



Homophobia and racism after the Orlando massacre

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The murder of 49 people at Pulse, a gay night club in Orlando, Florida is a horrific event which provokes the deepest sympathy both for the survivors and for the grieving families, partners and friends of the dead and injured. Our and solidarity should also be extended to LGBT communities throughout the United States, especially since the killings occurred in the middle of Pride month.

For all the media talk of Islamic terrorism; despite the killer Omar Mateen's self-identification with Islamic State (IS) and the latter's opportunistic claiming of him; this act does not appear to be part of an organised terrorist campaign by them or any other jihadist group. But neither is it sufficient to explain it away as the random action of a psychopathic individual, the kind of thing that cannot be guarded against.

It was a homophobic attack whose motivations originate in the homophobia and racism rampant in society. It is a blowback from the Nato Allies' wars on terrorism in the Middle East. It is the product of the fetishisation of individual gun ownership by a society in which huge numbers of people of colour continue to be shot and killed by law enforcement officers. Many of the victims were from Latino and black backgrounds.

Different progressive analyses of the massacre have emphasised one or other of these factors - individual psychology, sexual/identity politics, racism, homophobia and Islamophobia. The resultant horror was a conjuncture of all of them, a "perfect storm".

Only a powerful movement against US imperialism's interventions abroad, against racism and oppression of Muslims, black people, Latinos etc. at home, and against the ruthless capitalist exploitation that underpins and drives all these, will reduce and eventually end the remorseless procession of such outrages.

Homophobia

The scale of collective and individual hate crimes and assaults against LGBT people remains shockingly high despite the progress in terms of legal rights achieved in many western countries. In June 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled state bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional.

Yet sexual orientation still motivated roughly 20 per cent of hate crimes in 2013, according to the FBI. This shocking figure was an increase in proportional terms in the decade to 2014, and is a particularly high figure, given the relatively small size of the openly gay community compared to other targets of hate like black people.

The vast majority of such crimes, it should be pointed out, are carried out by white homophobes and not by Muslims, just as the majority of mass shootings have been carried out by white racists. Here we need to recall that it is just less than one year since the world was shocked by the killing of nine black worshipers at the Emmanuel Methodist Church in Charleston by Dylan Roof. This church was strongly identified with the 1960s civil rights movement.

This should remind us that religion can be a motive for legitimate resistance to oppression and this is no less a fact with regard to Islam. Nevertheless, religion, in its more conservative or fundamentalist varieties, also plays a role in generating or justifying homophobia.

Most world religions; Christianity, Islam, etc. have contributed to hatred and fear of gay people and sexuality or gender

roles that differ from heterosexual norms. This prejudice is also contributed to by 'secular' right wing pseudo-science, which stigmatises homosexuality as an offence 'against nature'. All these forces tolerate, if not incite, violence against people because of their sexual orientation. Politicians and public officials also play on this. Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick (R) responded on Twitter with the biblical quotation from Galatians 6:7, 'Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows'.

Indeed, the pathological hatred demonstrated by individuals like Mateen is socially conditioned, within the family, in the local, school and 'faith communities.' If he was, as a number of witnesses say, either gay himself, or conflicted over his own sexuality, this was obviously related to the hatred generated in society for gay people. It seems his father was religiously very conservative, and had praised the Afghan Taliban. Mateen's former wife says she several times heard his father accuse his son of being gay.

Such individuals have been brought up to regard with horror their own sexual drives, fearing the reaction of their family or co-religionists. In most cases, this leads to a life of internal torment. In extreme cases, individuals can be driven to seeking 'redemption' through 'martyrdom' i.e. by killing others and in the process being killed themselves.

The report that he beat his wife during the four months of their marriage before she was rescued by her own family shows that homophobia is invariably linked to the oppression of women, and therefore to norms about gender and sexual behaviour. Even though the vast majority of priests and pastors, rabbis and imams, do not encourage killings or assaults, their sanctification of such norms contributes mightily to generating misery and guilt amongst LGBT people and irrational hatreds and aggression towards them amongst non-LGBT people.

We should not forget the outrage which 'respectable' religious figures regularly express about gay marriage or about pupils in schools being educated about homosexuality, and the media campaigns which claim such sex education lessons is tantamount to teaching 'normal' children to be gay.

Islamophobia

Since 9/11, America's 3.3 million Muslims, one per cent of the population, have joined the list of those in the USA who are being demonised by politicians and the media and subjected to racist and far right harassment.

It was no surprise that Donald Trump immediately intervened to say that the tragedy in Orlando proved the correctness of his calls for Muslims to be banned from entering the USA. He tweeted:

'Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamist terrorism,' adding in a later statement: 'I said this was going to happen, and it is only going to get worse???'We can't afford to be politically correct any more".

Trump previously took advantage of the December 2015 San Bernardino massacre to launch his Islamophobic campaign. Given that his every outburst receives wall-to-wall media coverage, it is scarcely surprising that after Orlando a YouGov poll for the first time found a majority supporting Trump's demand.

Of course, no one can deny that many young Muslims in North America and Europe deeply resent the US/Nato/Russia bombings in Syria, Iraq, and the drone killings in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Israel's bombing of Gaza, barely criticised by the US government and actively excused by many politicians, Democrat as well as Republican, arouses indignation.

Reports state one of the survivors heard Mateen tell police that America should stop bombing IS in Syria. His workmates reported him for having said positive things about Al Qaeda and Hezbollah, leading to the FBI investigations.

