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How the Left Failed France's Muslims

By Walden Bello

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From Germany to Belgium to France, European countries have been on a manhunt for terrorists in the wake of January's shootings at the French satirical paper *Charlie Hebdo* and a Parisian kosher supermarket. The pursuit has been especially intense in Belgium, where officials describe their targets as jihadist sleeper cells about to mount new terrorist attacks.

But while top forces have been mobilized against migrants who have supposedly left Europe to train with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), only to return and wreak havoc in Europe, there's another explanation for recent attacks.

The real breeding ground for extremism stems from the treatment of immigrant groups within Europe. Racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination have driven a generation of young migrants to radical movements as a solution to an absence of job prospects, poor education, deteriorated neighborhoods, lack of respect, and repeated bouts in jail. Ironically, the crackdown on these communities in the aftermath of the attacks could potentially escalate the problem.

Rather than focus its attention on outsized warnings about terrorists being trained abroad, European countries would do well to oppose the anti-immigrant movements at home and promote left that can organize not only the traditional working class, but immigrants as well.

Fanning the Flames

The fear coursing through the public, and motivating public officials, is not surprising.

After all, the western media have painted an image of thousands of homegrown jihadists returning to Europe, to sow terror after they've received military training in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria at the hands of al-Qaeda and ISIS. CNN, among the most sensationalistic of the media sources, has warned its global audience that "as many as 20 sleeper cells of between 120 and 180 people could be ready to strike in France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands." And, as the narrative goes, European security agencies are barely able to follow up on them.

The sense of entering an exceptional period has been reinforced through high-profile media appearances by so-called security experts like U.S. Senator John McCain, Interpol chief Jürgen Stock, and former CIA chief Leon Panetta.

McCain has declared the threat to the West so great that only deploying American "boots on the ground" to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria will stem the terrorist tide in the West. Stock has urged hitting suspected terrorists "before they hit you." And Panetta has said that the terrorist assault is now entering "a much more dangerous chapter" that will require more coordinated surveillance and action on the part of U.S. and European security forces. He has warned that ISIS and al-Qaeda "are engaged in a much more aggressive effort to conduct violence not only in Europe, but I think it's a matter of time before they direct it at the United States as well."

The Real Threat

How much is reality and how much is fantasy when it comes to the so-called sleeper cells remains to be sorted out. What is a real threat is the treatment of migrant communities in Europe, which — to borrow Panetta's words — is entering a new, more dangerous chapter.

In their official responses to the Paris events, Western European governments have mainly called for inclusiveness and assimilation for migrants and the Muslim community. As German chancellor Angela Merkel put it in a speech preceding a Muslim solidarity rally, "Islam is part of Germany.... I am the Chancellor of all Germans. And that includes everyone who lives here permanently, whatever their background or origin." Or as German president Joachim Gauck later said at the rally, "We are all Germany."

But despite these words of inclusivity, migrants throughout the continent fear that the real solution entertained by increasing numbers of white Europeans is the one proposed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. He declared bluntly: “We should not look at economic immigration as if it had any use, because it only brings trouble and threats to European people. Therefore, immigration must be stopped. That’s the Hungarian stance.” Ironically, Orban said this after attending the January 11 “Unity Rally” in Paris where thousands of Muslim migrants participated, bearing the slogan *Je suis Charlie*.

Although these dynamics have touched many countries, France has become the epicenter of the continent’s struggle over migration. It’s home to more than 4 million Muslim immigrants, the largest such population of any country in Europe. And in France, anti-immigrant forces have a particularly vocal spokesperson in Marine Le Pen, president of the far-right National Front Party.

In an op-ed piece published in the *New York Times*, she called not only for “restricting immigration” but also for “stripping jihadists of their French citizenship,” a proposal that many migrants took to apply to more than just active jihadists. What’s more, Le Pen’s National Front is on a roll, having won 26 percent of the vote, or 4.1 million votes, in the May 2014 elections to the European Parliament — a result French Prime Minister Manuel Valls described as “a shock, an earthquake.”

And Le Pen’s influence is likely to remain strong — recent polls predict she’ll be the frontrunner in round one of the 2017 presidential elections.

Missed Opportunities

The situation that led to the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks has been in the making for a long time, and addressing it earlier might have prevented some of the damage.

