



ALJAZEERA.NET

The biggest threat to Western values

Multiculturalism does not pose a significant danger to Western values - but neoliberalism does.

Tarak Barkawi Last Modified: 27 Jul 2011 10:57



Political scientist Samuel Huntington's thought revolved around the idea that a "clash of civilisations" between East and West would define the post-Cold War era [EPA]

The paranoid style in politics often imagines unlikely alliances that coalesce into an overwhelming threat that must be countered by all necessary means.

In *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington conjured an amalgamated East - an alliance between "Confucian" and "Islamic" powers - that would challenge the West for world dominance. Many *jihadis* fear the Crusader alliance between Jews and Christians. They forget that until recently, historically speaking, populations professing the latter were the chief persecutors of the former.

Now Anders Breivik has invoked the improbable axis of Marxism, multiculturalism and Islamism, together colonising Europe. As he sees multiculturalism as essentially a Jewish plot, Breivik has managed to wrap up the new and old fascist bogies in one conspiracy: communists, Jews *and* Muslims.

Like his terrorist counterparts who kill in the name of various Islamic sects, Breivik is willing to slaughter people for an invented purity. Modern Norway is a latecomer to the world of nations, becoming sovereign only in 1905. Vikings, Arctic explorers and international humanitarians all went into imagining the place.

Given how readily *jihadi* texts are dismissed as ravings, it is notable how much attention has already been paid to Breivik's wacky ideological brew. This is a worrying portent of the line of analysis that says that the "root causes" of Breivik's madness - immigration and cultural difference - must be addressed. Otherwise, European societies will lose their social cohesion, to choose one current euphemism for the *Volk*.

To the extent such a view takes hold, the far right may be forgiven for concluding that terrorism works. As for the rest of us, now facing terrorist re-imaginings from both sides of obscure battles in a mythic past, we may long for the leftist and anti-colonial insurgents of bygone days. They at least could offer plausible accounts of what they were up to.

To be sure, tactically speaking, Breivik thought through his operation. Unlike many *jihadis*, however, he lacked the courage to face men armed like him, and to offer his own life for his beliefs as well as the lives of others. Nonetheless he wanted at his court appearance to strut about in some kind of military uniform.

Smartly tailored uniforms, an abhorrence of cultural difference, and a desire for racial purity are all of a piece with fascist mysticism. As with *jihadi* ideology, it is precisely the non-rational elements of fascism that give it emotive, and hence political, power. For what Breivik and others see as under threat in the West is the vital source of *meaning*, of ultimate values, which they associate with the communion of a purified people.

Since the West faces no obvious threat of such existential scale and significance, one must be fabricated. It is here that the unlikely alliance of left wing parties and Islam plays its role, purportedly importing on a mass scale Muslims to colonise Europe. In Norway, Muslims account for less than three per cent of the population; in the UK, less than five per cent. Even so, the fantastical fear of the "loss" of Europe to Islam animates many on the right. It is part of mainstream electoral politics in Europe, and has long been an element of right wing discourse in the US.

In this vision of danger, multiculturalism plays a key role. Many will have noted Breivik's odd invocation of "cultural Marxists", folks I have only spotted in small numbers in university departments and cafes frequented by graduate students. Breivik's reference is in part to the Frankfurt School, a group of German Jewish scholars who fled Hitler for the Western cosmopolis of New York.

The idea is that "Jews" have encouraged cultural mixing in the West, fatally compromising its purity and thus its values, while Muslims and Jews retain their cultural strength and identity. Europe must therefore declare "independence" and fight the Muslim-Jewish-Marxist hordes, apparently starting by killing their children.

We can only assume that Breivik has confused the computer fantasy games he played - using a busty blonde avatar named "conservatism" - with political analysis. What is truly frightening, however, is that the core of this vision of multiculturalism as a threat to the West is shared by leading political parties in the France, the UK, Germany and Italy, among others. This is why there is every chance that Breivik's murderous and cowardly rampage will achieve some of its aims. Immigration, it will be argued, has unbalanced "our" people. It is already being curtailed in all the leading Western powers.

Shut up, obey, and collaborate

The irony is that the West brought us empire on a global scale and drew its cultural, economic, and political strength from interconnections with all parts of the world. The cosmopolis of New York, London and Paris - a "brown" not a "white" West - are more appropriate beacons of a West flush with power and confidence in its values than the imaginary purification achieved through concentration camps and closed borders.

But just what might be corroding values in the West?

This was one of the questions that animated the Frankfurt School and those who influenced it. They focused on the interaction between capitalism and culture. They noted the ways in which capitalism progressively turned everything into something that could be bought or sold, measuring value only by the bottom line. Slowly but surely such measures came to apply to the cultural values at the core of society. Even time, as Benjamin Franklin told us, is money, a doctrine which horrified Max Weber in his searing indictment of the capitalist mentality as an "iron cage" without "spirit".

Note for example the ways in which the great professional vocations of the West - lawyers, journalists, academics, doctors - have been co-opted and corrupted by bottom line thinking. Money and "efficiency" are the values by which

we stand, not law, truth or health. Students are imagined as "customers", citizens as "stakeholders". Professional associations worry about the risk to their bottom line rather than furthering the values they exist to represent. Graduates of elite Western universities, imbued with the learning of our great thinkers, are sent off to corporations like News International. There they learn to shut up, obey, and collaborate in the dark work of exploitation for profit, for which they will be well rewarded, at least financially speaking.

Thanks in part to the grip of corporate power on the media and on political parties, few today in the West can imagine any other politics than those of big money. In the US, and increasingly even in Europe, the income differential between the poor and the wealthy already resembles that of banana republics. The downtrodden are asked to bear the burden of a financial crisis created by bankers. America's wealthy fly their children to summer camp in tax-free private jets amid a real rate of unemployment of over fifteen per cent.

Neoliberalism has only accelerated these processes at the heart of capitalist society. Here is a far more convincing threat to Western values and "social cohesion" than the lunatic fears of fascists. Notably, this is a threat that emanates from within, not without. It is precisely social democratic parties like Norway's Labour Party - Breivik's target - which have sought to contain the corrosive effects of capitalism and ensure the survival of the West's most humane values.

Tarak Barkawi is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre of International Studies, University of Cambridge.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.

Source: Al Jazeera