

## SOCIAL THOUGHT AND COMMENTARY

# Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency

**Charles Hirschkind**

*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

**Saba Mahmood**

*The University of Chicago*

**O**n a cool breezy evening in March 1999, Hollywood celebrities turned out in large numbers to show their support for the Feminist Majority's campaign against the Taliban's brutal treatment of Afghan women. Jay and Mavis Leno hosted the event, and the audience included celebrities like Kathy Bates, Geena Davis, Sidney Potier, and Lily Tomlin. Jay Leno had tears in his eyes as he spoke to an audience that filled the cavernous Directors Guild of American Theater to capacity. It is doubtful that most people in this crowd had heard of the suffering of Afghan women before. But by the time Mellissa Etheridge, Wynonna Judd, and Sarah McLachlan took to the stage, following the Afghan chant meaning "We are with you," tears were streaming down many cheeks.<sup>2</sup>

The person spearheading this campaign was Mavis Leno, Jay Leno's wife, who had been catapulted into political activism upon hearing about the plight of Afghan women living under the brutal regime of the Taliban. This form of Third World solidarity was new for Mavis Leno. Prior to embarking on this project, reports *George* magazine, "Leno restricted her activism to the Freddy the Pig Club, the not-so radical group devoted to a rare series of out-of-print children's books."<sup>3</sup> She was recruited by her Beverly Hills neighbor to join the Feminist Majority, an organization formed by Eleanor Smeal, a former president of NOW.

Little did members of the Feminist Majority know that Leno would make the plight of Afghan women living under the Taliban rule a cause célèbre: not only did the Hollywood celebrities join the ranks of what came to be called the “Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan” campaign, but a large number of popular women’s magazines (like *Glamour*, *Jane*, *Teen*, etc.), in addition to feminist journals like *Sojourner*, *Off our Backs* and *Ms.*, carried articles on the plight of Afghan women living under the Taliban. The Lenos personally gave a contribution of \$100,000 to help kick off a public awareness campaign. Mavis Leno testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, spoke to Unocal shareholders to dissuade them from investing in Afghanistan, and met with President Bill Clinton to convince him to change his wavering policy toward the Taliban. In addition, the Feminist Majority carried out a broad letter writing campaign targeted at the White House. The Feminist Majority claims that it was their work that eventually dissuaded Unocal officials to abandon their plans to develop a natural gas pipeline in Afghanistan, and convinced the Hollywood-friendly Bill Clinton to condemn the Taliban regime.

Even skeptics who are normally leery of Western feminists’ paternalistic desire to “save Third World women” were sympathetic to the Feminist Majority’s campaign. This was in part because the restrictions that the Taliban had imposed on women in Afghanistan seemed atrocious by any standard: They forbade women from all positions of employment, eliminated schools for girls and university education for women in cities, outlawed women from leaving their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative, and forced women to wear the *burqa* (a head to toe covering with a mesh opening to see through). Women were reportedly beaten and flogged for violating Taliban edicts. There seemed to be little doubt in the minds of many that the United States, with its impressive political and economic leverage in the region, could help alleviate this sad state of affairs. As one friend put it, “Finally our government can do something good for women’s rights out there, rather than working for corporate profits.” Rallying against the Taliban to protest their policies against Afghan women provided a point of unity for groups from a range of political perspectives: from conservatives to liberals and radicals, from Republicans to Democrats, and from Hollywood glitterati to grass roots activists. By the time the war started, feminists like Smeal could be found cozily chatting with the generals about their shared enthusiasm for Operation Enduring Freedom and the possibility of women pilots commandeering F-16s.<sup>4</sup>

