

THE HYPOCRISY OF “NEWLY MINTED FEMINISTS”... AND DAVID HOROWITZ’ DANGEROUS AGENDA

BY T. REDTREE (REVOLUTION # 105, OCTOBER 21, 2007)

The people putting on “Islamofascism Awareness Week”—the October 22–26 series of events at universities and colleges purporting to oppose “Islamofascism” and to develop support for the “war on terror”—pose as champions of the rights of women. And so, at a time when the Supreme Court has thrown the right to abortion into question, when the operatives of the Bush regime have brought birth control increasingly under fire, when violence against women in this country continues and intensifies with vengeance, and when the culture is saturated with ritual shamings of women who “go bad”. . . Horowitz and his allies have proclaimed their intent to hold sit-ins at Women’s Studies Departments, “designed to protest the absence of courses that focus on Islamic gynophobia,” in order to coerce them into signing the statement “Calling on Feminists to End Their Silence on the Oppression of Women in Islam”!

The hypocrisy of these newly minted feminists is stunning. But behind the hypocrisy lies an ugly and dangerous agenda. Horowitz is seizing on the truth of the real oppression of women in countries ruled by Islamic fundamentalists in the service of a very big lie. There is a way to oppose this oppression—but it is not by enlisting in Horowitz’s crusade. Indeed, if you really do oppose the oppression of women—in Islamic fundamentalist countries and movements and on the rest of the planet as well—opposing Horowitz’s “week” is the most important thing you can do right now.

“Islamofascism Awareness Week”

Horowitz has manipulated and thieved language and tactics from the 1960s to make it look like campus brownshirts are the new wave of student activism—using tactics like sit-ins and protests at Women’s Studies Departments “with the goal of encouraging them to provide course offerings on the abuse of women in Islam.” The scholarship and teaching currently going on in Women’s studies is dismissed as “trivial” or “imagined” and criticized for the “numerous hours. . . spent. . . dissecting the reasons for the ‘wage gap’ in America, violence against women and the ‘privileges’ accorded Caucasian males. But courses on the plight of women in Islamic regimes are strangely absent.” (Sara Dogan—Frontpage, 10/9/07)

Phyllis Chesler and Robert Spensor have written a pamphlet for the week titled *The Violent Oppression of Women in Islam*, which marshals partial truths about the oppression of women in the service of a gigantic lie—one that has been told by colonial powers since the 19th century—and was trotted out most recently in service of launching the opening act in the war on terror in Afghanistan. “We’re here to save the women! We’re ready to fight the ‘war on terror’ not to extend the violence of empire but to protect the weaker sex!” And now the same war propaganda is being drummed up all over again, to reinforce this “war on terror” and to mount support and consent for attacking Iran.

Chesler and Spensor also exhibit a xenophobic worldview that includes passages that warn of the danger of allowing Islamic people to immigrate—spreading the contagion of Islamic backwardness and terrorism into European and American society. Their treatment of the whole subject conjures up the kind of fear and prejudice that creates an atmosphere where rendition, detention, and torture for “your safety” are tolerated. And their rhetoric is an echo of the war propaganda from World War 2—where stereotypes of “inscrutable” Japanese whose “minds were 2000 years behind” were created to train the public to go along with putting people into internment camps.

A Cautionary Tale—Afghanistan and Iraq

In this land of short attention spans, let’s recall the justifications for war against Afghanistan. Before that war, TV specials about the plight of women forced under the burkah were brought into millions of living rooms—people sympathized and hearts went out to the women living under the Taliban. Young men and women signed up with the U.S. military to fight. The women’s movement was actively courted and put on display to prove the political will and broad sentiment in favor of bombing and invasion.

Susan Faludi’s new book, *The Terror Dream—Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, documents the whole thing in detail. “After months of being snubbed, the Feminist Majority, which had been trying to call attention to the Taliban’s abuse of women since 1996, found itself in the astonishing position of playing belle at the capitol ball. . . The White House (which had just abolished the office of women’s initiatives) began contacting women’s rights organizations and asking them to seek ‘common ground’ with the administration that had iced them since its inception.”

