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The misogyny of the anti-misogynists

by Michael Weiss

One of the more incisive sentences in Paul Berman's latest book *The Flight of the Intellectuals* occurs his description of one the many ways in which European leftists have condescended to Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Noting that Timothy Garton Ash, in one of his many coy interventions in the New York Review of Books, criticized the world's most famous apostate by citing *Glamour* magazine's recognition of her as "hero of the month," Berman wrote: "I can't help observing that *Glamour* magazine nowadays offers a more reliable guide to liberal principles than the *New York Review of Books*." (This put Nick Cohen in mind of Susan Sontag's similar animadversion of Communist fellow travelers in the eighties when she said that *Reader's Digest* offered a more reliable guide to Soviet tyranny than anything found in *The Nation*.)

Pascal Bruckner has given us the useful phrase "racism of the anti-racists" to encapsulate some of the liberal derision that Garton Ash and his pack-leader Ian Buruma had offered a black Somalian who thinks that there is more to recommend in Mill and Locke than there is in the Koran, making her an "Enlightenment fundamentalist." (To his credit, Garton Ash repudiated this Buruma coinage after a prolonged engagement with Brucker.) Yet what Berman was getting at in his tidy little put-down was something slightly different from veiled racism. It was what might be called the misogyny of the anti-misogynists. The logic here runs: Why should anyone take a woman writer seriously if the glossy girl-mags do? And don't we all agree that if Hirsi Ali didn't look like a runway model, she'd have lacked the international celebrity that merited the acidulated attention of the highbrow press in the first place? If only Hirsi Ali had been a pious Muslim preaching reconciliation between East and West, if only she'd said nice things about Tariq Ramadan and bad things about George W. Bush -- then maybe her looks wouldn't have mattered so much to Garton Ash, save perhaps to goad him into inviting her to his kind of dinner parties. No, it was her uncomplicated rejection of piety and her wholehearted embrace of Europe and the United States that made him mock her for being a bimbo.

The problem with the misogyny of the anti-misogynists is that many of the Muslim women causing uncomfortable ructions within Islam today are also incredibly beautiful. If pulchritude is to be the sole measure of their recognition as long-suffering dissidents, then what does this say about their suffering itself?

Freshly arrived at my office today is an Iranian New Year card sent to me by Shiva Nazar Ahari, whose troubles with the mullahs began after she coordinated a vigil for the victims of 9/11 ten years ago; her troubles continued after she tried to attend the funeral of a genuinely reform-minded ayatollah two years ago. She was recently sentenced to 4 years in prison and 74 lashes for “anti-regime activity” and “terrorism.” (She’s currently out on bail.) This is awkward for the *New York Review of Books* but Shiva could easily appear on the cover of *Persian Glamour* if there were such a publication.

More awkward: I’ve just been sent another piece of agitprop by yet another courageous bombshell, this time in the form of a video of the Pakistani actress Veena Malik. A former participant on India’s version of “Big Brother” where she apparently smooched a man and wore revealing outfits, Veena returned to Pakistan, went on television and got confronted by a commissar-like anchor asking her if she didn’t feel that she’d embarrassed herself, her faith and her country by her behavior in an enemy land. She was then further insulted via satellite by a fat and furry cleric with one hand on his sacred book and the other on his heavy heart. He’d never watched Indian “Big Brother” yet one clearly sensed that his enmity stemmed from a knowledge that he wouldn’t know the likes of Veena’s companionship until those celestial virgins fulfilled their end of the nasty bargain.

A woman who cites Pamela Anderson as a friend and sees no problem with subcontinental reality TV has added to the Hirsi Ali pile by responding to an on-air Islamic interrogation in a tone of voice it would be nice to see liberal magazines use once and a while. I know, I know. She’s not helping calm the clash of civilizations by calling a popular mufti a horny old goat or suggesting that he address child molestation in Pakistani mosques rather than hector a native celebrity. Still, some memorable lines Veena delivers (“I am angrier with you than you are with me!”) are even worthy of the East Coast smart sheets.

Watch the whole video below.

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