

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TERROR IN EUROPE

By Giorgos Poulimenakos and Dimitris Dalakoglou (VU Amsterdam)

Footage that shows the Abdeslam brothers having fun in a nightclub in Brussels, even after their so-called radicalization, came as a bit of a shock to many. In the images, the men now known to be terrorists were smoking, drinking, and dancing; they were using the same body language and slang to the other people in the club. They did not look like were following different than usual norms, but on the contrary they were behaving more or less as one may expect from young males of Northern Europe to behave in such situation.

Generally, sociological and anthropological research often shows that in European countries fewer and fewer second-generation Muslim immigrants pay attention to religion, let alone political Islam. What one sees in daily life amongst second and third generation male migrants in North Europe is self-expressions that prioritize different things than religion. If one was to observe ethnographically some examples, self-expressions through urban pop subcultures, the pursuit of material goals including consumer goods like fast cars etc. seem much more common than religion.

The majority of the analyses that appeared in media and social media discourses after the two recent attacks have not failed to reproduce the motifs that emerged after 9/11. On the one hand, there is the ultra-conservative Islamophobic discourse that argues that there exists an intrinsic, ontological violence inherent in Islamic scripts and values, and therefore that the Muslim population poses a continual historical threat to the Western world.

On the other hand, there is the leftist-oriented interpretation of the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism, which traces the origins of brutality to the consequences of historical Western imperialism in the 'Orient'. Many centuries of Euro-American interventions has often forcibly altered the economic, political, and social realities of peoples all around the world, according to Western geopolitical interests. From the Syces-Picot agreement, to the role played by the USA in the formation and strengthening of militant organizations of political Islam, these approaches expose the dark historical processes that ensured Western

global domination at the cost of the well-being of other populations. Thus, these more leftist opinions call for the blame to be placed on the geopolitics of capitalism, and not on a religion or a specific group of people.

The first argument, the conservative one, remains very popular; nevertheless it has been already criticized heavily, and rightly, and to this we do not have much to add. In this brief text we wish to focus a bit more on the latter argument and to examine some of its own logical discontinuities.

This second, progressive line of thinking explains a source of monstrosity that 'we' (the West) created 'out there', which has now begun to invade 'here' – rather like the ancient Greek myth of Nemesis. But what if our Nemesis appears in a more familiar guise?

One perhaps should start their inquiry by wondering what collective subjectivities are produced amongst European youth when they witness, and are invited to remain indifferent to, the mass deaths of migrants and refugees along the European borders? According to the Greek Minister of Migration, his Belgian colleague Theo Francken told him: 'you must consider letting them drown' as his official position on the refugee crisis. The Belgian government denied the statement; however, it remains a fact that this has been the European governments' collective attitude towards refugees for some time now. Might not the word *nihilism* be an appropriate term to describe such attitude?

Before fear become a norm in the European capitals because of the consecutive attacks, there was another condition producing fear for substantial parts of the European population – that is, for the working poor, those occupied in precarious or undocumented labour, subcontracted labour, and in general those who are victims, or remain continually potential victims, of the flexible labour market. It might not seem a proximate reality (at least until now) for middle-class white college educated Europeans, but this is precisely the reality for many second-generation migrants in countries like the Netherlands, France, Belgium, and the UK. A brief visit to blue-collar workplaces like factories, logistics warehouses etc. – those industries that keep everything moving smoothly in European metropolises – would be enough to make this phenomenon apparent. A British Imam, giving his opinion about what

draws young people to radical Islam for a TV show, stated recently: 'I believe that European societies are not giving ways out to young people anymore. For example, here in order to play tennis you have to pay five pounds. You have to pay to do anything.' Everyone who has lived in the UK has heard the typical joke: 'every breath you take costs you one quid in London'. During the post-1990s era, the hegemonic discourse in Europe was claiming that social class inequality is a myth that does not apply in contemporary World. The mantra of depoliticization of everyday life, and the erasure of visible social contradictions was repeated by intellectuals, journalists, politicians etc. Unlimited growth of an economy where everyone would be benefited via increase of the consumption were promised and there was space supposedly for everyone in that European Dream. However, this did not happen and since there is no political-economic antagonism, it is nobody's fault, this is how it is, some people will be excluded from the party. But maybe if we teach people that there is not such a thing as social class or class antagonism, and that such ideas do not explain social asymmetries in contemporary society, it follows that there is no one to blame for poverty and inequality. However, if there is nobody to blame does not follow that everyone is to blame?

of Western capitalist societies?

This is not to say that the religious factor is of absolutely no importance. However, living between a very politicized European country where axes of reference are political (Greece), and northern Europe (Netherlands and UK) where politicized explanations of the world are almost invisible among the younger generations, we are examining the possibility that the pain we are facing in northern Europe has little to do with what is happening 'out there'. Perhaps religion is being used as an *a posteriori* explanation of a phenomenon that actually has its roots in modern secular European culture.

At the end of the story might it be that this kind of twisted radicalization is not the product of a failure of integration of migrants into the European setting, but the opposite? Such attitudes might rather be indicative of a deep assimilation to the unethical ethos of the neoliberal Europe of the 1990s-2000s. Is it too extreme to say that the creation of these nihilistic subjectivities that spread terror in Paris and Brussels are compatible with – if not a consequence of – the neoliberal systemic shift