What Caused the Killings?

written by Gilbert Achcar | February 2, 2015

Gilbert Achcar is a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and the author of many books, including *Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder*, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* and *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*.

In the aftermath of the massacre at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris and the wave of repression and Islamophobia that followed, Achcar talked to Ahmed Shawki in late January about the questions the left in France and internationally need to answer to organize an anti-racist, anti-imperialist response.

WHAT HAS been the reaction to the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* by French society in general, and the French state and ruling class in particular?

THE REACTION has been what anybody would expect. The initial reaction was one of massive shock–which is not that different from the initial reaction to 9/11 in the United States, though it's obviously a big exaggeration to place both attacks on an equal footing as many did, particularly in France.

And, of course, the shock was immediately exploited by the French government in the same way that 9/11 was exploited by the Bush administration–in order to silence critics and get wide support in the name of "national unity." Suddenly, François Hollande's popularity went up sharply, from a very low point. The same happened with George W. Bush, whose popularity was very low before 9/11 and got boosted beyond anything he could have dreamed of.

These were quite similar reactions from appalled and frightened societies–and, of course, the crimes were appalling indeed. In both cases, the ruling class took advantage of the shock in order to whip up nationalist sentiment and support for the state: The police forces have been hailed as great heroes in France for mobilizing several tens of thousands in hunting down three lunatic assassins. To be sure, the New York firefighters were much more deserving of the praise for their bravery.

There is nothing much original about all this. Instead, what is rather original is the way the discussion evolved later on.

As you know, the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and the anti-Semitic attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris were perpetrated by two young men of Algerian background and one from Malian background, the three of them French-born. Over the last few days, there has been a significant shift in the discussion about the attacks: it has become more mitigated, with increasing acknowledgement of the fact that there is something wrong in French society–in the way it treats people of immigrant origin.

This shift went to the point French Prime Minister Manuel Valls stating publicly two weeks after the attack that there is a "territorial, social, ethnic apartheid" in France with regard to people of immigrant origin. That's an extremely strong characterization indeed–and as you might expect, it was massively criticized, even from within the cabinet over which Valls presides.

But it did represent a vindication of some sort for those who said from the start that those terrible attacks should lead people to think in the first place about the conditions that bring young people to such a level of resentment that they become willing to engage in suicidal attacks in order to kill. Not that any reason whatsoever could constitute an excuse for the murders that were perpetrated, but because it is indispensable to investigate the origin of such hatred and resentment instead of indulging in the inept explanation that "they hate us for our freedoms," as George W. Bush put it after 9/11.

This gets us to the core issue, which is what the French prime minister was referring to. The core issue is the condition of populations of immigrant origin inside France. One obvious and very telling indication of this is the fact that a majority of inmates in French prisons are people of Muslim background, although they constitute less than 10 percent of the population. And there is the related fact that the French society and state have never really settled accounts with their colonial legacy.

On this last issue, it's striking that self-examination in the U.S. society about the Vietnam War has been much more radical and widespread–reflecting the huge mobilization that built up within the U.S. itself against that war–than whatever there has been in France about the war in Algeria, although the latter was no less brutal, if not more so, and came after well over one century of barbaric colonial occupation of that country.

France is a country where, believe it or not, the parliament voted in 2005–that is, only 10 years ago, not half a century ago!–for a law about the colonial legacy that saluted the men and women, especially the military, who took part in the colonial enterprise. And it required, among other things, that schools should teach "the positive role of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa." That particular part of the law was repealed by presidential decree a year later after a huge outcry from migrant organizations, the left, historians and schoolteachers. But the very fact that such a law could be adopted by a parliamentary majority is just outrageous.

CAN YOU tell us more about the reaction to the prime minister's statement about France's "apartheid"? Because that's a striking statement.

IT IS–very striking. Mind you, Valls is definitely not a radical or even a progressive. He's from the right wing of the Socialist Party. He was minister of the interior before becoming prime minister, and was criticized on the left for entering into a competition with the far right–with Marine Le Pen–of trying to outdo each other on the issue of immigration. And now, suddenly, here he is with this strong statement.

Unsurprisingly, he was widely criticized, not only from the right-wing opposition, but also from within his own party, and even from some people on the left, all of them saying that he went over the top and should not have used the A-word.

