert Mugabe to Vladimir Putin, the anti-colonialist critique of the West more and more appears as the rejection of the Western “sexual” confusion, and as the demand for returning to the traditional sexual hierarchy.

I am, of course, well aware how the immediate export of Western feminism and individual human rights can serve as a tool of ideological and economic neocolonialism (we all remember how some American feminists supported the U.S. intervention in Iraq as a way to liberate women there, while the result is exactly the opposite). But I absolutely reject to draw from this the conclusion that the Western Left should make here a “strategic compromise,” and silently tolerate “customs” of humilitating women and gays on behalf of the “greater” anti-imperialist struggle.

Along with Jürgen Habermas and Peter Singer, Reimer then accuses me of endorsing “an elitist vision of politics—the enlightened political class versus a racist and ignorant population.” When I read this, I again could not believe my eyes! As if I hadn’t written pages and pages on criticizing precisely European liberal political elite! As for “racist and ignorant population,” we stumble here upon another Leftist taboo: Yes, unfortunately, large parts of the working class in Europe is racist and anti-immigrant, a fact which should in no way be dismissed as as the result of the manipulation of an essentially “progressive” working class.

Riemer’s final critique is: “Zizek’s fantasy that refugees pose a threat to the ‘Western’ ‘way of life’ that may be remedied by better kinds of military and economic ‘intervention’ abroad is the clearest illustration of how the categories in which analysis is conducted can open the door to reaction.” As for the danger of military interventions, I am well aware of it, and I also consider a justified intervention almost impossible. But when I speak of the necessity of radical economic change, I of course do not aim at some kind of “economic intervention” in parallel with military intervention, but of a thorough radical transformation of global capitalism that should begin in the developed West itself. Every authentic leftist knows that this is the only true solution—without it, the
developed West will continue to devastate Third World countries, and with fanfare mercifully take care of their poor.

Along similar lines, Sam Kriss’ critique is especially interesting in that he also accuses me of not being a true Lacanian:

It’s even possible to argue that the migrants are more European than Europe itself. Zizek mocks the utopian desire for a Norway that doesn’t exist, and insists that migrants should stay where they’re sent. (It doesn’t seem to occur to him that those trying to reach a certain country might have family members already there, or be able to speak the language, that it’s driven precisely by a desire to integrate. But also—isn’t this precisely the operation of the objet petit a [the unattainable object of desire]? What kind of Lacanian tells someone that they should effectively abandon their desire for something just because it’s not attainable? Or are migrants not worthy of the luxury of an unconscious mind?) In Calais, migrants trying to reach the United Kingdom protested against their conditions with placards demanding “freedom of movement for all.” Unlike racial or gender equality, the free movement of peoples across national borders is a supposedly universal European value that has actually been implemented—but, of course, only for Europeans. These protesters put the lie to any claim on the part of Europe to be upholding universal values. Zizek can only articulate the European “way of life” in terms of vague and transcendent generalities, but here it is in living flesh. If the challenge of migration is one of European universalism against backwards and repressive particularism, then the particularism is entirely on the part of Europe. … “The Non-Existence of Norway” isn’t a theoretical analysis, it’s a gentle word of heartfelt advice in the ear of the European bureaucratic class, one that’s not particularly interested in Lacan. For all his insistence on “radical economic change,” this epistolary structure ensures that such a change is, for the time being, entirely off the table. Hence the insistence that there is not, and can never be, a Norway. The capitalists do not intend to make one, and Zizek does not intend to address those that could. To which the Marxist response must be that if there is no Norway, then we’ll have to build it ourselves.

“Migrants are more European than Europe itself” is an old leftist thesis that I too have often used, but one has to be specific about what it means. In my critic’s reading, it means migrants actualize the principle—“freedom of movement for all”—more seriously than Europe. But, again, one has to be precise here. There is “freedom of movement” in the sense of freedom to travel, and the more radical “freedom of movement” in the sense of the freedom to settle in whatever country I want. But the axiom that sustains the refugees in Calais is not just the freedom to travel, but something more like, “Everyone has the right to settle in any other part of the world, and the country they move into has to provide for them.” The EU guarantees (sort of, more or less) this right for its members and to demand the globalization of this right equals the demand to expand the EU to the entire world.

