

# Editorial: Understanding the Conundrum Secular States, Fundamentalist Politics

Yasmin Rehman, Gita Sahgal, Rashmi Varma and Nira Yuval-Davis\*

\*Correspondence: [msyasmin.rehman@gmail.com](mailto:msyasmin.rehman@gmail.com); [gita.sahgal@gmail.com](mailto:gita.sahgal@gmail.com); [rashmi.varma@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:rashmi.varma@warwick.ac.uk); [n.yuval-davis@uel.ac.uk](mailto:n.yuval-davis@uel.ac.uk)

The theme of this special issue of *Feminist Dissent* focuses on the ways in which religious fundamentalist movements have become hegemonic in many secular states around the world. This purported paradox of fundamentalist politics gaining power in secular states is all the more challenging to analyse in the context of both the consolidation and re-articulation of neoliberalism as an ideology and framework for organising economy and society in the era of late capitalism and its successive crises. Specifically, we are interested in exploring the ways in which these transformations within state, society and the economy have affected women's positions and gender relations. The illustrative case studies we examine in this issue are India, Israel and Turkey.

Addressing the paradox of fundamentalism in secular states requires us to understand the varied nature of secular states in the first place. The fact that secularism has accrued different meanings in different global contexts means that we need to acknowledge at the outset that secular states have different historical and political contexts within which secularism came to be embedded in their polities and politics from the twentieth century onwards. In some, secularism has entailed separation of church and state (with personal law often the exception), in others it has guided principles of tolerance and co-existence as an essential aspect of democratic governance in pluralist societies, with the state not interfering in the

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practice of any religion, nor favouring one over others except for the purposes of redressing some injustices meted out to minority groups. In still others, secularism has been understood as an absence of religion in public spaces and in civil society, sometimes even understood as atheism, and as a part and parcel of the process of modernisation itself.

At the same time, it is important to outline some of the key characteristics of secular states. Gita Sahgal (2013) has argued that in principle a secular state 'defends both freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief'. It is characterised not by the absence of religion in society, but by the absence of a 'state religion, where law is not derived from God and where religious actors cannot impose their will on public policy'. On this definition,

a secular state does not simply limit religion, it also maintains as a duty, not a favour, the essential right of religious freedom – the freedom to worship and maintain churches, mosques and temples unhindered and to protect minorities from attack. Such a right also includes the right to challenge dominant religious interpretations and to leave religion.

We believe with Sahgal that 'such a state is crucial to the protection of rights, not only for women, but also for religious minorities' and that ironically it is the secular state 'in which religious fundamentalists have a voice, but which is capable of limiting the inevitable harm they will cause'.

What is common to almost every secular state today is that each has been challenged by right wing, often populist authoritarianisms that have won power through democratic means and secured mandates for destroying the existing constitutions and the larger liberal apparatuses and norms of democracy. Even in the case of Israel, which does not have a constitution, we have witnessed an increased religionisation of political, legal and social

institutions, thus exacerbating the already existing contradictions within a democratic state whose identity is tethered to religious identity. The use of democratic means such as elections to gather popular support for fundamentalist movements is a key component of these rightward shifts that mark a historic setback for the modern secular project.

This project has been attacked as being rooted in racist and imperialist values enshrined in the Enlightenment. Academic critiques of secularism present it as an oppressive and racist ideology that is instrumentalized by states to curtail and manage religious differences and to oppress religious minorities (Farris, 2017; Scott, 2017). Going further, a dominant feature of postcolonial and anti-imperialist scholarship has been a rejection of the defence of secularism against the onslaught of rising fundamentalism by equating it with a defence of imperialism and Islamophobia (Scott, 2017). Sidelining feminist and activist work on the centrality of secular struggles from the ground up (see Bennoune, 2013), some academics have decried what they perceive as 'femo-nationalism' in which secular states deploy gender equality as a pre-text for advancing racist agendas and hostility towards migrants (Farris, 2017). They see proponents of secularism as making a claim that secularism is a pre-condition for gender equality. Against such representation, we believe that the struggle for women's emancipation cuts across secular and religious states which are in fact united in patriarchy and the control of women. However, the latter is at the explicit centre of fundamentalist projects globally, a fact that prevents us from flattening out differences between secular and fundamentalist politics.