His most sober critics pointed to the fact that there is no legal apartheid in France, unlike what you had until a few decades ago in South Africa or in the U.S. South half a century ago. But no one could seriously deny the reality of a "territorial, social and ethnic" segregation in France that is similar to what still prevails in the United States.

The condition of the populations of migrant origin in France is indeed closer to that of the Black people in the U.S. than to apartheid in the strict sense. These populations are concentrated in separate areas, on the periphery of cities, and live in extremely frustrating conditions. On top of that comes racism that is pervasive in various forms in French society, including discrimination in employment, in housing and so on.

On this last point, France is even worse than the United States–it won't be any time soon that we shall see a person of African background elected president of France, other than in the wild fantasy of an infamous French Islamophobic novelist. It is actually–and unfortunately–much more likely that a far-right candidate would be elected to the French presidency. After all, in 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen managed to get to the second round of the presidential election, beating the Socialist Party candidate in the first round.

THIS BRINGS up a related question about the French far right, which is quite powerful electorally, with Le Pen's daughter Marine leading a "reformed" National Front. My understanding is that the National Front, which historically draws its inspiration from the far right–up to and including the fascist right–is now inviting representation among its leadership of gays, of other minorities, of Jews. But it is singling out the immigrant population, and in particular Muslims, as the "new enemy." Is that roughly the trajectory?

GENERALLY speaking, the far right in Europe nowadays, except for a lunatic fringe, does not focus on anti-Semitism or even anti-gay bigotry. Actually, one of the major figures of the far right in Holland was an openly gay man, who used to justify his Islamophobia by referring to the alleged homophobia of migrants of Muslim background.

So this is no longer the platform of the European far right nowadays. The preferred target of their hate speech is Islam. Muslims are their scapegoats, much more so than Jews or any of the other victims of fascism and Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s–save the Roma, who are still the object of much racist hatred. Nowadays, it is Islam that is by far the main target of far-right hatred.

This Islamophobia is actually presented most often with the pretense that it isn't about racism–that it's a rejection of the religion alone, and not of Muslims themselves, so long as they aren't practicing Muslims.

In other words, there are "bad Muslims" and "good Muslims," the latter being those who "drink alcohol and eat pork," i.e. those who are irreligious and adapt fully to Western Christian culture. The most welcome Muslims–here in the ethnic sense, of course–are the small minority who join the Islamophobic choir, seeking reward for their collaboration, like the colonial natives who worked for their colonial masters.

It is this anti-Islam approach that is at work in the demonstrations that have been organized in Germany by a movement that claims to be fighting against "the Islamization of the West." This kind of ideology is common to the far right all over Europe–though maybe less so for the UK Independence Party in Britain, which targets all immigrants, including those from European Union countries.

IT'S BEEN suggested that the French left is quite poor on the question of institutional racism within French society. Do you think that's true?

DEFINITELY. THE French left–and I mean what is usually called the "radical left," to the left of the Socialist Party, which I would not really call "left"–has a poor record on relating to people of immigrant origin. This is a major failure–though, of course, you can find similar situations in most imperialist countries.

The absence of a strong connection with these populations, and particularly with their youth, means that there is little challenge when the resentment that builds up for legitimate reasons among them goes in the wrong direction, leading in extreme cases to the murderous fanaticism that we have seen at play.

The historical record of the French Communist Party on anti-colonialism, especially in the case of Algeria, is far from clean overall. Within France, the fight against ethnic discrimination and the colonial legacy has not been central enough in the actions of the left, and this has led many young people who have been attracted to the left at some point to reject it and develop quite bitter feelings toward it.

This is usually connected to a tradition within the French left that one may call "radical secularism," or "secular fundamentalism."

YOU MEAN "laicité"?

"LAICITÉ" MEANS secularism. There is something beyond that, though–let's call it an "anti-clerical" tradition, which has been very strong on the left historically in France. It can take the form of secularist arrogance toward religion and the believers overall.

As long as the targeted religion is the dominant one, this isn't a major problem, although even then it can be politically counterproductive. As the young Marx aptly put it, the same religion that is the dominant classes' ideological tool can also be the "sigh of the oppressed."

