

Review of Secularism and Cosmopolitanism: Critical Hypotheses on Religion and Politics by Étienne Balibar

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One of the most defining realities of the current period is the ‘return of the religious’, and this is the central theme for this new collection of essays by Étienne Balibar. The real story of the ‘end of history’ promised by Francis Fukayama is not the shining neoliberal capitalist future he held up as our promised future; rather it is the inability of this to meet people’s needs for basic forms of social and economic security. With the decline of genuine alternatives that offered another vision of how to achieve this – communism, social democracy, progressive forms of post-colonial nationalism – a vacuum has been created into which these forms of reactionary religious identity politics have leapt. This takes different forms – be they the transnational community of true believers, as in the global Ummah of Salafi-jihadists, or a form of territorially bound politics, such as Hindutva in India, the evangelical Christianity that brought Trump and Bolsonaro to power, the contemporary politics of Israel, or the new forms Catholic authoritarianism in Eastern Europe – even the aggressive nostalgia of Brexit with its appeal to a time when Britain was unequivocally a ‘Christian nation’ is part of this. The political imaginary of forms of theocratic-political identities combines a direct appeal to the victimhood of the excluded but dominant group, whose betrayal by earlier political classes has traduced the truth of their glorious history and which they are now going to ensure is made ‘Great Again’. The process of re-establishing this greatness is driven by visceral forms of racist violence against the



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hated 'other', alongside virulent misogyny and homophobia, representing a vengeful social conservatism.

Given the centrality of the collapse of the Left in the emergence of this phenomena, it is disconcerting to see how little those on the Left have had to say about it; and it is in this context that this book of essays by Étienne Balibar on the themes of 'Secularism and Cosmopolitanism' is very welcome. Balibar himself remains an interesting and creative thinker on the Left, even if he can be a bit of a hard read at times. He emerged in the late 1960s in France as part of Louis Althusser's 'Reading Capital' project. While Althusser's star fell and that of his star student Michel Foucault rose via a thorough repudiation of the teacher's Marxism and much of the legacy of the Enlightenment with it, Balibar stayed true to his original project in the best sense; that is he has remained consistent with Marxism as both a theory and practice, with his work and his political engagements always showing a preparedness to re-examine the grounds of this commitment, while trying to face contemporary realities at the same time.

Balibar is very clear at the outset that this return of religious identities is not in any sense about a return to 'traditional culture'. These contemporary forms of religious identity are entirely products of 'the age of globalisation', emerging as expressions of the yearning for collective identity that taps into the 'destabilisation and politicisation of the relationships between culture and religion, because the frontiers of what can be pooled, shared, generalised, have lost their institutional or traditional identifications (2018:36). Taking the reader on a re-reading of Marx's work on religion, Balibar insists that the 'return to the religious' can only be understood as ideology's capacity to interpolate, and here Balibar is drawing on Althusser's work; with this conception of ideology remaining as the most enduring legacy of Althusserianism. It is Balibar's insistence that the relations between 'culture' and 'religion' are *ideological* relationships that is so refreshing here, precisely because this relationship

is being re-established in a period in which as he notes 'we longer have enough political economy (or politics in economics) but we have too much political theology (or too much theology in politics)' (2018: xxi).

The book is made up of a central essay entitled 'Saeculum', accompanied by some shorter essays and popular articles not previously translated into English. Running throughout the whole book is his attempt to think through confrontations between the 'religious' and the 'secular' – France is very much the context, though the discussion always has wider relevance – in the light of deregulated capitalist globalisation, global migration, 'the relativization of borders and the hybridisation of cultures'. While Balibar could be criticised for his failure to reference the body of international feminist scholarship and activism which has been addressing these questions for over a decade (including *Feminist Dissent*), his voice is almost alone in taking these concerns into debates within Marxism. It is also refreshing to see him grasp the absolute centrality of the social position of women, and the politics of the 'sexualised body', as one of the central battlegrounds. He notes the way this has become 'the very site where signs of purity, election, sacrifice, asceticism, and alliance are to be made manifest' (xxxii). Few events illustrate this better than the 'double-binds' in the debate around politics of the veil in France, usefully revisited in this book. This is an issue around which the Left continues to be polarised between those for whom this is fundamentally a hegemonic state strategy of anti-Muslim racism and those offer an equally passionate defence of 'secular' with all the advances in the conception of citizenship which this involves. Balibar thinks both are partly right and partly wrong, but also that these two arguments need to set alongside rather than against each other. In this sense he want to take back Laïcité from those who have mobilised it as a form of 'white' religious nationalism in which the French state has taken a sacralised form, and in which the poverty and exclusion of the largely Muslim inhabitants of France's impoverished banlieues doesn't quite figure in the discussion. But at the same time he

isn't happy with the Left/pomo-poco characterisation of Muslim religious agency as pure victimhood, and takes issue with Joan Scott's attack on the secularism of the French state as demonstrating 'extraordinary blindness to the way a social order that is patriarchal and monotheistic invests sexuality with a symbolic function that is a frightfully effective means of reproducing its own power structures' (217). It is revealing to see an almost identical polarisation in the UK in relation to the fundamentalist demonstrations against Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) outside Anderton Park School in Birmingham throughout 2019. While much of the Left remained silent on this issue, a group of 'LGBT+ organisations and individuals' wrote to the *Independent* newspaper not in support of the embattled teachers and students in the school that was taking forward RSE and Equality initiatives, but rather claiming that these agendas were being 'hijacked' by state through being incorporated into the teaching of 'fundamental British values'.ⁱ What was entirely absent in this statement was any reference to the extremely fundamentalist and homophobic agenda of the protest leaders themselves, which the authors implicitly accepted as a legitimate expression of 'Muslim values'. The conclusion Balibar reaches at the end of his discussion is that secularism must be defended as absolutely central to a progressive agenda, but that this must at the same time be 'secularised' itself; that it needs to be seen as an expression of 'universal' emancipation, and not the historic property of white French people. There is a critically important point for progressives in the UK here where we have a much weaker tradition of secularism.

Alongside some of the denser theoretical arguments the book includes three short pieces of journalism written in response to immediate events, including the Charlie Hebdo murders. Balibar is again unusual on the Left as someone who has pointed to the responsibility of Muslims within this, not because Islam is inherently violent as various right-wing commentators argue, but rather because of the deeply fraudulent nature of Salafi-jihadism in relation to the depth of Islamic traditions. He argues

that it is ‘the initiative of Muslims (as many as possible, as diverse as possible, as unanimous as possible) [which will] play the decisive role in counteracting the *religious* conditions of contemporary *jihadism*...because nobody else has a right and a capacity to talk *in the name* of Islam’ (146). This points to the kind of political alliances which need to be developed between secular and democratic voices within religion with non-religious anti-racist and progressive forces – a kind of alliance that develops all too infrequently. This little book is a highly engaging read which one can only hope opens up some crucially important political debates on the Left.

References

Balibar, Étienne (2018) *Secularism and Cosmopolitanism: Critical Hypotheses on Religion and Politics*, New York City: Columbia University Press.

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Notes

ⁱ The letter to the *Independent* of 5/9/2019 stated ‘We support the inclusion of LGBT+ identities within RSE at both primary- and secondary-school level. However, we reject the ways in which LGBT+ issues are being deployed in the government’s discourse about the requirement to teach “Fundamental British Values” as part of their “Prevent” counter-extremism and counterterrorism strategies’ ‘The government is hijacking LGBT+ sex education to bolster its counterterrorism strategy – it must stop now’. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/lgbt-no-outsiders-rse-birmingham-muslim-prevent-values-a9092781.html>