Among the key factors that facilitated this remarkable consensus, there are two in particular that we wish to explore here: the studied silence about the cru-

cial role the United States had played in creating the miserable conditions under which Afghan women were living; and secondly, a whole set of questionable assumptions, anxieties, and prejudices embedded in the notion of Islamic fundamentalism. It was striking how a number of commentators, in discussions that preceded the war, regularly failed to connect the predicament of women in Afghanistan with the massive military and economic support that the US provided, as part of its Cold War strategy, to the most extreme of Afghan religious militant groups. This silence, a concomitant of the recharged enthusiasm for the US military both within academia and among the American public more generally, also characterized much of the response both to reports of mounting civilian casualties resulting from the bombing campaign, and to the widespread famine that the campaign threatened to aggravate. For example, as late as early December, the Feminist Majority website remained stubbornly focused on the ills of Taliban rule, with no mention of the 2.2 million victims of three years of drought who were put at greater risk of starvation because US bombing severely restricted the delivery of food aid. Indeed, the Feminist Majority made no attempts to join the calls issued by a number of humanitarian organizations—including the Afghan Women’s Mission—to halt the bombing so that food might have been transported to the Afghans before winter set in.<sup>5</sup> In the crusade to liberate Afghan women from the tyranny of Taliban rule, there seemed to be no limit of the violence to which Americans were willing to subject the Afghans, women and men alike. Afghanistan, so it appeared, had to bear another devastating war so that, as the *New York Times* triumphantly noted at the exodus of the Taliban from Kabul, women can now wear *burqas* “out of choice” rather than compulsion.

The twin figures of the Islamic fundamentalist and his female victim helped consolidate and popularize the view that such hardship and sacrifice were for Afghanistan’s own good. Following the September 11th attacks, the *burqa*-clad body of the Afghan woman became the visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only “us,” citizens of the West, but our entire civilization. This image, one foregrounded initially by the Feminist Majority campaign though later seized on by the Bush administration and the mainstream media, served as a key element in the construction of the Taliban as an enemy particularly deserving of our wrath because of their harsh treatment of women. As Laura Bush put it in her November 17<sup>th</sup> radio address to the nation: “Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest

of us.” Not surprisingly, the military success of Operation Enduring Freedom was celebrated first and foremost as the liberation of Afghan women from Taliban control.

Our main concern here is not simply to dwell on the inadequacies of the campaign to rescue Afghan women by the Feminist Majority or other groups, but to address the larger set of assumptions and attitudes undergirding this campaign and that are reflected widely in American public opinion: attitudes about the proper place of public religious morality in modern Islamic societies, and in particular how such morality is seen to shape and constrain women’s behavior. The Taliban in many ways have become a potent symbol of all that liberal public opinion regards as grievously wrong with Islamic societies these days, proof of the intense misogyny long ascribed to Islam, and most emphatically to those movements within Islam referred to as fundamentalist. That from the rubble left behind by the game of super power politics played out on Afghan bodies and communities, we can only identify the misogynist machinations of the Islamic fundamentalist testifies to the power this image bears, and the force it exerts on our political imagination.

### **Counterinsurgency**

It is striking that even among many of those who came to acknowledge the US involvement in the civil war in Afghanistan, the neat circuit of women’s oppression, Taliban evil, and Islamic fundamentalism remained largely unchallenged. It is worthwhile here to briefly recall some of the stunning history of the conflict in Afghanistan. US concern for what was until then a neglected part of South West Asia was greatly heightened when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. President Jimmy Carter signed a directive to begin covert operations in Afghanistan in order to harass the Soviet occupying forces by supplying funds, weapons, and other forms of support to the Afghan fighters known as the *mujahedeen*. By 1986, under the Reagan administration, this project had mushroomed into the largest covert operation in US history since WW II. Overall, the US funneled more than \$3 billion to the mujahedeen, with an equal if not greater amount coming from Saudi Arabia, one of the staunchest US allies. The Saudi monarchy had historically been lavish funders of anti-leftist forces around the globe. The aims of the Saudi monarchy to root out any communist influence from the Muslim world dovetailed with the Reagan Doctrine which had increased US support for anticommunist insurgencies against Soviet-backed regimes in various parts of the Third World.