The actualization of this freedom presupposes nothing less than a radical socio-economic revolution. Why? New forms of apartheid are emerging. In our global world, commodities circulate freely but not people. Discourse around porous walls and the
threat of inundating foreigners are an inherent index of what is false about capitalist globalization. It is as if the refugees want to extend the free, global circulation of commodities to people as well, but this is presently impossible due to the limitations imposed by global capitalism.

From the Marxist standpoint, “freedom of movement” relates to the need of capital for a “free” labor force—millions torn out of their communal life to be employed in sweatshops. The universe of capital relates to individual freedom of movement in an inherently contradictory way: Capitalism needs “free” individuals as cheap labor forces, but it simultaneously needs to control their movement since it cannot afford the same freedoms and rights for all people.

Is demanding radical freedom of movement, precisely because it does not exist within the existing order, a good starting point for the struggle? My critic admits the impossibility of the refugee’s demand, yet he affirms it on account of its very impossibility—all the while accusing me of a non-Lacanian, vulgar pragmatism. The part about objet a as impossible, etc., is simply ridiculous, theoretical nonsense. The “Norway” I refer to is not objet a but a fantasy. Refugees who want to reach Norway present an exemplary case of ideological fantasy—a fantasy-formation that obfuscates the inherent antagonisms. Many of the refugees want to have a cake and eat it: They basically expect the best of the Western welfare-state while retaining their specific way of life, though in some of its key features their way of life is incompatible with the ideological foundations of the Western welfare-state.

Germany likes to emphasize the need to integrate the refugees culturally and socially. However—and here is another taboo to be broken—how many of the refugees really want to be integrated? What if the obstacle to integration is not simply Western racism? (Incidentally, fidelity to one’s objet a in no way guarantees authenticity of desire—even a brief perusal of Mein Kampf makes it clear that Jews were Hitler’s objet a, and he certainly remained faithful to the project of their annihilation.) This is what is wrong with the claim “if there is no Norway, then we’ll have to build it ourselves”—yes, but it will not be the fantasmsic “Norway” refugees are dreaming about.

**Ritualized violence and fundamentalism**

Along these lines, in his attack on me, [Sebastian Schuller raises the question](http://inthesetimes.com/article/print/18605/breaking-the-taboos-...): “Is Zizek now going over to PEGIDA [Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident]?”

Schuller’s blog post even attributes a statement to me that, of course, I never made: “I no longer know any classes, only Europeans.” What we must do is move beyond the cliché of refugees as proletarians with “nothing to lose but their chains” invading bourgeois Europe: There are class divisions in Europe as well as in the Middle East, and the key question is how these different class dynamics interact.

This brings us to the reproach that, while I call for a critique of the dark underside of the Islamic right, I remain silent about the dark underside of the European world: “And what about Crosses in the school? What about the church tax? What about the diverse Christian sects with absurd moral ideas? What about the Christians who announce that gays will be barbecued in hell?” This is a weird reproach—the parallel between Christian and Muslim fundamentalism is a topic over-analyzed in our media (as well as in my books).
Be that as it may, let’s recall what happened in Rotherham, England: At least 1,400 children were subjected to brutal sexual exploitation between 1997 and 2013; children as young as 11 were raped by multiple perpetrators, abducted, trafficked to other cities, beaten and intimidated; “doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight, threatened with guns, made to witness brutally violent rapes and threatened they would be next if they told anyone, as the official report put it.” There had been three previous inquiries into these goings on that led to nothing. One inquiry team noted a fear among council staff that they’d be labelled “racist” if they pursued the matter. Why? The perpetrators were almost exclusively members of Pakistani gangs and their victims—referred by the perpetrators as “white trash”—were white schoolgirls.

Reactions were predictable. Mostly through generalization, many on the Left resorted to all possible strategies in order to blur facts. Exhibiting political correctness at its worst, in two Guardian articles the perpetrators were vaguely designated as “Asians.” Claims were made. This wasn’t about ethnicity and religion but rather about domination of man over women. Who are we with our church pedophilia and Jimmy Saville to adopt a high moral ground against a victimized minority? Can one imagine a more effective way to open up the field to UKIP and other anti-immigrant populists who exploit the worries of ordinary people?

What is not acknowledge is that such anti-racism is in effect a form of covert racism since it condescendingly treats Pakistanis as morally inferior beings who should not be held to normal human standards.