Faludi documents how feminist leaders were invited to brief Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and others. Congress held hearings on the status of women in Afghanistan. Bush himself pronounced to an audience of women’s rights activists that “the central goal of the terrorists is the brutal oppression of women,” and Colin Powell solemnly

stated that the “rights of women will not be negotiable” as the State Department issued a “Report on the Taliban’s War against Women.” And then it stopped. Barely two weeks after the invasion, when questioned about the status of women’s rights, the State Department said it “had other priorities.”

Today Afghanistan has a parliament full of Islamic fundamentalists and warlords and the situation for women in Afghanistan has barely changed. Wearing the burkah is no longer law—but women are in danger of being beaten if they dare to appear in public without it. In September, the same journalist who made the CNN documentary “Behind the Veil” before the invasion returned to Afghanistan to report on the grim situation for women now. The new documentary interview shines a light on an epidemic of young women with serious burns—from setting themselves afire with household kerosene in acts of defiance and despair at arranged marriages.

The same lies and hypocrisy are evident in the Iraq war as well. In summer 2003, L. Paul Bremer, the top administrator of the U.S. occupation, assembled the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC). Among those appointed by Bremer were Islamists who openly declared their intent to restrict women’s rights. Then, on December 29, 2003, the IGC held a quasi-secret vote to replace Iraq’s 1959 family law which was among the most progressive in the Middle East. The family law had been enacted in 1959 by the secular nationalist government of Abd Al Karim Qasim, who was later overthrown by the Ba’athists (with support from the United States). These laws came into being on the heels of mass mobilization of the Iraqi women’s movement at the end of the British colonial era. Aspects of the progressive family law persisted until the eve of the U.S. invasion. Divorce cases were to be heard only in civil courts, and women divorcees had an equal right to custody over their children. Women’s income was recognized as independent from their husbands. The law also restricted child marriage and granted women and men equal shares of inheritance.

The occupation authorities consistently undermined Iraqi women’s efforts to secure their legal rights. The U.S. threw its weight behind Iraq’s Shiite Islamists, calculating that these forces, long suppressed by Saddam Hussein, would cooperate with the occupation and deliver the stability needed for the U.S. The first battle in the drafting of Iraq’s constitution was over the family laws. The U.S.-backed forces reviled the 1959 law for being “secular” and spawning “deviant decisions that tore families apart.” They also demanded that interpretation of family law be removed from civil authority and handed back to the clerics.

Further, the new Iraqi Constitution that Bush and the media glorify as bringing democracy to Iraq, in reality finalized the establishment of an Islamic Republic. Article 2 of the final version of the constitution makes Islam the official religion of Iraq and its state and makes it clear that no law can be passed to contradict it. Article 14 of the final constitution guarantees equal rights for women—only so long as those rights do not “violate Sharia” (Islamic law). So Sharia comes first. According to Sharia, only fathers can have custody of children in case of divorce. Women are officially valued at only half the worth of men in matters such as inheritance and bearing witness in court.

Meanwhile, Shiite militias patrol the streets of Iraq’s major cities, attacking women who don’t dress or behave to their liking. In many places, they kill women who wear pants or appear in public without a headscarf. In much of Iraq, women are virtually confined to their homes because of the likelihood of being beaten, raped, or abducted in the streets. The Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani—a U.S. ally—ordered all Iraqi women to wear headscarves, and his edicts were enforced by beheadings and acid attacks. In 2006, Sistani also issued an order for the killing of gays and lesbians, which was publicized for several months on his website. And a recent UN report states that 250 women were killed in honor killings in Iraqi Kurdistan alone thus far this year—most of them burned alive.

If David Horowitz really gave a damn about the status of women under Islam, he would be denouncing and protesting at the White House.

Honor Killings

Horowitz and Chesler make use of a surge in honor killings in Iraq and the region more generally to also make their case that there is something unique and intrinsically worse about Islam than any other ideology or religion. To be clear: honor killings are barbaric. They are a horrific manifestation of property relations and of the fact that societies have treated women first and foremost as the property of males. They are one more reason that this whole world needs to be turned right side up through communist revolution and a radical rupture with all traditional property relations and all traditional ideas.

But Horowitz, Chesler & Co. once again take some truths about honor killings to buttress a big lie. First off, incidents of honor killings in Iraq have increased as Iraqi

civil society has collapsed under the occupation—strengthening tribal bonds and religious authority. Second, unfortunately the practice of honor killings is far from confined to Islamic culture. It predates Islam and today spans religions, cultures, and countries, including Argentina, Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, Guatemala, India, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, Peru, Syria, Turkey, and Venezuela.