Pakistan was the ground from which this covert operation was staged. The then military dictator of Pakistan, General Zia ul-Haq, who had just overthrown the democratically elected prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was more than eager to oblige the Americans, not only as a means to obtain US economic aid but also to bolster the legitimacy of his military rule. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI, was a key player in both channeling US arms to the Afghan *mujahedeen*, as well as training them. The strategy that the CIA pursued in this covert operation was quite different from the one pursued in Nicaragua and Angola insofar as no Americans trained the *mujahedeen* directly—instead the CIA trained Pakistani instructors and members of the ISI.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the Afghan war, critics of the CIA's covert operation voiced two major complaints: first, that the bulk of US aid was being funneled to the most extreme and conservative Islamic groups from the Afghan opposition; second, that as an indirect consequence of the CIA operation, the Afghanistan-Pakistan region was now the largest producer of heroin as well as a sizeable marketplace for illicit arms. Let us consider each of these. When Moscow first intervened militarily in Afghanistan in 1979, there were a variety of both Islamic and secular-nationalist Afghan groups opposed to the Moscow-backed Communists, some of them espousing political and religious positions we would label "moderate." Yet the majority of the US aid (as much as 75%) was channeled to the most extremist of these opposition groups, an important consequence of which was the marginalization of moderate and secular voices. It is widely understood that the Pakistani agency ISI was instrumental in choosing these groups. But as the *World Policy Journal* noted, "There is no evidence to indicate that CIA officials or other US policymakers strenuously objected to the channeling of aid to the most extreme authoritarian elements of the Afghan resistance".<sup>7</sup>

One of the most favored of these groups was headed by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a man known for throwing acid in the faces of women who refused to wear the veil, and whose group received as much as 50% of US aid. When questioned about the US support of Hekmatyar, a CIA official in Pakistan explained, "Fanatics fight better."<sup>8</sup> This policy of promoting extremist Islamic groups in the region, and equipping them with the most sophisticated military and intelligence equipment, had gradually, over a period of ten years, created the political climate in which the emergence of the Taliban was a predictable outcome. Even though the Taliban did not come into power until 1995, well after both the US and Soviet Union had withdrawn from the region, their methods were not much different from groups that the US and its allies had supported. Neither, for that matter, are the practices of the United States' more

recent allies, the Northern Alliance, a fact that is becoming evident since their seizure of power in Kabul. After the exodus of the Taliban, as the Northern Alliance were being legitimized in Germany, the widely respected Afghan women's organization, Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, put out a statement saying "The people of the world need to know that in terms of widespread raping of girls and women from seven to 70, the track record of the Taliban can no way stand up against that of these very same Northern Alliance associates."<sup>9</sup>

The arms pipeline established between the US-ISI-*Mujahedeen* was notoriously corrupt, and many of the arms that the CIA supplied ended up being sold in the open market as well as being channeled to groups of fighters already known for their excessively violent tactics against non-combatant peoples living within the area of conflict. The CIA turned a blind eye to this arms leak, chalking it up to the necessary cost of a covert operation, and in so doing, turned the region into one of the most heavily armed areas in the world.<sup>10</sup> In addition, as the Afghan *mujahedeen* gained control over liberated zones in Afghanistan, they required that their supporters grow opium to support the resistance. Under CIA and Pakistani protection, Pakistan military and Afghan resistance fighters opened heroin labs on the border between the two countries. By 1981 this region was supplying 60% of the US demand for heroin. In Pakistan the results were particularly horrendous: the number of heroin addicts rose from a handful in 1979 to one million two hundred thousand by 1995.<sup>11</sup>

In its literature, the Feminist Majority claims that "Afghanistan, under the Taliban rule, [had] become the number one producer of illicit opium and heroin in the world."<sup>12</sup> Insomuch as the Taliban did not come to power until 1995 and Afghanistan was already the major supplier of world heroin by 1985, this was a misrepresentation of facts. On the contrary, according to the United Nations, the Taliban all but eliminated heroin production in the first year from the areas under their control.<sup>13</sup> Where heroin production did continue to flourish was in areas controlled by the Northern Alliance. Its cultivation has remained an important source of revenue for them, and indeed, since their rise to power, poppy cultivation has been revived in many of the areas from which the Taliban had managed to eliminate it. The Feminist Majority's misrepresentation of the Taliban drug policy was consistent with the overall picture that the group sought to present, one that held the Taliban solely responsible for the catastrophic situation that the Afghans, in particular women, faced.