But this is much truer when the religion in question is the particular faith of an oppressed and exploited part of society, the religion of the downtrodden, such as–in the West–Judaism yesterday and Islam today. You cannot have the same attitude to Judaism in 1930s' Europe as in today's Israel, for instance–or the same attitude to Islam in Europe today as in Muslim-majority countries. Likewise, you cannot have the same attitude to Christianity in, say, today's Egypt where Christians are an oppressed minority as in Christian-majority countries.

This is the problem with *Charlie Hebdo*. Some of the people involved in *Charlie Hebdo* were very much on the left. Stéphane Charbonnier, known as Charb, the editor of the magazine, who was the principal target of the assassins, was, by any standard, someone on the left. He had close ties with the Communist Party and the general milieu of the left. His funerals were held to the tune of the "Internationale," and his eulogy by Luz, a surviving member of the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial staff, included a bitter criticism of the French right and far right, and of the Pope as well as of Benjamin Netanyahu.

In this respect, the comparison that some have made of *Charlie Hebdo* to a Nazi publication publishing anti-Semitic cartoons in Nazi Germany is completely absurd. *Charlie Hebdo* is definitely not a far-right publication–and present-day France definitely not a Nazi-like state.

Rather, *Charlie Hebdo* is a blatant illustration of the left-wing arrogant secularism that I mentioned, which is an attitude widely held on the left in good conscience–that is, in the firm belief that secularism and anti-clericalism are basic tenets of the left-wing tradition. They are seen as part of a left-wing identity, along with feminism and other emancipatory causes.

I KNOW that one of the major debates on the French left in the last decade or so was about the question of the veil and the rights of Muslim women to wear the hijab in public. Can you discuss what the issues were in that debate?

THIS IS another illustration of the same problem. It arose in 1989 over the issue of young girls coming to school wearing the headscarf, and being expelled for insisting on doing so, with the support of their families. This led to a 2004 law banning "ostentatious" religious symbols from being worn in public schools.

Part of the left–in fact, I would say the vast majority of the French left, including the Communist

Party–supported this ban, in the name of "helping" young girls to fight an oppressive imposition of the headscarf on them by their families, and in the conviction that since the headscarf is a symbol of women's oppression, banning it is a way of challenging this oppression, as well as of upholding the secular character of public schools.

The core problem with this arrogant secularism–this very Orientalist arrogance, one could say–is the belief that liberation can be "imposed" on the oppressed. The rationale is that in forcing you to remove your headscarf, I am "liberating" you, whether you approve of it or not. Needless to say, this happens to be an exact reproduction of the colonial mindset.

I THINK that for some people, this criticism of the French left for its arrogant secularism gets mixed up with a hesitation to make a left-wing analysis of political Islamism, particularly the reactionary variety behind the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* or the September 11 attacks in the U.S. You touched on that issue with your book *The Clash of Barbarisms*, didn't you?

I WROTE that book after 9/11 indeed. When you're faced with an attack like 9/11, of course, the term "barbaric" will inevitably be used to describe it.

Now how should anti-imperialists react? There are two possible ways. One is to say, "No, it's not barbaric." That's ridiculous, because it obviously is. Why should one regard as barbaric the Islamophobic rampage perpetrated by Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-right fanatic, in 2012, but not the massacres of 9/11, or the Paris killings, for that matter? This would be an extreme case of "Orientalism in reverse," substituting the contempt of Islam with a very naive and uncritical stance toward everything that is done in Islam's name.

What is politically wrong and dangerous is not the use of terms like "barbaric," "appalling" and the like, but that of the misplaced political category of "fascism." Many on the French left–the Communist Party, but also members of the far left, and most recently, the post-Maoist philosopher Alain Badiou–have labeled the Paris attacks as "fascistic" and described those perpetrating them as "fascists."

This is completely pointless in socio-political terms since fascism is an ultra-nationalistic mass movement whose main vocation is to salvage capitalism by crushing whatever threatens it, starting with the workers' movement, and to promote aggressive imperialism. Applying this category to terrorist currents inspired by religious fundamentalism in countries that are dominated by imperialism is nonsense.

Such a use of the label "fascism" blurs everything that makes it a distinctive sociopolitical category. If one wishes to dilute a socio-political category this way, then phenomena such as Stalinism or, even more so, the Baathist dictatorships in pre-2003 Iraq or present-day Syria bear much more resemblance to historical fascism than al-Qaeda or the purported "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria."