Moreover, the vestiges of these customs and the same property relations that still dominate the planet can also be found in the U.S.—they are called “crimes of passion” in U.S. legal code where sentencing is not based on the crime but the feelings of the perpetrator. And they have always worked to the advantage of men. For example, in 1999, a Texas judge sentenced a man to four months in prison for murdering his wife and wounding her lover in front of their 10-year-old child. As in an “honor killing,” adultery was viewed as a mitigating factor in the case. Both the “crime of passion” and the term “honor killing” communicate the perspective of the overwhelmingly male perpetrators, and thereby carry an implicit justification. Marital rape laws were non-existent in many states in the U.S. until the 1990s. And many of Horowitz’s strongest allies are the same people who pass laws to strengthen the “sanctity of marriage” and promote the cult of virginity—both of which provide the underpinnings of the honor killings that Horowitz so hypocritically pretends to oppose now, when it suits his purposes.

So when they hold “Islamofascism Awareness Week” and they tell you we need a “war on terror” to free the women of Islam, the old saying “fool me once, shame on you—fool me twice, shame on me” applies.

[sources for the section on Iraq and Honor Killings—1) A World to Win News Service and 2) Promising Democracy—Imposing Theocracy—gender based violence in the US war on Iraq” by Yifat Susskind, www.MADRE.org]

The Bizarre Political Marriage of Phyllis Chesler and Rick Santorum

Phyllis Chesler is a long-time feminist and one-time progressive who now finds herself politically and ideologically allied with the very people who not too long ago desired nothing less than having her head on a pike. Exhibit A in this is her fellow “Islamofascism Awareness” comrade Rick Santorum. Apparently Chesler wants to support Christian fascism to oppose so-called “Islamofascism.”

Santorum, formerly the third highest ranking member of the Senate who lost his seat last November, is a featured speaker for Horowitz’s “Islamofascism Awareness Week.” Santorum came up with the novel thesis that the liberal climate in Boston gave rise to the rash of pedophile priests in the Catholic Church. He is an opponent of abortion who argues that the right to privacy does not exist in the Constitution and therefore that the Supreme Court decision that legalized contraception is not valid.

In a 2003 interview, Santorum justified his opposition to gay marriage by lumping homosexual relations in with bestiality. He tried to pass legislation to bring “intelligent design” into school science curriculum and does not believe in the separation between church and state. This is a total package—a repressive outmoded and reactionary scriptural view of women and the family that demands women’s obedience and submission.

How in the world can anyone who opposes the oppression of women enlist in a crusade with the likes of Rick Santorum? Chesler wants to condemn the horror of female mutilation in Africa (which is not just Islamic)—but now aligns herself with forces who want to block the human papilloma virus vaccinations that would save millions of women from cervical cancer. The Islamic fundamentalists and the Christian fascists use the same rationalization: both are done in the name of keeping women from engaging in pre-marital and extra-marital sex; both reflect an ugly mentality that this violence towards women is necessary to keep them from “being loose women.” The world that either would have you live in is one where women are the possessions of their husbands and where the sexual lives of all women are controlled by men.

Santorum represents a very powerful section of the U.S. ruling class aiming at bringing just such a world into being. Horowitz himself is a conscious and high-level operative of those same rulers. Anyone who comes in under that banner, no matter what caveats they may issue, will end up as vehicles for those forces and that agenda.

A worldwide snapshot of the standing of women at the dawn of the 21st century is looking dreadfully dim. You can look out over the vast technological and productive capacity achieved, the unprecedented availability of information, and the percentage of women who have now entered the global labor force and ask WHY? Why, with all this, does the status of women look socially, practically and existentially more like the Dark Ages than what many people assumed would be the step-by-step progression and advancement of more enlightened attitudes toward women? Suddenly it seems that that fragile progress is being hurtled backwards with hurricane force—threatening to drown the hopes of those who have dreamed of throwing off centuries of oppression and traditions that have squelched the life and potential of half the human race.