Feminist Majority statements consistently ignored the devastation wrought by two decades of warfare in which women and children had suffered most heav-

ily, and instead suggested a relatively benign picture of women's lives prior to Taliban rule. For example, in 1998 when the Lenos announced their \$100,000 contribution to the Feminist Majority campaign, Mavis Leno said, "Two years ago women in Afghanistan could work, be educated, and move about freely. Then the Taliban seized power. Today women are prohibited from leaving their homes unless accompanied by a close male relative and are forced to wear the burqa. Girls and women are banned from schooling....No healthcare...no education...no freedom of movement. This nightmare is reality for 11.5 million women and girls in Afghanistan."<sup>14</sup> It has been common knowledge for anyone interested in the region that Afghan men and women have long suffered from many of the ills that the Feminist Majority attributed to the Taliban. For example, in addition to being one of the poorest nations of the world, Afghanistan had, for a number of years, one of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates. These conditions were only exacerbated by twenty years of war during which the delicate balance of tribal power was radically destabilized by the influx of weapons, making ordinary people subject to violence on an unprecedented scale. As is often the case, the increased militarization of Afghan society made women more subject to violence than at any time before. During this period of civil war, perhaps two million Afghans were killed, and six million made refugees—75% of whom are women and children. Afghanistan today remains one of the most heavily land-mined countries in the world, with people being maimed and killed on a daily basis. And if those weapons are inadequate, among the many types of collateral that the US has put into its recent deal with the country is a new stratum of unexploded munitions. Given these conditions, the narrow focus on Taliban rule by the Feminist Majority and other groups, and their silence on the channeling of US aid to the most brutal and violent Afghan groups (of which the Taliban were only one), must be seen as a dangerous simplification of a vastly more complicated problem. Why were conditions of war, militarization, and starvation considered to be less injurious to women than the lack of education, employment, and, most notably, in the media campaign, Western dress styles?

The silence among scholars and women's advocacy groups around these issues was coupled with a highly selective and limited representation of Afghan life under Taliban rule, one that filtered out all information that might contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Afghan women's situation. For example, the Taliban decree to ban girls and women from schools affected only a tiny minority of urban dwellers since the majority of the population reside in the rural areas where there are few schools: approximately 90% of women and 60% of men in Afghanistan are illiterate. Likewise, rarely was it mentioned that the Taliban

policy of disarming the population, and the strict surveillance of all major areas under their control had made it possible for the first time in years for women to move outside their homes without fear of being raped (of course, being beaten for a variety of moral transgressions remained a distinct possibility). According to recent reports, this security is rapidly disintegrating. As the Agence France-Pressé recently reported, "Just 10 weeks after the Taliban fled Kabul city, Afghans are already starting to say they felt safer under the now-defeated hardline militia than under the power-sharing interim administration that has replaced it. Murders, robberies and hijackings in the capital, factional clashes in the north and south of the country, instability in Kandahar and banditry on roads linking main centres are beginning to erode the optimism that greeted the inauguration of the interim administration on December 22."<sup>15</sup>

Equally relevant here is the fact that even though Taliban policies had made conditions much worse for urban women, they did not substantially affect the lives of the vast majority of rural women either because many of the Taliban edicts already mirrored facts of rural life, or because those edicts were never enforced. Sensitive writers documenting the catastrophe unfolding in Afghanistan have occasionally pointed this out. For example, an article published in the *New Yorker* noted that just outside of the urban centers, "one sees raised paths subdividing wheat fields... in which men and women work together and the women rarely wear the burka; indeed, since they are sweating and stooping so much, their heads often remain uncovered. The Taliban has scarcely altered the lives of uneducated women, except to make them almost entirely safe from rape."<sup>16</sup> As the article suggested, one consequence of the admittedly oppressive regulations put into place by the Taliban was that life for the majority of Afghans had become considerably safer.<sup>17</sup> Despite the availability of this kind of data, the Feminist Majority and other advocacy groups carefully kept any ambiguities out of their case against the Taliban as the sole perpetrators of the ills committed against Afghan women.

Taking these realities into account demands a more nuanced strategy on the part of anyone who wishes to help the women of Afghanistan in the long run. Already before the bombing began, one consequence of the campaign to rescue Afghan women was the dramatic reduction of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, the brunt of which was borne by women and children as the most destitute members of the population.<sup>18</sup> When some of those concerned protested this outcome, they were chided for being soft on the Taliban.<sup>19</sup> It seemed like any attempt to widen the discussion beyond the admittedly brutal practices of the Taliban was doomed to be labeled as antithetical to women's interests.