What we are witnessing in the paradoxical situation of the rise of fundamentalist politics in secular states is precisely the emergence of new forms of patriarchal power that need to be understood and politically challenged for feminist liberation. Further, the scholarly attacks on secularism overlook the long histories of anti-colonialism and national

liberation movements that fought for secular states throughout the twentieth century (Varma, 2018). Thus, fundamentalist movements must be challenged from both an anti-colonial and feminist perspective, as the control and domination of women, sexual minorities and all manner of dissenters is at the heart of religious fundamentalism. It is our view that secularism forms part of a popular fight back against authoritarianism and fundamentalism.

Recently, attention has focused on European social democracies such as France, Denmark and the Netherlands where an aggressive and sometimes distorted secularism is being championed by the state and which indeed threatens religious minorities who are often poor migrants. These states have adopted a different route to manage social differences in the name of universal citizenship, as opposed to the more palatable but equally racist policies of liberal multiculturalism pursued by states such as the UK. It is our contention that both are responses to major challenges by the right in those states and globally. The recent pronouncements by the French President Macron in the wake of the brutal murder of the schoolteacher Samuel Paty by an Islamic fundamentalist is a case in point about the distorted secularism we point to above. The introduction of the controversial draft 'Law for the consolidation of Republican principles' widens its net beyond extremist organisations to include vast swathes of Muslim immigrant social life, targeting precisely the kind of institutions that serve as a 'firewall' between the Islamic fundamentalists and the French state (Burgat, 2020). Critics rightly point out that a law legitimising what it euphemistically calls the 'consolidation' of republican values threatens to tread on the core principle of freedom of religion, and that such a move, even as it is clothed in muscular *laïcité*, only goes to underscore the defeat of the secular left in France. In our view, far from delegitimizing secularism as a democratic ideal these distortions reveal the urgent necessity of reclaiming the political ground from the right.

As many of the contemporary fundamentalist movements interact with (and often build themselves on) the socio-political infrastructures of neoliberalism that were first consolidated in the 1970s and 1980s and then mutated from the 1990s onwards as capitalism was hit by a series of crises, it is important to examine the interlinking of seemingly paradoxical ideologies. Thus, the convergence of religious fundamentalism and neoliberalism in secular states presents a second paradox [the first is religious fundamentalism in secular states] that we hope to understand. As Wendy Brown (2019) discusses in her recent book *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* the neoliberal ideologies and practices prevalent today globally are strikingly different from the visions of its early instigators. 'Forged in the crucible of European fascism, neoliberalism aimed at permanent inoculation of market liberal orders against the regrowth of fascistic sentiments and totalitarian powers' (9). For Brown, it is the subsequent 'rise of anti-democratic politics in the West' that signals the setback to neoliberalism, although in a somewhat circular argument she suggests that 'tribalism' and populist extreme right movements of the last few years are the result of the ground prepared by the 'disintegration of society and the discrediting of the public good by neoliberal reason' (7). However, the career of neo-liberalism in the global South is often overlooked in accounts such as these which primarily focus on the setbacks to the neoliberal agenda in the North.

We see the resurgence of global right wing movements, of which religious fundamentalism is a key actor, not only as the result of a vacuum created by neoliberalism in the social sphere, nor even as the outcome of comprehensive effects neoliberal reason and governmentality has had on law, political culture and political subjectivity, but as a result of the ways in which neoliberalism morphed and mutated on the one hand, and on the other as fundamentalist ideologies negotiated with it to bolster their own stakes within states. After all, in spite of its roots in liberal political theory, the neoliberal market, by separating itself from the political, has been

ultimately (against the common lip service to the contrary) indifferent to the political environment in which it operated. As long as markets were allowed to operate freely through expanding deregulation and were supplied with sufficiently developed infrastructure, corporations were not taxed too highly and suitable (local and/or migrant) labour force was easily available, the regimes could be liberal or authoritarian, honest or corrupt (the latter was often easier to work with, of course) and composed of multi- or single party polities.

Given our focus in this special issue, we want to point out that where neoliberalism's hegemony has been most marked is reflected in the way in which populist and fundamentalist movements that, at least partly, started out by protesting and resisting some of its effects, ended up being managed and even co-opted by market forces. These movements, mobilizing majority ethno-nationalist and/or religious ideologies, often operate by mobilising 'anti-establishment' feelings. Billionaires like Trump, Berlusconi and others are transformed in these movements into populist leaders rising against an erstwhile establishment consisting of liberal elites out of touch with the 'people'. Migrants and members of ethnic and religious minorities are deployed as scapegoats so that they can then be excluded from the shrinking public resources. It is important to note here that many of these leaders, like Trump in the US and Netanyahu in Israel, have not been part of fundamentalist political movements as such, while others like Erdogan in Turkey and Modi in India can be thought of as machine men who emerged as strong male leaders from the bottom up.