The sudden explosion of the globalization of prostitution, for instance, has combined the inequality of nations and the inequality of the sexes into one hideous phenomenon. Today there are 400,000 to 500,000 child prostitutes in India. Some 800,000 children and teenagers in Thailand have been forced into prostitution—an “industry,” by the way, brought into being by the use of Thailand as a “rest and recreation” area for U.S. troops during the Vietnam war. Literally hundreds of thousands of women and children are sold each year by traffickers in a “bull market” of sexual slavery that generates billions of dollars every year. A World to Win News Service points out that, while some refer to the “sex industry” as if it were just another job, “most of the women are youths and children and little more than modern slaves. Workers create commodities, but like old-fashioned slaves these women are commodities to be bought and sold as if they were things, and not human beings. Many hundreds of thousands of women are trafficked every year from the world’s poorest areas to Western Europe, Australia, Israel, Japan, the U.S., the Arab Gulf states and other countries.”

At the same time, mass culture and morality is increasingly imprisoned in a fascination with the virgin and the whore. Someone like Britney Spears is manufactured as a “star”—which includes sexually objectifying her—and then gleefully torn down, with her “fall from grace” put on lurid display and Spears herself put in a 21st-century version of the stocks in the electronic town square. The moral and lesson is driven home to hundreds of millions. . . and to make sure people “get it,” the same fable will be repeated with another victim next month.

What kind of world is this where the more wealth is created and the more the world is drawn into a single whole, instead of human progress the result is greater tragedy for millions? What kind of a world is it where women are ever more forcefully told that their only choice—if they even have one—is between the feudal nightmare embodied in the traditions of all the major religions, or the commodified “Sex-in-the-City” version of liberation, where you have “autonomy” to market yourself—as a commodity, in a world still premised on the everyday subordination, debasement, and brutalization of half of humanity? The answer is, a world still dominated by capitalism and imperialism.

There was a time when, in truly socialist countries, the first breathtaking steps toward women’s equality were being taken and this is what inspired the world and set the terms for everything. This was especially true in China during the era of Mao (1949-76). Women went from bound feet, domestic slavery, and female infanticide to breaking barriers in every sphere. Socialism—proletarian state power—transformed gender relations in politics, in production, in the arts, within the family and in education (including in the raising of children in a way that really began to overcome gender bias and oppression), and in every other sphere to such an extent that the formerly backward China inspired millions of women—and men—worldwide with a vision of social emancipation for women. But socialist rule in China was overturned—in fact, if not yet in name—and it is no longer a beacon for anything progressive, including for women. Nonetheless, what was accomplished there when the proletariat did hold state power sets a point of departure for a new round of revolutions and for a further, and even more deep-going, effort to break all of tradition’s chains, one that goes even further in mobilizing women, and men, to uproot the oppression of women in every sphere, to fully achieve equality and go beyond it, to a world of freely associating human beings. It is this kind of revolutionary future—and not a return to one or another suffocating and subjugating tradition of the past, or the oppressive emptiness of the imperialist present—that has to be fought for. And it is this kind of future for which the suppressed fury of women must be unleashed, as part of eradicating all oppression.

There Is Another Way

As the degradation of and violence towards women are increasingly globalized, the struggle and resistance of women is also taking on an increasingly international dimension. To take one example: on International Women’s Day this year, revolutionary, progressive, and communist women from Iran raised the cry to break “the chain of violence against women [that] goes back thousands of years and is long enough to cross every border and encircle the world.” Their statement read in part:

“We Iranian women will continue on the path. . . seeking to build ‘another world’ based on the participation and power of the people, who have no interest in maintaining the power structures based on exploitation and injustice. We seek a world where mutilating women is considered a crime, not a tradition. We seek a world where no female child will be forced to submit to ‘matrimonial’ rape, where no woman will face ‘honour killings’, where no woman is forced to commit suicide or to set fire to herself to escape patriarchal violence, a world where no woman is punished or faces stoning by death for loving someone or for sexual relations. We seek a world that does not consider homosexuality a crime, a world where a woman’s identity is not determined by her marriage or motherhood. We are fighting for a world where no one can force women to stay in the kitchen or indoors, where no one can deprive women of the right to participate in social production and in politics. In such a world women will control their own bodies and will make their own decisions about whether they want children, a world in which men and women are truly equal in all aspects of life.”

There IS an alternative to support, if you truly care about uprooting the oppression of women AND opposing this horrific system and its “war on terror.” There ARE people who are fighting, worldwide, to do that. Let’s hear THEIR call and join them!