## Fundamentalism

In addition to the uncritical stance adopted towards US foreign policy by many of those who took up the cause of Afghanistan's women, an important factor that inhibited a more complex analysis to emerge was the trope of Islamic fundamentalism, one that offered a ready-made explanation for whatever violence to which Afghan women were subjected. It seemed that historical analysis was unnecessary because images of veiled women, so skillfully marshaled by organization like the Feminist Majority, were explanation enough for what most Americans already knew: that Islam in a variety of its forms, and in particular so-called Islamic fundamentalism, is generally oppressive of women. Afghan women are only one of its more recent and dramatic victims. A more realistic assessment of the impact of Taliban rule on women living in conditions of militarization, social disintegration, intense poverty, and endless war could not be accommodated in this view and was therefore rejected. Instead, the trope of Islamic extremism allowed a vast field of wrongs suffered by Afghan women to be consolidated within a simple and singular explanatory framework, with the fundamentalist Taliban at its center.

The point we wish to make here is that Afghanistan and Pakistan have been entirely transformed by the roles they were recruited to play during the Cold War conflict. The vast dissemination of arms, military training, the creation of a thriving drug trade with its attendant criminal activity, and all of this in circumstances of desperate poverty, has had a radical impact on the conditions of moral and political action for the people in the region. Colombia may serve as a useful comparison in this regard. As it has been widely reported in the US media, the rampant violence in Colombia is directly tied to its status as one of the largest producers and traffickers of narcotics, and the proliferation of arms associated with this trade. Yet while we tend to acknowledge the role of militarization and drugs in the case of the ongoing violence in Colombia, in Afghanistan we instead seek explanations in the psychology of the so-called fundamentalist.

The wide currency such explanations enjoy, even among materialist feminists like Barbara Ehrenreich, is startling. In a recent op-ed piece in *Los Angeles Times*, Ehrenreich complains about the lack of analysis among progressives of the "hatred of women" that the Taliban, and Islamic fundamentalists more generally, exhibit.<sup>20</sup> She then proceeds to offer an explanation for this hatred through reference to a "global masculinity crisis" that Third World men are supposedly facing because of women's entry into arenas of employment and political participation. What accounts for the Taliban's misogyny in particular, she suggests, is the masculinist ethos of the all-male *madrasas* [religious schools]

devoid of the “potentially softening influence of mothers and sisters.” Since Ehrenreich is a scholar who has often presented cogent analyses of the material conditions of gender inequality in this country, it is surprising that when it comes to Islam she too, like the Feminist Majority, can offer up an analysis of the conditions of Afghan women’s lives that barely touches on the context of persistent war, rampant ethnic and tribal violence, and the complete unraveling of Afghanistan’s complicated social fabric that resulted from the country’s incorporation into the Cold War. Instead, Ehrenreich grounds her explanations in popular narratives of the psychological blowback produced by modernization (“masculinity crisis”) and exemplified in the figure of the Muslim fundamentalist.

### **The pariahs of the world**

What gives Islamic fundamentalism such explanatory power? To begin, note the variety of ideas, images, and fears that Islamic fundamentalism evokes in the American imagination: women wearing headscarves (now, *burqas*), the cutting off of hands and heads, massive crowds praying in unison, the imposition of a normative public morality grounded in a puritanical and legalistic interpretation of religious texts, a rejection and hatred of the West and its globalized culture, the desire to put aside history and return to a pristine past, and the quick recourse to violence against those who are different. In other words, the notion of fundamentalism collapses a rather heterogeneous collection of images and descriptions, linking them together as aspects of a singular socio-religious formation. Moreover, in their longstanding representation of Islam as violent spectacle (like a 1400-year-old train wreck), CNN and their competitors have managed to endow each one of these images with the power to immediately animate all of the others, each one a falling stone capable of bringing the avalanche of Islamic global terror down on the US. What allows this reduction is the idea that all of these phenomena are expressions of Islam in its dangerous and regressive form, its fundamentalist form.