In particular, the neoliberal project of the separation of markets and society began to comprehensively unravel since 9/11 as we witnessed the emergence of a new American imperialism that succeeded in strengthening NATO's militarised spheres of influence globally. The new security state meant that borders had to be controlled and racialised religious minorities had to be managed through surveillance but also

through new social contracts in which we saw a growing collusion between the racialised ethno-national and religious fundamentalist movements and the state, further shrinking secular and democratic spaces. The ‘war on terror’ thus provided fertile ground for fundamentalist movements to regroup and deepen their hold, as key partners of the West, while simultaneously opposing Western and local secular struggles (Zia, 2018).

What we want our analysis to register is the coeval mutation of neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism from the beginning of the twenty-first century. There is often an assumption that markets in some form or the other dominate the thinking of the movements that we are analysing.<sup>1</sup> But our argument is that fundamentalist authoritarian populists, although they rely on large corporations for funds to control the media and significant parts of the economy, can also be disruptive of market forces. Corporations are rewarded for their political support through elaborate networks of mutual patronage – i.e. political patronage of corporates involves handing out of industry contracts for major infrastructure, security and surveillance projects, social enterprises, the health sector (as we have seen in the right wing government of Boris Johnson’s in Britain and globally in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic) and media shares--through what has come to be known as ‘crony capitalism’. Thus, the political backing of capitalists does not by itself constitute neoliberalism understood as the free reign of markets.

What we are witnessing today is an anti-global nationalism and an intensification of the gendered ideology of ‘family values’ that is getting in the way of the neoliberal project in its ideal form. The latter is being recalibrated to ensure the continuing accumulation of wealth for national and global elites via privatisation. In this sense too, the ‘liberal’ part of neoliberalism that has often been instrumentalised to present a modern, forward looking state, has suffered defeat both in the electoral and other political realms. The fundamentalists in power in secular states are

overturning norms of good market conduct that are purported to be within the framework of neoliberalism. Further, the gendered racialisation of neoliberalism has meant not only that spaces for welfare and secular organisations have shrunk, but also that inequalities across gender lines have been exacerbated. As Farris points out in her study of European states, the bulk of low-end jobs in the care industry in Europe have now been assigned to migrant and racially minoritised women.

In its 'ideal' form, neoliberalism is meant to protect markets from politics and to free entrepreneurship in order to create wealth and jobs. In India the ending of government controls known as the 'licence raj' did open up new jobs and sectors and led to steady growth. But India survived the financial crash of 2008 precisely because its reforms never went far enough. It was assumed that the right-wing Hindu nationalist party the BJP, helmed by Modi, would bring in these reforms rapidly to fill the massive job hunger of a young population. This is why Modi's election was welcomed so widely by business-friendly press globally. But when in a spectacular move Modi announced the demonetisation of the economy early on in his first term as prime minister, the massive attack on the informal sector which not only includes the poor, especially women, as well as on the traditional heart of his support among the neo-middle classes and petty traders, he still succeeded in getting an increasingly supine media to present it as an anti-elitist move, framed as a nationalist endeavour aimed at cleansing the Indian economy of 'black money'.

As Chacko (2019) writes, 'the intermingling of cultural nationalism and neoliberalism in the BJP's virtuous market citizenship is an Indian manifestation of a growing global trend'. In Turkey, the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) combines in uneven and contradictory ways its Islamist politics with largescale privatisation of urban development projects, health, pensions and industry. At the same time, social welfare measures are ceded to religious organisations. This has had a significant



impact on women in particular as their access to the labour market and to the public sphere in general is now regulated in the name of religious piety and a 'familial' state. In Israel, the state's commitment to neoliberal agendas is qualified by its subsidies to the ultra-orthodox communities and an expanding religious sector, as well as its continuing policies that tether its citizens to the military. Further, while Israel's hi-tech security and surveillance products are the mainstay of its export economy, these have also played the part of a largescale militarisation of Israeli society. The purportedly contradictory projects of neoliberalism and religionisation in Israel can be seen as further elaborated in the discourse of sexual rights (what critics have termed 'pink-washing') on the one hand and increasing restrictions on women's access to secular spaces and resources on the other.