In order to break out of this deadlock, one should begin with the very parallel between the Rotherham events and pedophilia within the Catholic Church. In both cases, we are dealing with organized—ritualized even—collective activity. In the case of Rotherham, another parallel may be even more pertinent. One of the terrifying effects of the non-contemporaneity of different levels of social life is the rise of systematic violence against women. Violence that is specific to a certain social context is not random violence but systematic—it follows a pattern and transmits a clear message. While we were right to be terrified at the gang rapes in India, as Arundhati Roy pointed out, the cause of the unanimous moral reaction was that the rapists were poor and from lower strata. Nonetheless, the world-wide echo of violence against women is suspicious, so, perhaps, it would be worthwhile to widen our perception and include other similar phenomena.

The serial killings of women in Ciudad Juarez at the border are not just private pathologies, but a ritualized activity, part of the subculture of local gangs and directed at single young women working in new assembling factories. These murders are clear cases of macho reaction to the new class of independent working women: The social dislocation due to fast industrialization and modernization provokes a brutal reaction in males who experience this development as a threat. And the crucial feature in all these cases is that the criminally violent act is not a spontaneous outburst of raw brutal energy which breaks the chains of civilized customs, but something learned, externally imposed, ritualized and part of the collective symbolic substance of a community. What is repressed for the “innocent” public gaze is not the cruel brutality of the act, but precisely its “cultural,” ritualistic character as symbolic custom.

The same perverted social-ritual logic is at work when Catholic Church representatives insist that these intercontinental cases of pedophilia, deplorable as they are, are the
Church’s internal, problem, and then display great reluctance to collaborate with police in their investigation. Church reps are, in a way, right. The pedophilia of Catholic priests is not something that merely concerns the persons who accidentally (read: privately) happened to choose the profession of a priest. It is a phenomenon that concerns the Catholic Church as an institution, and is inscribed into its very functioning as a socio-symbolic institution. It does not concern the “private” unconscious of individuals, but the “unconscious” of the institution itself. It is not something that happens because the institution has to accommodate itself to the pathological realities of libidinal life in order to survive, but something that the institution itself needs in order to reproduce itself. One can well imagine a “straight” (not pedophiliac) priest who, after years of service, gets involved in pedophilia because the very logic of the institution seduces him into it. Such an institutional unconscious designates the disavowed underside that, precisely as disavowed, sustains the public institution. (In the U.S. military, this underside consists of the obscene sexualized hazing rituals that help sustain the group solidarity.) In other words, it is not simply that, for conformist reasons, the Church tries to hush up the embarrassing pedophilic scandals: In defending itself, the Church defends its innermost obscene secret. Identifying oneself with this secret side is key for the very identity of a Christian priest: If a priest seriously (not just rhetorically) denounces these scandals he thereby excludes himself from the ecclesiastic community. He is no longer “one of us.” Similarly, when a US southerner in the 1920s denounced the KKK to the police he excluded himself from his community by betraying its fundamental solidarity.

We should approach the Rotherham events in exactly the same way since we are dealing with the “political unconscious” of Pakistani Muslim youth. The kind of violence at work is not chaotic violence but ritualized violence with precise ideological contours. A youth group, which experiences itself as marginalized and subordinated, took revenge at low-class girls of the predominant group. It is fully legitimate to raise the question of whether there are features in their religion and culture which open up the space for brutality against women without blaming Islam as such (which is in itself no more misogynistic than Christianity). In many Islamic countries and communities one can observe consonance between violence against women, the subordination of women and their exclusion from public life.

Among many fundamentalist groups and movements strict imposition of hierarchical sexual difference is at the very top of their agenda. But we should simply apply the same criteria on both (Christian and Islamic fundamentalist) sides, without fear of admitting that our liberal-secular critique of fundamentalism is also stained by falsity.

Critique of religious fundamentalism in Europe and the United States is an old topic with endless variation. The very pervasiveness of the self-satisfactory way that the liberal intelligentsia make fun of fundamentalists covers up the true problem, which is its hidden class dimension. The counterpart of this “making-fun-of” is the pathetic solidarity with the refugees and the no less false and pathetic self-humiliation of our self-admonition. The real task is to build bridges between “our” and “their” working classes. Without this unity (which includes the critique and self-critique of both sides) class struggle proper regresses into a clash of civilizations. That’s why yet another taboo should be left behind.