Note also that this complex of features does not fit together in the way that the notion of fundamentalism implies, any more than, say, being a born-again Christian in the US entails one’s willingness to assassinate doctors who perform abortions, or that being a Peruvian leftist is equivalent to being a supporter of Sendero Luminoso, or, for that matter, that liberalism fits with Nazism simply because the latter emerged in a liberal democracy (recall that Hitler came into power by popular vote). What is at stake here, however, is not simply a problem of definition, but of political strategy: that is, the reduction effected by

terms like fundamentalism allows US public opinion in this moment to equate those who attacked New York and Washington with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, with those Islamic schools that impart a strict interpretation of Islam, with Muslim preachers who criticize the US for its liberal social mores, with Arab families in Detroit that have daughters who wear headscarves. In so far as these different actors and institutions may be thought of as different faces of a global fundamentalism, now increasingly associated with terrorism, they may also be conceived of as legitimate targets, whether for intelligence gathering or for aerial bombing.

Let us give an example that points to the problems entailed by the concept of "global fundamentalism." Not unlike Afghan women now, Salman Rushdie's name also became a cause célèbre in the West in the 1980s when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* against Rushdie's life for having written a blasphemous book supposedly injurious to Muslim sensibilities. Rushdie has recently written two essays on the current crisis that are worth quoting from, particularly in light of the moral authority he has been accorded in Europe and the US as a defender of liberal freedoms. Referring to those who carried out the attacks on September 11, Rushdie writes:

"Whatever the killers were trying to achieve, it seems improbable that building a better world was part of it. The fundamentalist seeks to bring down a great deal more than buildings. Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women's rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex." He continues later, "The fundamentalist believes that we believe in nothing. In his world-view, he has his absolute certainties, while we are sunk in sybaritic indulgences. To prove him wrong, we must first know that he is wrong. We must agree on what matters: kissing in public places, bacon sandwiches, disagreement, cutting-edge fashion, literature, generosity, water, a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, movies, music, freedom of thought, beauty, love."<sup>21</sup>

This list couples, in bizarre fashion, the political principles at the heart of a liberal polity, on one hand, with those titillating icons of hetero-normative pleasure that trigger a warm feeling of self recognition and superiority among cosmopolitans. It is as if Rushdie worried that the staidness of the former could not convince without the sexiness of the latter (and here we would note that,

among the multiple violences that have come to define Afghan women, it is an article of clothing that always appears at the top of the list). The rhetoric works something like this: a society in which women can't wear mini-skirts is also against adult suffrage; an equitable distribution of wealth demands kissing in public; eating bacon sandwiches (that is, pork) equips one to enjoy literature and movies. In other words, those who have increasingly come to see Islam as important to their lives, their politics, and their forms of public expression—and therefore don't eat pork, don't kiss in public, and don't subscribe to evolutionary theory—are destined to live within authoritarian, intolerant, and misogynist societies. The implicit suggestion is that any departure from Western cultural and political norms becomes a threat to all aspects of our lives, from our political system to our private pleasures. That this argument occurs today at a political moment in which Americans are being told to be on constant alert for "suspicious looking people" should give us some pause and provoke reflection.

Rushdie's statements are also misleading in their portrayal of contemporary Islamic movements, or what he refers to as fundamentalism. A large sector of the Islamic movement, *pace* Rushdie, is neither against a multi-party political system, nor universal suffrage and accountable government. In fact, in many parts of the Muslim world (such as Egypt, Indonesia, Turkey, and Tunisia), Islamic political parties contest elections when allowed, and are a part of the voices striving for greater democratization and political liberalization. In Egypt, for example, the Labor Party (*Hizb al-Amal*), in coalition with one of the major Islamist organizations in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood, regularly floats candidates in local and national elections. In addition, over the last ten years, the Egyptian unions of physicians, engineers, and lawyers have elected Islamist activists to serve as their leaders and representatives. In many cases, it is the quasi-secular governments of Muslim countries that have banned Islamist political parties (as is the case in Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia) from participating in the electoral process. In doing so, they have only given weight to the militants' argument that the sole avenue for political change is armed struggle and guerilla warfare. Other currents within the Islamic movement are engaged in pious and welfare activities, and have little to do with electoral political reform, let alone militant activism. In other words, the disparate currents within contemporary Islam, all of which are lumped together under the rubric of fundamentalism, do not cohere in a singular movement definable for its dangerous regressivity. They differ in their goals, their politics, their models of society, and their understandings of moral responsibility. It is particularly important to recognize these differences in the context of today's burgeoning conflict.

