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In praise of dissidence

Ulrike Ackermann on how Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash have gotten lost somewhere along the "third way"

In the spring of 2006, as the Mohammed cartoons [controversy](#) was peaking and European governments, companies and media were worrying about wounded Muslim feelings and were swearing allegiance to inter-cultural dialogue, [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](#) held an unusual [speech](#) in Berlin on the "**Right to insult**." The German media paid almost no attention and the speech remained unpublished.

In it, the author cited freedom of expression, opinion and art, in her defence of the decision to print the cartoons and she criticised the self-censorship of the West with respect to Islam and its radical extremes. Her choice of location was deliberate - Berlin has been deeply marked by the history of ideological challenges that go along with the establishment of an open society. "A divided city in which the communist state held people captive behind a wall but which was the focal point of the battle for the hearts and minds of the people. In the West, those who defended the open society preached the failure of communism while the works of Karl Marx were being taught at university. Dissidents who had escaped from the East could write, make films, draw cartoons and use their creativity to persuade others that communism was a long way from creating paradise on earth. Despite the self-censorship of many who idealised and defended communism in the West and despite the brutal censorship in the East, the battle was won. Today the open society is being challenged by Islamism."

Ayaan Hirsi Ali positioned herself explicitly in the tradition of eastern European dissidents who turned away from communism in favour of Western freedom. "The dissidents of Islamism, like those of communism, possess neither atomic bombs nor other weapons. We don't set embassies and **flags on fire**. We are too few and too dispersed to become anything significant as a collective. The only thing we have are our thoughts and the only thing we demand is the chance to express ourselves freely. Our opponents want to use violence to silence us. They claim that we are spiritually and mentally unreliable and shouldn't be taken seriously. Communism's defenders used the same methods."

The sympathetic reading of Islam recalls that of communism before 1989. At the time, the West's self-hatred and invalidation of the accomplishments of free democracy were expressed in a generous interpretation of communism. A similar phenomenon is to be seen in attitudes towards Islam today, in large part thanks to its anti-capitalism and anti-Americanism. Many Western intellectuals had reservations about eastern European dissidents because they were only fighting for the so-called "bourgeois liberties." Many dreamed at the time of a "third way" between capitalism and communism. The analogy is evident in the terminology: Stalinism could be criticised but communism was handled with kid gloves. Today, criticism of Islamism is common sense, but criticism of Islam has to be conducted with care.

In Great Britain, piggy banks are being removed from banks because they offend the religious sensibilities of Muslims, who consider pigs to be impure. Italy is considering creating exclusive beaches for Muslim women so that they can swim fully clothed and without being

offended by the much-feared, **decadent, Western nakedness**. In Holland there is talk of Muslim hospitals where husbands, fathers and brothers of Muslim women can be reassured that no non-Muslim doctor will touch their wives, daughters and sisters. There are more headscarves and burkas to be seen in the streets of Western Europe today than ever before and the numbers of those converting to Islam is on the rise.

In the face of such developments, Ayaan Hirsi Ali warns of a "**creeping Sharia**" in Europe. The once devoted Muslim describes in her autobiography the process of her personal liberation: her gradual turning away from Islam and the inner conflicts and ambivalence that this caused. It's a wonderful example of personal enlightenment. She is one of very few dissidents who is willing to criticise Islamism as well as Islam. For her, "Islam is not reconcilable with the liberal society that has resulted from the Enlightenment."

Her criticism arouses not only the anger and critique of her former confessional brothers, but also European leftist intellectuals such as [Ian Buruma](#) and [Timothy Garton Ash](#). Both accuse her of being an "Enlightenment fundamentalist," who is pouring oil onto the fire and engendering "politics of fury."

For Hirsi Ali, the legacy of the Enlightenment - the separation of religion and state, political and individual rights, self-determination of the individual, reason and the equality of the sexes - are of fundamental importance and so they should be. To have to defend these against an accusation of fundamentalism is, given the situation in which we find ourselves, pretty ludicrous.

Ian Buruma considers both Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of **Theo van Gogh**, who rammed a note threatening to kill Ayan Hirsi Ali into his victim's chest, and the notes' addressee to be fundamentalists in equal measure: the Islamist fights with the sword, the Islam critic with the pen. Because they have both lost their faith, they fight with equal tenacity against the opposite. Strange, we had that once: in communist days, those who had lost faith were exposed as apostates by well-meaning intellectuals in the West and were thus disqualified as collaborators on the path towards "peaceful co-existence."

In an interview with "**3sat Kulturzeit**", which was reporting on this ongoing debate, Timothy Garton Ash talks in conciliatory tones about the "third way" that should be negotiated between Western culture and its values and Islam. This term was used frequently by intellectuals at the time of the iron curtain. In realpolitik, the gradual relaxing was called "peaceful coexistence" and later "**change through rapprochement**".

Precisely because of his support for the Central European dissidents – which I am very familiar with – I find it astonishing that Timothy Garton Ash has clearly become a fellow traveller of [Tariq Ramadan](#), that representative of obscure "European Islam." "We're for integration," says Ramadan in a [portrait](#) written by Ian Buruma for the **New York Times**, "but we must decide what that means ourselves. I obey the laws, but only insofar as they don't force me to do anything against my religion." Both Garton Ash and Buruma name Ramadan as a contact person for Western societies. They share a multiculturalism in which the Enlightenment and the lifestyle it gave rise to are relativised with respect to the "foreign cultures" to be tolerated.

Whereas the freedom-loving dissidents in Central Europe were considered "trouble-makers of detente" between East and West, today's dissidents of Islam like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, [Taslima Nasrin](#), [Irshad Manji](#), Necla Kelek ([more](#)) or Seyran Ates ([more](#)) fall into disgrace because

their criticism purportedly disrupts the dialogue of cultures. Their passionate defence of self-determinism and freedom of the individual against a domesticating religious collective deserves vocal support, which **Pascal Bruckner** [offers](#) for the "rebels of the Islamic world." For who else can initiate self-reflection and reform in Islam, if not these courageous dissidents?

Hatred for the "decadence" of the West, its capitalism, consumerism and individualism, was as much part of the communist ideology as it is of radical Islam today. In the fusion of belief and social order, of truth, hierarchy and social reality, arose a secular Umma in which the individual is to be collectivised. The individual is suspicious of all ideocratic totalitarianisms. Unpredictable, instinctive, egoistic, headstrong and anarchistic, it must be controlled and dominated for the good of the respective Umma: the national, class or religious community. The communist social experiment cost millions of lives, as did National Socialism and fascism. Learning from this history can only mean remaining vigilant in face of new totalitarian dangers which threaten our painstakingly acquired freedom. This must be defended "in a continuously repeated act of liberation, an eternal battle in which there can be no final victory, because that could only mean the death of all combatants, that means all those living." (Benedetto Croce)

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