The worries and cares of so-called ordinary people affected by the refugees are oft dismissed as an expression of racist prejudices if not outright neo-Fascism. Should we
really allow PEGIDA & company to be the only way open to them?

Interestingly, the same motif underlies the “radical” leftist critique of Bernie Sanders: What bothers his critics is precisely his close contact with small farmers and other working people in Vermont, who usually give their electoral support to Republican conservatives. Sanders is ready to listen to their worries and cares, not dismiss them as racist white trash.

**Where does the threat come from?**

Listening to ordinary people’s worries, of course, in no way implies that one should accept the basic premise of their stance—the idea that threats to their way of life comes from outside, from foreigners, from “the other.” The task is rather to teach them to recognize their own responsibility for their future. To explain this point, let’s take an example from another part of the world.

*Udi Aloni’s* new film *Junction 48* (upcoming in 2016) deals with the difficult predicament of young “Israeli Palestinians” (Palestinians descended from the families that remained in Israel after 1949), whose everyday life involves a continuous struggle at two fronts—against Israeli state oppression as well as fundamentalist pressures from within their own community. The main role is played by Tamer Nafar, a well-known Israeli-Palestinian rapper, who, in his music, mocks the tradition of the “honor killing” of Palestinian girls by their Palestinian families. A strange thing happened to Nafar during a recent visit to the United States. At UCLA after Nafar performed his song protesting “honor killings,” some anti-Zionist students reproached him for promoting the Zionist view of Palestinians as barbaric primitives. They added that, if there are any honor killings, Israel is responsible for them since the Israeli occupation keeps Palestinians in primitive, debilitating conditions. Here is Nafar’s dignified reply: "When you criticize me you criticize my own community in English to impress your radical professors. I sing in Arabic to protect the women in my own hood."

An important aspect of Nafar’s position is that he is not just protecting Palestinian girls from family terror he is allowing them to fight for themselves—to take the risk. At the end of Aloni’s film, after the girl decides to perform at a concert against her family’s wishes, and the film ends in a dark premonition of honor killing.

In Spike Lee’s film on *Malcolm X* there is a wonderful detail: After Malcolm X gives a talk at a college, a white student girl approaches him and asks him what she can do to help the black struggle. He answers: “Nothing.” The point of this answer is not that whites should just do nothing. Instead, they should first accept that black liberation should be the work of the blacks themselves, not something bestowed on them as a gift by the good white liberals. Only on the basis of this acceptance can they do something to help blacks. Therein resides Nafar’s point: Palestinians do not need the patronizing help of Western liberals, and they need even less the silence about “honor killing” as part of the Western Left’s “respect” for Palestinian way of life. The imposition of Western values as universal human rights and the respect for different cultures, independent of the horrors sometimes apart of these cultures, are two sides of the same ideological mystification.

In order to really undermine homeland xenophobia against foreign threats, one should reject its very presupposition, namely that every ethnic group has its own proper
“Nativia.” On Sept. 7, 2015, Sarah Palin gave an interview to Fox News with Fox and Friends host Steve Doocy:

“I love immigrants. But like Donald Trump, I just think we have too darn many in this country. Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native-Americans—they’re changing up the cultural mix in the United States away from what it used to be in the days of our Founding Fathers. I think we should go to some of these groups and just ask politely: “Would you mind going home? Would you mind giving us our country back?”

“Sarah you know I love you,” Doocy interjected, “And I think that’s a great idea with regards to Mexicans. But where are the Native Americans supposed to go? They don’t really have a place to go back to do they?”

Sarah replied: “Well I think they should go back to Nativia or wherever they came from. The liberal media treats Native Americans like they’re gods. As if they just have some sort of automatic right to be in this country. But I say if they can’t learn to get off those horses and start speaking American, then they should be sent home too.”