## Public religion

One reason why Islamic movements make many liberals and progressives uncomfortable is the Islamists' introduction of religious concerns into what are considered to be properly political issues. The argument is often made that if the Muslim world is to become modern and civilized, it must assign Islam to the space of the private and personal. When religion is allowed to enter into public debate and make political claims, we are told, it results in rigid and intolerant policies that are particularly injurious to women and minorities. Once again we quote from Salman Rushdie who reiterates this admonishment to the Muslim world: "The restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal, its depoliticization, is the nettle that all Muslim societies must grasp in order to become modern....If terrorism is to be defeated, the world of Islam must take on board the secular-humanist principles on which the modern is based, and without which Muslim countries' freedom will remain a distant dream."<sup>22</sup>

One of the many problems with such a formulation is that it ignores the multiple ways in which the public and private are linked in contemporary society. As many scholars have argued for some time now, the division between the public and the private is quite porous; the two are ineluctably intertwined in myriad ways. The most striking example of this linkage is the reaction that the adoption of the veil provoked in some European and Middle Eastern countries. In France, for example, the decision on the part of Muslim schoolgirls to wear the headscarf was denounced as injurious to French public life and in 1994 the French government banned the headscarves from public schools. Similarly, between 1998-2000, more than 25,000 women were barred from Turkey's college campuses because they refused to remove the headscarves, and hundreds of government employees were fired, demoted or transferred for the same reason.<sup>23</sup> In all of these instances, the pleas of the young women that their adoption of the veil was an expression of their personal faith, and not an endorsement of state-censured Islamist politics, went unheeded.

Both of these examples demonstrate not simply that the private and the public are inter-twined, but more importantly that only certain expressions of "personal faith"—and not others—are to be tolerated even in modern liberal societies. That is, what gets relegated to the sphere of the personal is still a *public* decision. Thus we need to put to question the idea suggested by Rushdie, among others, that were Muslims simply to privatize their faith, their behavior would become acceptable to secular sensibilities.

One of the reasons why the veil provoked such a passionate response even among feminists in France is the assumption that it potently symbolizes

women's subordinate status within Islam. A number of French feminists supported the ban on the headscarf because, as a leading French feminist intellectual, Elizabeth Badinter, put it, "The veil... is the symbol of the oppression of a sex. Putting on torn jeans, wearing yellow, green, or blue hair, this is an act of freedom with regard to social conventions. Putting a veil on the head, this is an act of submission. It burdens a woman's whole life."<sup>24</sup> While the veil's symbolic meaning has been frequently discussed, particularly by those opposed to it, the question is far more complicated than suggested here. The veil has been freighted with so many meanings in contemporary social and political conflicts that any ascription of a singular meaning to it—such as 'symbol of women's oppression'—is unconvincing. Think of the very different contexts within which the practice of veiling is undertaken, for example, in Afghanistan, France, Turkey, or for that matter the US. Whereas the veil was forced on urban women in Afghanistan by the Taliban under the threat of physical violence, in France its adoption has, in many instances, come in the context of young women going against their parents' more assimilated life-styles. In Turkey, on the other hand, the coercive powers of the law were marshaled, back in the 1920s, to force woman to *unveil*. More recently, the practice of veiling has gained ascendancy as part of an opposition movement protesting the rigid policies of a state that insists on dictating the ways in which personal practices of religious piety should appear in public. Note that this is not to say the veil never works to signify women's oppression. The point is that to speak about the meaning of the veil in any of these contexts requires a lot more analytical work than that undertaken by those who oppose its adoption.