It seems he also pledged allegiance to IS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and linked himself to the Boston bombers and a man who became a suicide bomber for the Syrian-based al-Qaeda-franchise Jabhat al-Nusra. But there seems to be no organised relation either via the internet or more directly to jihadi groups. His wife and workmates said he was not a pious Muslim.

There are many reasons why Muslims, in Europe and in the US, should resent the actions of Western governments and be alienated when they find themselves and their religion the object of abuse, both in personal encounters and in the media.

In a war, all sides resort to terror and to violations of human rights like arbitrary executions and torture. US and British or French bombing is wholesale terrorism, far outstripping the victims of killings by individuals, even the most horrific ones like Orlando or 9/11. Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, with their torture of Muslim "suspects", will not be quickly forgotten.

For those politicians who order "shock and awe" bombings; the Bushes, the Blairs, the Clintons, the Putins, and the Obamas too, their "anti-terrorism" is the vilest hypocrisy. In a very real sense, they are responsible for the deaths of innocents whether in San Bernadino, Orlando or in Grozny or Fallujah.

Young Muslims are right to oppose these actions of "their" governments and to resent their own abuse and persecution. Given the accessibility of radical Islamist and jihadist blogs and websites, a tiny fraction of them are likely to be "radicalised", not so much because of the prowess of the propagandists, as the fact the actions of the US and other Nato governments, plus Israel, appear to confirm the truth of their hate messages.

Another not insignificant factor preventing them from finding a path of effective resistance, is the decline of the antiwar movement in the USA and Europe as compared to the 2002-2010 period. Then, anti-imperialist and antiwar activists reached out to the Muslim communities, making many realise they had friends and allies in the countries where they had settled. Today, an alternative way of fighting back, that targets the real enemies, imperialism and racism, rarely presents itself to many young Muslims. We have to correct this as soon as possible.

Of course, this is not a justification for horrific attacks against entirely innocent people in Orlando (who are themselves a persecuted minority), in San Bernardino, or in Paris in November 2015, but they are nevertheless a genuine "blowback" for the actions of US and its principal Nato allies, plus Israel, and their far larger scale terrorism in the Arab and Muslim world.

Indeed, it is their wars, plus those of their valued allies, the Saudi and Gulf monarchies, that produced jihadist currents that "went rogue" and turned on their own inspirers, and led to the growth of Al Qaeda and IS. These monstrous children, the overwhelming proportion of whose victims are fellow Muslims, are a by-product of the Western Allies' interventions in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq and Syria over the last 35 years.

Marxists have always rejected terrorism as a strategy, not only because of its innocent victims, but also because it is prone to rebound onto the very people it is supposed to help or avenge, in this case the more than three million US Muslims and the 19 million Muslims in the European Union.

Gun culture and racism

Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton's calls for stricter gun controls are no solution either. Marteen was made in the USA. Plainly, Trump's call for a ban on Muslims entering the USA would have no effect on Marteen since, although his father was Afghan, he himself was born in New York and was a US educated citizen. He trained unsuccessfully at the Indian River Community College police academy. Prior to the attack, he was working as an armed G4S security guard.

G4S is a huge British-based corporation (640,000 employees world wide) that contracts with the US for work in Afghanistan and Iraq and also works for the Israeli government. It is widely accused of serious violations of human rights. Marteen successfully passed their background checks in both 2007 and 2013. Co-workers reported him to the FBI in 2013 after he had made "inflammatory" and "racist" statements, claiming that he had family connections to al-Qaeda and Hezbollah.

He was nevertheless able to buy the .223 Sig Sauer assault rifle and a Glock 9mm handgun at the St Lucie Shooting Center, run by a retired New York city police officer who claims that Mateen had undergone a full federal background

check before he allowed him to buy the guns.

What can be done?

Gun controls, or even an outright ban, are no solution. Gun culture, the worship of the armed individual citizen, heroically defending his or her hearth and home, is iconic within US culture, in its most popular Hollywood films, and fomented by the National Rifle Association (NRA). It is rooted in the racism that led to the near genocide of North America's First Nations peoples, in the Old (and New) Jim Crow repression of black people by vigilantes as well as the police. The beneficiaries of racism, even those whose benefits are utterly marginal and limited to subjective feelings of superiority, regard themselves as under constant threat from those they know, deep down, have been cruelly wronged. This is the 'colonisers' mentality' replicated in South Africa and Israel.

Under the present system, right wing forces cannot be disarmed effectively: they can only be protected against. Hence the communities who are victims of hate crimes (including those carried out by police officers) have the absolute right to defend themselves under the slogan 'self defence is no offence'. This applies equally to gay venues like Orlando's Pulse.

But even this would be a mere sticking plaster on a gaping wound if the causes are not addressed and combatted by mass action. In the USA and Europe, we need to rebuild a powerful movement to demand an end to western interventions in the Middle East, in Central Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the U.S. and Europe, today, the populist racist and proto-fascist far right is on the rise. In Israel, a racist regime is increasingly influenced by violent Zionist extremists. In India, the Hindu nationalist party BJP is being ever more brazen in its ethnic and religious antagonism towards Muslims and other religious minorities.

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, jihadists are carrying out awful atrocities against religious minorities and secularists alike. In Sri Lanka and Myanmar, Buddhist fundamentalist violence is also targeting religious minorities.

This epidemic of murderous reaction can only be effectively resisted and finally smashed by a movement that offers real hope and liberation to the exploited and terrorised. That is the task of the working class and the revolutionary left around the globe.

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