A decade ago, massive riots rocked the *banlieues*, the miserable suburbs of French cities. The 2005 riots lasted 20 successive nights and resulted in the burning of 9,000 vehicles and the destruction of 80 schools and many business establishments. They brought to the eyes of France and the world the desperation of migrant communities that inhabited the suburbs, and the tremendous resentment felt by their young people. As Mary Dejevsky of *The Independent* wrote, the riots offered a glimpse of the “France that is marooned between town and country, shut away behind ugly concrete walls, confined inside rotting tower blocks...the France that has failed.”

It was in these *banlieues* that the *Charlie Hebdo* gunmen — the Kouachi brothers Cherif and Said — were born, raised, and worked.

Things could have gone differently. The riots could have been taken as an opportunity to truly integrate communities that had been defined as French but lacked the opportunities available to other French people. Yet for ten years, hardly any substantial reform took place to speed up the migrants’ assimilation and improve their living conditions.

One reason for the lack of reform was, paradoxically, rooted in the ideology of the French Revolution. As a French immigration specialist noted, “Our approach to integration, based on the

concept that everyone is equal, is part of the problem. The idea that we are equal is fiction. Ethnic minorities are being told they do not exist.”

French official ideology is so intent on erasing particularities, that the government does not allow statistics to be broken down by religion or ethnicity. As Guy Arnold explains in his book *Migration: Changing the World*, the result of these ideological blinders is a “resentful society of supposedly equal French citizens that has grown up in the heart of France’s capital under the blind eyes of successive governments that have simply not wanted to know.”

The treatment of immigrants has been further complicated by another legacy of the French Revolution — the core principle of *laïcité*, or secularism. The separation of church and state has always been strict in France. But in recent years, it has bordered on intolerance, with a devastating impact on relations between Muslims and the dominant society.

Invoking the idea of *laïcité*, a movement drawing support from left to right was in 2004 able to pass a law banning the *hijab*, a scarf that covers the head and chest, in public schools. This was followed in 2011 by another law, again with support across the ideological spectrum, that criminalized hiding one’s face in public. That law effectively banned two other traditional items of clothing worn by Muslim women: the *niqab*, a veil that covers the entire face, and the *burqa*, an outer garment that covers the body from head to toe.

Some analysts claim that it was not so much the ideology of *laïcité* that was at fault. Rather, they blame doctrinaire ideologues and self-interested politicians who allowed the issue to run out of control. Those same public figures could have appealed to common sense and tolerance, allowing these regular items of female Muslim dress to become parts of a diverse sartorial scene, as in Britain and the United States.

Failure of the French Model of Assimilation

A third reason for the absence of reform was the smug conviction among technocrats that the “French model of assimilation” was on the whole working, and the 2005 riots were merely a rough patch on the road.

In the “French model,” according to analyst Francois Dubet, “the process of migration was supposed to follow three distinct phases leading to the making of ‘excellent French people.’ First, a phase of economic integration into sectors of activities reserved for migrants and characterized by brutal exploitation. Second, a phase of political participation through trade unions and political parties. Third, a phase of cultural assimilation and fusion into the national French entity, with the culture of origin being, over time, maintained solely in the private sphere.”

What the technocrats didn’t face up to was that by the 1990’s the mechanism sustaining the model had broken down. In the grip of neoliberal policies, the capitalist economic system had lost the ability to generate the semi-skilled and unskilled jobs for youth that had served as the means of integration into the working class for earlier generations of migrants. Youth unemployment in many of the *banlieues* reached 40 percent, nearly twice the national average.

And with the absence of stable employment, migrant youth lacked the base from which they could be incorporated into trade unions, political parties, and cultural institutions.

Impeded by ideological blindness to inequality, political mishandling of the Muslim dress issue, and technocratic failure to realize that neoliberalism had disrupted the economic ladder to integration, authorities increasingly used repressive measures to deal with the “migrant problem.” They policed the *banlieues* even more tightly, with an emphasis on controlling young males, and, most notably, escalated deportations.

When Nicolas Sarkozy took office as president of France in 2007, deportation became the preferred method of dealing with migrants. With his interior minister given free rein, a record 32,912 migrants were deported in 2011, a 17-percent rise from the year before. The minister, Claude Gueant, regularly engaged in explosive anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic rhetoric, linking Muslim immigrants to crime and drugs and asserting that Muslims praying in the street led to the “French no longer [feeling] at home.”

