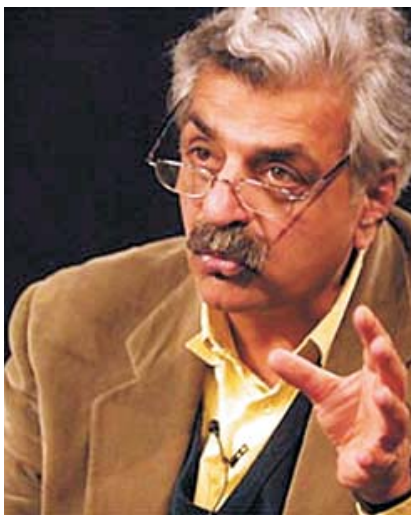


HOW THE CHANGING ECONOMIC COURSE IS NEUTRALISING XENOPHOBIA

Tariq Ali

SPECIAL OPINION



TARIQ ALI is a famous British and Pakistani left-wing theorist. He is also a historian and a writer and is a member of the editorial board at *The New Left Review*. In addition, Ali is a contributing writer for *The Guardian*, *Counterpunch* and the *London Review of Books*

RJ *Is the hostility towards ethnic groups – for example, against migrants, or against citizens of other ethnic groups – merely a substitute for an authentic social process that has nothing to do with xenophobia? For example, while people experience some injustice, they do not understand where it is coming from and merely attribute it to ethnic causes.*

While historically this is true, it is not simply the spontaneity of these protests that one has to look at, it is also which of the political groups are behind them. Therefore, if you look at Europe in the nineteen-thirties leading up to the Second World War, the groups that were actively promoting hostility towards minorities

and the poor were right wing groups. In some cases, these groups were extreme right wing organisations such as the fascists in Germany, Italy, and Spain. So, you have the far right current, deeply embedded in politics, which exploits the insecurity and uncertainty faced by ordinary citizens during times of severe economic crisis. Moreover, instead of stating that something is wrong with the system that produced the crisis, they blame it on scapegoats, be it historically the Jews, the Roma, or communists, which has proven to be very effective.

Today the situation is very different than before, because there are not the same political divisions that you had during the twenties, thirties, or forties. However, even in a uniform world, with essentially one dominating economic system, any crisis situations still garners the rise of extremist right wing organisations across Europe. In Italy, for instance, the coalition in power with Berlusconi includes what they call post-fascists. These are essentially individuals whose roots are in the extreme right of Italian politics. Crisis leads to the growth of extremist right wing organizations all over Europe. Conversely, it also creates a vacuum that once was filled by social democratic parties that offered alternatives, including those to people in Italy and in France.

So, it is in such a situation that there are real dangers. There is only one political current and it is very close to capitalism. This current has many different factions in it and the most extreme factions

play on ethnic hostilities. This ethnic hostility does not necessarily even have much to do with race these days. For instance, today in Europe there is a hostility towards Islam, an Islamophobia so to speak. But this is different since it is the ideological mood of the world for very clear reasons – the United States has been occupying Muslim countries in Afghanistan and the Middle East.

We are living in very confused times with an absence of political organisations that can take up these issues in a proper way and say: ‘Look, it is crazy to victimize migrants from everywhere.’ Essentially, what we are witnessing is the impact of a severe social and economic crisis on a large number of people.

RJ *Do you think welfare measures and social reforms will alleviate social unrest and, to a certain extent, appease ethnic tensions?*

It would. However, **one of the problems today is precisely that the main liberal economic system has grown increasingly removed. Not totally, of course, that would be a bit of an exaggeration, but even in Western Europe the whole tendency is to privatize, to make everything privately owned, so that even for essential needs such as health care, education, or housing, people have to pay more and more and more. Furthermore, people must also pay for basic things such as gas, electricity, and water.**

So, these developments, of course, create further uncertainties. They also generate a big economic shift towards some state of

social democracy, or some form of reviving the role of the state in order to ensure decent standards of living for its citizens, which would also have a big effect, in my opinion, on reducing xenophobia.

RJ Do you think so-called 'tribal' feelings in multicultural nations can or should be constrained by the state? If so, what kind of role should the elites play in this process?

Here I would like to look back at the elites of the republics of the former Soviet Union, including the elites of the former republics of Central Asia. These elites were trained in a similar way to the Russian elites. There was no discrimination, and that is still, unfortunately, how they operate, in a commandist way. But the positive side of this training is that it

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was not based on ethnicity and the quality of rights guaranteed to all citizens was, of course, defective. We know this, but at the same time ethnic rivalries and racism were punished quite severely and that helped create the modern free generation.

I used to travel there a lot and that was an amazing impression I used to get when I was visiting Tajikistan or Uzbekistan in the eighties. When comparing them to other parts of the Muslim world, the differences were very clear. You had educated young people there, who were not religious-minded in the extremist sense at all and who had an incredibly universal outlook. Unfortunately, with the breakup

and collapse of the Soviet Union, the implosion, Yeltsin and the clique around him failed to understand that it would create ethnic and xenophobic tensions for a variety of reasons.

For many, many generations, people from all parts of the Soviet Union lived together in regions outside their own. As a result, condition of ethnic Russians in many parts of the former Soviet Union became quite dangerous, and they were treated like second class citizens, especially in the Baltic republics. The same process took place in other parts of Russia, with citizens from all over the former Soviet Union. In my opinion, the process was handled rather poorly because Yeltsin, and partly Gorbachev, were completely bamboozled by the West during that period. They could

not think of anything except winning the approval of the West and they did not consider their own country or the direction in which it was going, which led to disaster. So, it is not surprising that today, in the former Soviet Union, you have states that are built entirely on ethnicity.

RJ Gellner said, in opposition to Marx, that the more developed the economy, the more important the ethnic differences become. Do you agree with this statement? If so, what does this correlation mean for multinational countries? Should we be prepared for more ethnic problems?

I do not agree with Gellner on

this. I think there are some examples, which could be induced. But by and large I do not think it is the case. **Capitalism is largely color blind, ethnicity blind, and even gender blind.** It would employ men, women of all colors and of all ethnic origins in order to use them to maximize profits. It has always been done this way.

RJ What is the correlation between democracy and the ethnic composition of a state? John Stuart Mill argued that democracy is possible only in ethnically homogeneous societies. Does this idea still make sense today?

Even During Mill's time it was not valid and it was linked very much to the British Empire and British colonial system. Of course, most of the countries Britain occupied were not ethnically homogeneous. Look at India, which they ruled for one hundred and fifty years. Or take a look at part of Africa. Arguments like this were used to justify the lack of democracy in the colonies. I mean what does democracy have to do with ethnic homogeneity?

It has everything to do with social class and the distribution of wealth. The people in Britain had to fight for 200 years to get the right to vote. It has nothing to do with ethnicity but rather with class. Prior to the reforms, in order to vote in Britain, one had to have money. There were property qualifications. And this is what the poor fought against.

So, I don't think Mill was right at all and today this argument is completely ludicrous. Virtually every country in the world now, including the United States, is a mixed country and this nobody can deny. ■

Tariq Ali was speaking with
Yulia Netesova