Unfortunately, we immediately learned that this story—too good to be true—was a hoax brilliantly performed by Daily Currant. However, as they say, “Even if it’s not true, it is well conceived.” In its ridiculous nature, it brought out the hidden fantasy that sustains the anti-immigrant vision: In today’s chaotic global world there is a “Nativia” to which people who bother us properly belong. This vision was realized in apartheid South Africa in the form of Bantustans—territories set aside for black inhabitants. South African whites created the Bantustans with the idea of making them independent, thereby ensuring that black South Africans would lose their citizenship rights in the remaining white-controlled areas of South Africa. Although Bantustans were defined as the “original homes” of the black peoples of South Africa, different black groups were allocated to their homelands in a brutally arbitrary way. Bantustans amounted to 13 percent of the country’s land carefully selected not to contain any important mineral reserves—the resource-rich remainder of the country would then be in the hands of the white population. The Black Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 formally designated all black South Africans as citizens of the homelands, even if they lived in “white South Africa,” and cancelled their South African citizenship. From the standpoint of apartheid, this solution was ideal: Whites possessed most of the land while blacks were proclaimed foreigners in their own country and treated as guest workers who could, at any point, be deported back to their “homeland.” What cannot but strike the eye is the artificial nature of this entire process. Black groups were suddenly told that an unattractive and infertile piece of land was their “true home.” And today, even if a Palestinian state were to emerge on the West Bank, would it not be precisely such a Bantustan, whose formal “independence” would serve the purpose of liberating the Israeli government from any responsibility for the welfare of the people living there.

But we should also add to this insight that the multiculturalist or anti-colonialist’s defense of different “ways of life” is also false. Such defenses cover up the antagonisms within each of these particular ways of life by justifying acts of brutality, sexism and racism as expressions of a particular way of life that we have no right to measure with foreign, i.e. Western values. Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe’s talk at the UN general assembly is a typical anti-colonialist defense used as a justification for brutal
homophobia:

Respecting and upholding human rights is the obligation of all states, and is enshrined in the United Nations charter. Nowhere does the charter arrogate the right to some to sit in judgment over others, in carrying out this universal obligation. In that regard, we reject the politicization of this important issue and the application of double standards to victimize those who dare think and act independently of the self-anointed prefects of our time. We equally reject attempts to prescribe “new rights” that are contrary to our values, norms, traditions, and beliefs. We are not gays! Cooperation and respect for each other will advance the cause of human rights worldwide. Confrontation, vilification, and double-standards will not.

What can Mugabe’s emphatic claim “We are not gays!” mean with regard to the fact that, for certain, there are many gays also in Zimbabwe? It means, of course, that gays are reduced to an oppressed minority whose acts are often directly criminalized. But one can understand the underlying logic: The gay movement is perceived as the cultural impact of globalization and yet another way globalization undermines traditional social and cultural forms such that the struggle against gays appears as an aspect of the anti-colonial struggle.

Does the same not hold for, say, Boko Haram? For certain Muslims the liberation of women appears as the most visible feature of the destructive cultural impact of capitalist modernization. Therefore, Boko Haram, which can be roughly and descriptively translated as “Western education [of women specifically] is forbidden,” can perceive itself as a way of fighting the destructive impact of modernization when it imposes hierarchic regulation between the two sexes.

The enigma is thus: Why do Muslim extremists, who were undoubtedly exposed to exploitation, domination, and other destructive and humiliating aspects of colonialism, target what is (for us, at least) the best part of the Western legacy—our egalitarianism and personal freedoms? The obvious answer could be that their target is well-chosen: What makes the liberal West so unbearable is that they not only practice exploitation and violent domination, but that, to add insult to injury, they present this brutal reality in the guise of its opposite—of freedom, equality and democracy.

Mugabe’s regressive defense of particular ways of life finds its mirror-image in what Viktor Orban, the rightwing Prime Minister of Hungary, is doing. On Sept. 3, 2015, he justified closing off the border with Serbia as an act of defending Christian Europe against invading Muslims. This was the same Orban who, back in July 2012, said that in Central Europe a new economic system must be built: “And let us hope that God will help us and we will not have to invent a new type of political system instead of democracy that would need to be introduced for the sake of economic survival. ... Cooperation is a question of force, not of intention. Perhaps there are countries where things don’t work that way, for example in the Scandinavian countries, but such a half-Asiatic rag-tag people as we are can unite only if there is force.”

The irony of these lines was not lost on some old Hungarian dissidents: When the Soviet army moved into Budapest to crush the 1956 anti-Communist uprising the message repeatedly sent by the beleaguered Hungarian leaders to the West was: “We are defending Europe here.” (Against the Asiatic Communists, of course.) Now, after Communism collapsed, the Christian-conservative government paints as its main
enemy Western multi-cultural consumerist liberal democracy for which today’s Western Europe stands, and calls for a new more organic communitarian order to replace the “turbulent” liberal democracy of the last two decades. Orban already expressed his sympathies towards cases of “capitalism with Asian values” like Putin’s Russia, so if the European pressure on Orban continues we can easily imagine him sending the message to the East: “We are defending Asia here!” (And, to add an ironic twist, are, from the West European racist perspective, today’s Hungarians not descendants of the early medieval Huns—Attila is even today a popular Hungarian name.)