As the 2012 presidential elections drew near, Muslim- and immigrant-baiting became the means by which Sarkozy tried, unsuccessfully, to cut into Marine Le Pen’s right-wing base in order to stop Francois Hollande from being elected president in 2012.

Where Was the Left?

Notably absent as a decisive force shaping the politics of migration was the left.

That’s because, for the most part, the left had marginalized itself. The Socialists largely bought into the technocrats’ assimilation model, while the Communist Party of France oscillated between hostility to, and uneasy acceptance of, migrants. Failing to understand how capitalism was creating new strata of marginalized workers, the Communists largely stuck to representing, servicing, and protecting their traditional industrial working class base. Indeed, the Communist Party initially displayed hostility to migrants — the party leadership voted to limit migration in 1980, and local governments dominated by the party opposed migrants’ entry into housing projects. Currently, although the party now supports the regularization of undocumented migrants, the Communists and the migrant community view each other with mutual suspicion.

This is not to say that the militant left made no efforts to organize migrants. Small Maoist groups dabbled in mobilizing them in the 1970s and 1980s. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist project, many progressive activists shied away from working with unorganized sectors of the working class, which they regarded as a failed agent of change.

Meanwhile, other former activists evolved into union bureaucrats. A number of militants became active in the largely middle-class based anti-globalization movement, while some of the most promising progressive intellectuals, like the now celebrated Alain Badiou, moved from politics (he had founded the Marxist Leninist French Communist Union that had tried to organize migrants into class-conscious workers) to philosophy.

Over the last decade, one issue in particular eroded the already tenuous ties of the left to the Muslim migrant community. While all sectors could unite against racism and Islamophobia, a debilitating debate about the *hijab* split their ranks. Some viewed its use in public places as a violation of *laïcité*, while others defended the right of women to wear it.

As class politics ossified, ethnic, cultural, national, and racial themes came to dominate public debate both inside and outside the *banlieues*. For the youth of the *banlieues*, the vacuum created by the absence of the left had critical consequences. As Dubet put it, “the traditional character of the left-wing activist supporting the population’s collective protest is disappearing behind the religious figure embodying the alternative route for a dignified and moral life in a city ‘outside the real world,’ in a community protected from a society perceived as being impure.”

Reading accounts of their trajectory, one cannot but entertain the possibility that under other circumstances, Cherif and Said Kouachi would probably have been ripe for recruitment into a progressive movement. But with no figure on the secular left to provide guidance to their feelings of injustice and their idealism, others filled the vacuum.

In Cherif’s case, it was Farid Benyettou, a devout Muslim of Algerian descent, who tirelessly held discussion groups with impressionable young men, encouraged them to join the jihad, and set up, according to one investigative report, “a pipeline for young French Muslims” to travel to join Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda’s network in Iraq.

The rest, as they say, is history.

An Inevitable Ascendancy?

The real threat in France, and in Europe more broadly, is not the fantasy of a thousand jihadist sleeper cells poised to wreak havoc on society. The real threat is the repression of migrant communities by national security states. These have come with the backing of a significant segment of the majority population that has been mobilized by right-wing forces.

These forces are becoming increasingly sophisticated in popularizing their reactionary project. In her recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Marine Le Pen invokes the name of the liberal icon Albert Camus and deploys republican discourse: “We, the French, are viscerally attached to our *laïcité*, our sovereignty, our independence, our values. The world knows that when France is attacked it is liberty that is dealt a blow.... The name of our country, France, still rings out like a call to freedom.”

Some commentators have interpreted this new style as a move “into the mainstream.” They are mistaken. It is extremist intent masked in secular republican discourse. What is unmistakable, though, is the confidence with which Le Pen now speaks to the West. It is the confidence of one who feels she is in the antechamber of power.

Is the ascendancy of Le Pen and similar far-right leaders inevitable?

In France, as in Europe as a whole, the relationship between the dominant society and the migrant community is a story of missed opportunities, timid initiatives, and failures in leadership. It is also a story of abdication. A central actor — the organized left — that had played a role in the integration and amelioration of the conditions of earlier oppressed and exploited communities deserted the scene, leaving the field to racists and religious fundamentalists.

A secular left that could bridge the growing gulf between communities by asserting — beyond real differences of religion, culture, and ethnicity — the overriding common interest of people as workers that are exploited and divided by an aggressive neoliberal capitalism, and rally them around a transformative emancipatory project, is still Europe's best antidote to the brewing maelstrom. Whether the European left is up to the challenge, however, is another story.