The set of phenomena we have identified above requires us to step out of our theoretical and political complacencies and shelters. Capitalism has resorted to its key extractive tendencies even as it is creating increasing numbers of refugees both within nation states and across national borders. Corporations such as Vedanta and Adani have their tentacles spread as far wide as the bauxite-rich mountains in eastern India to mining in Australia, South America and Africa. They have the backing of authoritarian and populist states across the board, as they provide funds for the social agenda of the right. Social welfare measures are now re-articulated as the beneficence of ruling regimes, crucial to maintaining popular and electoral support. The global turn to surveillance as a key aspect of state power as biometric identity cards and militarised border zones that are outsourced to corporations make any analysis of secular states and fundamentalist politics far more challenging today.

The challenges we face both theoretically and politically underscore the importance of comparative thinking. Critiques of secularism and analyses of the 'ruins' of neoliberalism, even when purporting to speak broadly, are

usually embedded in 'western' democratic perspectives. Thus, for the historian Joan Scott (2017), the history of secularism is almost entirely readable within the 'clash of civilisations' discourse in which secularism has been instrumentalized to secure the hegemony of western dominance whose primary 'other' is Islam. What we hope to do is not only to analyse the set of paradoxes we have identified above in a global and transnational context, but to root the analyses in non-Western states such as India and Turkey (and to some extent Israel), states whose constitutional and legal frameworks were seeded within principles of secularism (Bose, 2018). We hope this will encourage work that can revisit the long histories of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles in the global south, as in India secularism was a cornerstone of imagining freedom from colonial rule. In Turkey, secularism has had a long and vexed history and where it assumed an aggressively interventionist form that comprehensively sought to control and even to stamp out religion from public life, even as secularism continues to be a site for forging gender equality. In Israel, the Israeli state has attempted to stitch together a neoliberal agenda with an increasing religionisation of the Zionist project.

In the case of the AKP in Turkey and the BJP in India, it is important to underscore the fact that both are part of modern transnational movements – the AKP has deep links with the Muslim Brotherhood and the BJP with a broader Hindutva movement that gains energy and significant material support from its diasporic supporters abroad. At the same time, both have had to operate in some form of secular and democratic contexts and present themselves as 'moderate' in the international arena. In Israel, it is important to point out, democracy has never been extended to all its citizens (although the same could be said of India in Kashmir and Turkey vis a vis its Kurdish population). Israel, too, has recruited swathes of Jewish diasporic establishments to support and promote the Zionist endeavour and its settlers.

What the essays in this special issue aim to do is to help us map out the crucial convergences between the case studies, as well as important differences. Understanding both is essential for challenging the increasing stranglehold of fundamentalist politics in secular states. The first two articles in our special issue focus on India. The first, 'Hindutva, Past and Present: from Secular Democracy to Hindu Rashtra', written by Gita Sahgal, focuses on the Hindutva project as an extreme right political movement. It examines it historically and the ways in which it has undermined the constitutional character of the secular Indian state. In particular it focuses on the complex and fluid approaches adopted by the Hindutva movement on issues of caste and the control of inter-caste and inter-religion marriages. Amrita Chhachhi's article 'Neoliberalism, Hindutva and Gender: Convergence and Contradictions in the Provision of Welfare' examines how the neoliberal and Hindutva projects both collude and contest each other in Modi's India. These collusions and contestations are studied through the lens of welfare provision and in the context of the labour market, in the legal sphere with a focus on personal and citizenship laws as well as in the shifts in the patriarchal character of the state and its use of reproductive technologies.

Nira Yuval-Davis's article, 'In between neo-liberalism and religious fundamentalism' reflects on the ways the Zionist movement and the Israeli state both rejected and relied upon Jewish religious discourse and how gradually Israel has been going a process of religionization at the same time as it has been going through a process of neoliberalisation. It examines the conflicts as well as collusion between religion and neoliberalism have had on gender relations in Israel, focusing on the incorporation of ultra-orthodox Israeli Jewish women into the labour market and higher education as an illustrative case study. For Turkey, we present an in-depth interview with Deniz Kandiyoti on 'The Pitfalls of Secularism in Turkey'. Building on a life's work on the politics of gender and state in Turkey, Kandiyoti traces the complicated history of secularism

from the post-imperial turmoil at the very beginning of the twentieth century to Kemalist state's formation as a modern secular republic in 1923 to the resurgence of Islamic politics under Erdogan.