Is there a contradiction between these two Orbans: Orban the friend of Putin who resents the liberal-democratic West and Orban the defender of Christian Europe? There is not. The two faces of Orban provide the proof (if needed) that the principal threat to Europe is not Muslim immigration but its anti-immigrant, populist defenders.

So what if Europe should accept the paradox that its democratic openness is based on exclusion. In other words, there is “no freedom for the enemies of freedom,” as Robespierre put it long ago? In principle, this is, of course, true, but it is here that one has to be very specific. In a way, Norway’s mass murderer Andres Breivik was right in his choice of target: He didn’t attack the foreigners but those within his own community who were too tolerant towards intruding foreigners. The problem is not foreigners—it is our own (European) identity.

Although the ongoing crisis of the European Union appears as a crisis of economy and finances, it is in its fundamental dimension an ideological-political crisis. The failure of referendums concerning the EU constitution a couple of years ago gave a clear signal that voters perceived the European Union as a “technocratic” economic union, lacking any vision which could mobilize people. Till the recent wave of protests from Greece to Spain, the only ideology able to mobilize people has been the anti-immigrant defense of Europe.

There is an idea circulating in the underground of the disappointed radical Left that is a softer reiteration of the predilection for terrorism in the aftermath of the 1968 movement: the crazy idea that only a radical catastrophe (preferably an ecological one) can awaken masses and thus give a new impetus to radical emancipation. The latest version of this idea relates to the refugees: only an influx of a really large number of refugees (and their disappointment since, obviously, Europe will not be able to satisfy their expectations) can revitalize the European radical Left.

I find this line of thought obscene: notwithstanding the fact that such a development would for sure give an immense boost to anti-immigrant brutality, the truly crazy aspect of this idea is the project to fill in the gap of the missing radical proletarians by importing them from abroad, so that we will get the revolution by means of an imported revolutionary agent.

This, of course, in no way entails that we should content ourselves with liberal reformism. Many leftist liberals (like Habermas) who bemoan the ongoing decline of the EU seem to idealize its past: The “democratic” EU the loss of which they bemoan never existed. Recent EU policies, such as those imposing austerity on Greece, are just a desperate attempt to make Europe fit for new global capitalism. The usual Left-liberal critique of the EU—it’s basically OK, except for a “democratic deficit”—betrays the same naivety as the critics of ex-Communist countries who basically supported them, except for the complaint about the lack of democracy: In both cases, the “democratic deficit” is
and was a necessary part of the global structure.

But here, I am even more of a skeptical pessimist. When I was recently answering questions from the readers of Süddeutsche Zeitung, Germany’s largest daily, about the refugee crisis, the question that attracted by far the most attention concerned precisely democracy, but with a rightist-populist twist: When Angela Merkel made her famous public appeal inviting hundreds of thousands into Germany, which was her democratic legitimation? What gave her the right to bring such a radical change to German life without democratic consultation? My point here, of course, is not to support anti-immigrant populists, but to clearly point out the limits of democratic legitimation. The same goes for those who advocate radical opening of the borders: Are they aware that, since our democracies are nation-state democracies, their demand equals suspension of—in effect imposing a gigantic change in a country’s status quo without democratic consultation of its population? (Their answer would have been, of course, that refugees should also be given the right to vote—but this is clearly not enough, since this is a measure that can only happen after refugees are already integrated into the political system of a country.) A similar problem arises with the calls for transparency of the EU decisions: what I fear is that, since in many countries the majority of the public was against the Greek debt reduction, rendering EU negotiations public would make representatives of these countries advocate even tougher measures against Greece.

We encounter here the old problem: What happens to democracy when the majority is inclined to vote for racist and sexist laws? I am not afraid to conclude: Emancipatory politics should not be bound a priori by formal-democratic procedures of legitimation. No, people quite often do NOT know what they want, or do not want what they know, or they simply want the wrong thing. There is no simple shortcut here.

We definitely live in interesting times.

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