

Are We Fighting the Trees Instead of the Forest?

by **Lorna Salzman** (June 2014)

That may be a strange distortion of the old slogan but it certainly applies to essentially all the ideological and intellectual battles going on today in the world. As I see it, these are Islamism, climate change denial, creationism/ID, technocracy, Political Correctness, and the neo-fascist left.

What these share are the obeisance to doctrine and the desire to re-shape human behavior and society. Where they depart from issue-focused reformists is on their methodologies and targets. Their long-range intent is to impose their own belief system on others. To achieve this, some rely on violence and threats of violence. Others take advantage of human frailty, insecurity and irrationality. Others, particularly on the left, see mass movements rather than education, policy change or legislation as the path to domination. Still others, not yet radicalized sufficiently, see persuasion and propaganda, using media and educational institutions, as their main tools, at least temporarily. And then there are those who style themselves as progressives – the technocrats and the Politically Correct – and deceive the public (and themselves) that their objectives are humanitarian and compassionate: relieving starvation in the less developed world, developing still-speculative technologies to serve human needs for food, energy and economic stability, abolishing prejudice, and directing science in directions that will preserve the established order that they refuse to question.

Are these clichés? Of course! They are the same battles that have taken place over the whole course of human history and civilization. The only differences lie in the tools and technologies available. Mass battlefield murder no longer consists of soldiers, horses, swords and axes, fighting one on one. Religion no longer relies on Muslim marauders by the thousands galloping westward and taking over the former Roman Empire and Western Christianity, or on the church's Inquisition and burning of heretics.

Now Muslims entrust the fight to install the caliphate to fiery imams and to front groups in the West to resist assimilation and inculcate Muslim fanaticism and privilege using the media, the right of free speech, domestic leftist anti-Americanism, the legal system and liberal guilt and sympathy.

Instead of tyrants like Stalin, communists and socialists now have Putin and other "populist"

resistance leaders without scruples to fight leftist proxy battles against American "imperialism"(while promoting, as Ecuador, Brazil and others do, corporate globalization under a new name), in company with the new capitalist oligarchs in Russia. To squash science and evolution, religious fundamentalists establish their own think tanks to gain intellectual credibility for their superstitions. To refute the often uncomfortable truths revealed by science, truths that conflict with *a priori* beliefs and Utopian wishful thinking, special interest movements such as feminism, ethnic/racial minorities, post-modernists and cultural determinists denounce science entirely, accusing society of dangerous "scientism," even as they turn a blind eye to the potential dangers of technology and the soothing voices of the paleo-greens (the "anthropoceniacs") promoting the total control of the planet by and solely for humanity.

Modern civilization has been caught off guard, because it tends to see only the proximate threats, not the ultimate ones or the ones that underlie all of these belief systems. We were not prepared for battles against science, rationality, human rights and freedom because we were duped into thinking that these movements and battles were for humane ends. We chose to ignore the hidden agendas of resistance movements and took them at their word that they were for human rights, equality, liberty and religious tolerance, when they said they were fighting against tyranny, slavery, poverty, discrimination, corruption and greed. Those on the left still believe they are fighting against "imperialism," capitalism, corporate globalization, and for the oppressed huddled masses. When asked why they have aligned themselves with Putin's new Stalinism, or with movements which enslave women, oppose free speech, prohibit the free exercise of non-Muslim religions, allow the forced marriage of small girls to older men or which murder apostates and gays, they have no answer except to say that whatever the USA does is far worse. We can thank Noam Chomsky for this excuse.

Every time we share a platform with a religious or leftist fanatic or technocrat, we endow them with intellectual credibility. Every time we choose to fight one battle in isolation, it is simply plugging a hole in the dike while the waves pour over the top. We have failed to identify the reasons for the ongoing reign of irrationality and ideology because most of us have chosen to join one of the courtier groups of this reign. This is especially true of Political Correctness, perhaps the most delusional of the secular ideologies and arguably the most dangerous because it has chosen to use neo-fascist tools to root out what THEY define as fascist. Of all the threats to secular democracy posed by Islamism and Christian fundamentalism, Political Correctness has turned out to be the greatest, being embraced on our university campuses as well as in the media. Not the most inflamed violent Muslim fanatic could have concocted this great a threat; now the Muslims can sit back and let their proxies,

uninformed American students, do their dirty work of dismantling our right to free speech.

Political Correctness is a virulent variant of cultural relativism, which excludes oppressive, even barbaric, customs and traditions from being judged by modern-day human rights and humanitarian criteria. Political Correctness goes one step further and attempts to suppress any criticism of such customs by accusing critics of racial or ethnic "insensitivity" at best and of outright racism at worst. The origins of both Political Correctness and cultural relativism stem not from any respect for foreign cultural practices but from the belief that Western "imperialist" concern for human rights violations is merely a cover for foreign intervention and exploitation, hence the left's charge that Islamic terrorism is not religion-based but a backlash against the West's attempts to impose its own values on other countries.

Each of these threats to secular democracy is being confronted by one group or another, some of which choose to completely ignore the other threats and therefore lack the ability to reach a valid critique. Their prescription ends up as another belief system, another ideology no more valid than what it replaced, whether it is the free market, Christianity (as the virulent anti-Islam Jewish activist Melanie Phillips promotes), cultural determinism, eco-socialism, retreat into apolitical rural agro-hippiedom, Green Capitalism a la Hawken's "Natural Capital" (which commodifies Nature in the name of ecology), or a manicured planet managed by "progressive" technocrats.

The challenge is how to think about and explain the interconnections of these threats and their shared origins. There is nothing inherently wrong about fighting imminent or nearby battles on a piecemeal basis. A belief in the futility of resistance is exactly what our adversaries pray for. The inculcation of cynicism guarantees political and mental surrender. We should not gratify their wishes. But neither should we think that one isolated fight indicates future success. As Dave Brower said, "all victories are temporary, all defeats permanent." We have already lost a huge portion of the earth to irreversible degradation and even greater portions are under attack today, though many of these can be reversed if we have the will. Despite the claims of the anthropoceniacs like Peter Kareiva, Stewart Brand and the BreakThrough Mafia, Nature still exists and is waiting for us to move over onto her side instead of making room for corporations. Despite the onslaught of Islamic jihad in Europe, we still have the legal system and our Constitution to protect our free speech rights. Despite the Tea Party and the creationists, we still have the books, journals, libraries and schools to learn about the true origins of life. Despite Political Correctness, we possess the same tools of public outreach and education to crush neo-fascism. But when we join one battle or more, we should remind ourselves of the connections of all of these threats. It is the reversion to irrationality that prevailed until the Enlightenment, and which has risen to the

surface today for numerous reasons, not the least of these being the fear of change and its threat to the old order, accompanied by a global (and terminal) competition for resources and wealth and the power these confer. The failure to see growing tolerance of irrationality and cultural relativism behind all of our problems is what is allowing things to get worse...and what allows the enemies to get stronger.

Lorna Salzman's career as an environmental activist and writer began when the late David Brower hired her to be the regional representative of Friends of the Earth in NYC. Later she worked as an editor on *National Audubon's American Birds* magazine and as director of Food & Water, an early opponent of food irradiation, and then spent three years as a natural resource specialist in the NYC Dept. of Environmental Protection. She co-founded the New York Green Party in 1984 and in 2004 she sought the U.S. Green Party's presidential nomination. She is the author of “