Rohini Hensman in her article, 'Christianity and Abortion Rights' examines the ongoing struggle for women's rights to control their own bodies, specifically access to abortion, led by feminists and progressives across the world. Hensman focuses on the ways in which fundamentalist Christian groups are engaged in pushing back the hard-won battles of feminist and progressive movements by pushing a pro-life, anti-abortion agenda that has resulted in limits being placed on women's access to safe abortion in many countries across the world. These fundamentalist groups are transnational in orientation and are an integral part of a larger backlash on women's reproductive rights, from Argentina to the US to Poland and elsewhere.

In addition to our special focus articles discussed above, we have an additional feature essay by Alison Assiter and María J. Binetti on the emergence of what they call a 'postmodern post-feminism without women' and an interview with Caroline Fourest on her work as a writer and journalist in France as a critic of both Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. We also have shorter presentations in our *Voices of Dissent* segments on the women's revolution in Sudan (Amira Ahmed), on Hungary as a 'laboratory' of illiberal policies (Andrea Pető), and on the women of Shaheen Bagh protesting against India's discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (Shirin Rai). We are also incredibly proud to carry poetry from the citizenship protests in India. Many of these poems were performed at protests and sit-ins or were written as a form of resistance. They have been sensitively curated by Mahtab Alam. We are extremely grateful to the poets Aamir Aziz, Rehna Sultana, Hafiz Ahmed, Hussain Haidry, Nabiya Khan, Kaushik Raj, Taikhum Sadiq and Iqra Khan who have so generously shared their work with *Feminist Dissent*. We are

honoured to be carrying the first published compilation of this poetry. We also want to thank Yehudis Fletcher for her moving poem 'Wedding Night'. We hope you will appreciate the powerful set of photographs that are the work of Nazes Afroz, Ateş Alpar, Cecilia Garcia, Agata Kubis and Shirin Rai. These photographs provide a moving visual testimony of protests women, queers and transsexuals against fundamentalist movements across the world, from Argentina, Poland, Turkey and India. We are also carrying reviews by Angela Saini on recent books dealing with gender and genetics, Stephen Cowden on Etienne Balibar's book on secularism and cosmopolitanism, Charmaine Pereira on Sarah Eltantawi's book on the Islamic revolution in northern Nigeria and Alison Assiter's review of books by Afiya Zia and Ayesha Khan on the women's movement and the politics of faith in Pakistan.

Finally, it bears mentioning that this issue is being published during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Among other things, it has exposed the destructive effects of neoliberalism, particularly in the shrinking of public resources when they are most needed. It has also contributed to a further erosion of democracy and accountability, as well as opened up new opportunities for 'crony capitalism', a mutated form of neoliberalism that attempts to seize more public funds than ever before and to hollow out the public sector altogether. Meanwhile, fundamentalist movements and right-wing governments have raised doubt over the scientific advice of health experts and defied international health norms, thereby exacerbating the effects of the virus on the poorest and most marginalised communities while also scapegoating them as spreaders of the virus. The pandemic has also had profound effects on the reproductive labour of women worldwide, exacerbating already existing inequalities. There has also been an exponential increase in cases of domestic violence and exposed women to greater patriarchal and community control.

If there is a ray of hope at the end of this dark tunnel, it lies in the fact that on the practical level the pandemic has also created new modes of

communitarian living via mutual aid groups and neighbourhood support committees. It has also drawn greater theoretical and political attention to women's reproductive labour within the home and the world outside. We hope this issue, although not focused on the gendered effects of the pandemic, provides analyses that can contribute towards imagining feminist futures in secular states and help us navigate our way out of this crisis.

**Yasmin Rehman** is a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Dissent*. She is Chief Executive Officer at Juno Women's Aid, East Midlands, UK. She is the co-editor of *Moving in the Shadows: Violence in the Lives of Minority Women and Girls* (2013). She was awarded the Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year in 2017.

**Gita Sahgal** is a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Dissent*. She was a co-founder of Southall Black Sisters, a founder member of the group Women against Fundamentalism and of the Centre for Secular Space. She co-edited, with Nira Yuval-Davis, *Refusing Holy Orders: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain* (1992).

**Rashmi Varma** is a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Dissent*. She teaches English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick.

**Nira Yuval-Davis** is a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Dissent*. She is Professor Emeritus, Honorary Director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at the University of East London. She is a founder member of Women Against Fundamentalism and co-author most recently of the book *Bordering* (2019).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Yuval-Davis (2012) provides an important account of what she calls the double crisis of governability and governmentality under global neoliberalism, especially after 2008.