It is interesting that Badinter opposes the decision to veil by young Muslims girls on the grounds that, as an act in accord with (and therefore not in contest with) Islamic norms of female modesty, it does not rise to the status of "an act of freedom in regards to social conventions." This points out the degree to which the normative subject of feminism remains a liberatory one: one who contests social norms (by wearing torn jeans and dyeing her hair blue), but not one who finds purpose, value, and pride in the struggle to live in accord with certain tradition sanctioned virtues. Women's voluntary adoption of what are considered to be patriarchal practices are often explained by feminists in terms of false consciousness, or an internalization of patriarchal social values by those who live within the asphyxiating confines of traditional societies. Even those analyses that demonstrate the workings of women's subversive agency in the enactment of social conventions remain circumscribed within the singular logic of subordination and insubordination. A Muslim woman can only be one

of two things, either uncovered, and therefore liberated, or veiled, and thus still, to some degree, subordinate. Can our bras, ties, pants, miniskirts, underwear, and bathing suits all be so easily arrayed on one or the other side of this divide? Can our daily activities and life decisions really be captured and understood within this logic of freedom or captivity?

We need a way to think about the lives of Muslim women outside this simple opposition. This is especially so in those moments of crisis, such as today, when we tend to forget that the particular set of desires, needs, hopes, and pleasures that liberals and progressives embrace do not *necessarily* exhaust the possibilities of human flourishing. We need to recognize that, whatever effect it has had on the women who wear it, the veil has also had a radical impact on our own field of vision, on our capacity to recognize Muslim societies for something other than misogyny and patriarchal violence. Our ability to respond, morally and politically, in a responsible way to these forms of violence will depend on extending these powers of sight.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Noah Solomon and Scott Richard for their research assistance in gathering the pertinent data for this article.

<sup>2</sup> Stacie Stukin, "Warrior Princes," *George*, July 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Stukin, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Lerner, "Feminists Agonize Over War in Afghanistan: What Women Want," *The Village Voice*, October 31, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> The Afghan Women's Mission reported that according to UNICEF, "Two million people do not have enough food to last the winter, and 500,000 of them will be unreachable after snow begins to fall in mid-November." From the press release issued by Afghan Women's Mission, October 2001, <http://www.afghanwomensmission.org>.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Coll, "Anatomy of a Victory: CIA's Covert Afghan War," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> *World Policy Journal*, "The Unintended Consequences of Afghanistan," Spring 1994, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp.62-63.

<sup>9</sup> *Reuters Wire Service*, "Afghan Women's Group Gloomy of the Post-Taliban Era," December 10, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> *Electronic Telegraph* reported that the CIA had spent "more than 170 million in a belated and often bungled operation to buy back the missiles" it had provided to the Afghan resistance (Daniel McGrory, "CIA Stung by Its Stingers," November 3, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books), pp. 445-460.

<sup>12</sup> From "Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan Organizational Co-Sponsor Resolution," <http://www.feminist.org/afghan/afghanresolution/html> (July 4, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times* reported that the Taliban's "ban on opium-poppy cultivation appears to have wiped out the world's largest crop in less than a year" (Barbara Crossette, "Taliban's Ban on Poppy A Success, U.S. Aides Say, May 20, 2001). The *Times* acknowledged that poor farmers were most adversely affected by this ban since they could not grow any other crop that would fetch them the same kind of income.

<sup>14</sup> "Mavis Leno to Chair Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid," <http://www.feminist.org/news/pr/pr102198.html>, July 4, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Agence France-Presse, Friday January 25, 2002, <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/020125/1/2crv0.html>.

<sup>16</sup> William Vollmann, "Letters from Afghanistan: Across the Divide," *The New Yorker*, May 15, 2000, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Vollmann, pp. 64-65.

<sup>18</sup> See Megan Reif, "Beyond the Veil—Bigger Issues," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, 2000. Also see "Afghanistan—UN Denies Aid," *Off Our Backs*, 28, no. 5 1998.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the response to Megan Reif's article (May 3, 2000) by Mavis Leno in the *Christian Science Monitor*, May 18, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, "Veiled Threats," *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Fighting the Forces of Invisibility," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Yes, This is About Islam," *New York Times*, November 2, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Molly Moore, "The Problems of Turkey Rest on Women's Heads: Islamic Scarves Seen as Threat to Secular State," *The Washington Post*, October 9 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Norma Claire Moruzzi, "A Problem with Headscarves: Contemporary Complexities of Political and Social Identity," *Political Theory*, vol. 22, no. 4, November 1994, p. 662.



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