The misuse of the label was started by the neocons in the Bush administration and others who called al-Qaeda "Islamo-fascism," and it is quite unfortunate that people on the left fall into this trap. The obvious political goal of this misuse of the label–since "fascism" is seen as the ultimate evil, and Nazism itself being an avatar of fascism–is to justify every action against it, including imperialist wars.

I remember well a discussion in which I was invited to take part in Paris in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, which was organized by the Communist Party. One of the speakers, a prominent member of that party, explained that al-Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalism constitute the new fascism, against

which it is legitimate to support war by Western states, in the same way as it was legitimate for the USSR to ally with the U.S. and the UK against fascist powers in the Second World War. You can find a direct echo of the same rationale in the neocon description of the "war on terror" as being a "Third World War" against "Islamo-fascism."

To come back to the "barbaric" label, the other way of reacting to it, of course, is to say: Yes, these massacres are barbaric indeed, but they are in the first place a reaction to capitalist-imperialist barbarism, which is much worse. That's the reaction many on the left had after 9/11. Noam Chomsky was probably the most prominent of those who explained that, as appalling as the 9/11 attacks were, they were dwarfed by the massacres committed by U.S. imperialism.

In my book on "the clash of barbarisms," I emphasized that the barbarism of the strong is the major culprit, and that it is the primary cause that leads to the emergence of a counter-barbarism on the opposite side. This "clash of barbarisms" is the true face of what has been, and still is, misleadingly described as a "clash of civilizations." As Rosa Luxemburg put it a century ago, the dynamics of the crisis of capitalism and imperialism leaves no option in the long run but "socialism or barbarism."

The attacks of September 11, 2001, those of Madrid 2004, London 2005 and Paris recently, were all claimed by al-Qaeda–an extremely reactionary organization. Along with likeminded organizations, they are the sworn enemies of anyone on the left in the countries where they are based. For example, a prominent member of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria boasts of having organized the assassination of two key leaders of the Tunisian left in 2013.

The young men who carried out the killings in Paris were wrapped up in terroristic organizations that stand on the extreme far right in Muslim-majority countries. Al-Qaeda is an outgrowth of Wahhabism, the most reactionary interpretation of Islam and the official ideology of the Saudi kingdom–and as everybody knows, the Saudi kingdom is the best friend of the United States in the Middle East, outside of Israel.

People on the left should not appear to be excusing or supporting in any way organizations like these. We must denounce them for what they are–but we must also stress, at the same time, that the main responsibility in their emergence lies with those who started the "clash of barbarisms" in the first place, and whose barbarism is murderous on an incomparably larger scale: the imperialist powers, and above all, the United States.

There's actually a direct and obvious connection between the two. The United States, along with the Saudi kingdom, has been fostering for decades these militant Islamic fundamentalist currents in the fight against the left in Muslim-majority countries. These currents were, for a long time, associated with the United States–a historical collaboration that culminated in the 1980s war in Afghanistan, when they were backed by Washington, the Saudis and the Pakistani dictatorship, against the Soviet occupation.

What happened eventually is that, like in the Frankenstein story, some sections of these forces turned against the Saudi monarchy and against the United States. This is the story of al-Qaeda: its founders were allied with the United States and the Saudi kingdom during the fight against the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, but they turned against both of them because of the direct deployment of U.S. troops in the Saudi kingdom in preparation for the first U.S. war against Iraq in 1991.

Thus, the Bush Sr. administration provoked al-Qaeda's about-face against the U.S. with the first war on Iraq, and Bush Jr. carried it on with the invasion of Iraq. The latter was carried out on the pretext of huge lies, one of which was that it was needed in order to destroy al-Qaeda–although there was no

connection whatsoever between al-Qaeda and Iraq. The result of the U.S. occupation of that country was actually a huge boost to al-Qaeda, allowing it to acquire a crucial territorial base in the Middle East, after having previously been restricted to Afghanistan.

What is today called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is but a further development of what used to be al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq–an organization that didn't exist before the 2003 invasion, but came into being thanks to the occupation. It was defeated and marginalized from 2007 onward, but it then managed to re-emerge in Syria, taking advantage of the conditions created by the civil war in that country and the utmost brutality of the Syrian regime. And here it is, now striking again in the heart of the West. As ever: "They sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind."

article originally appeared in the online Socialist Worker, the newspaper of the International Socialist organization.