

But Wh...Wh...What about...!?: Islam and Finding Something Else to Worry About

by Thomas Samm (March 2015)

Whataboutery is a slim quiver in the bows of adolescent debaters. High on the rush of self-importance granted by the lectern, they revert to the lexicon of debate itself in order to accuse and discredit their opponent. The young discover meta as an enthralling meter in which to argue matter. *Tu quoque*, *ad hominen*, and *ad verecundiam* are other supposedly fallacious objections they raise to argument, and they are preferred; the arrows of criticism threaten a deeper incision when riding on the pseudo-linguistic winds of Latinate terminology.

Whataboutery, however, is their most utilized allegation. And they are often right. It doesn't require a modern day Cicero, after all, to retort "conditions in Gaza" to "rocket attacks in southern Israel"; or vice versa. As a debating tactic, whataboutery takes you into a cul-de-sac of accusation and counter-accusation so single dimensional, that, perforce, discussion dissolves into yelling, or ends only when either debater has run out of historical exempla to launch at their opponent.

That said, every now and again, you will live to witness an incidence of whataboutery of such dissembling unrelatedness that you emerge blinking into the streets unsure of which way is up and which way is down. On Wednesday, February, 18th, 2015, Chelsea FC, an English soccer club based in West London and, as of the current millennium, the beneficiary of a wealthy Russian oil and mineral oligarch, played a fixture in the 2014-2015 European Champions League competition against Paris St. Germain, a sort of rival Gallic franchise, who spend similar idiot's ransoms on leather ball kickers thanks to the national-cultural self-promotion schemes of oil oligarchy, Qatar. The fixture was played in Paris, which to this day is still known in magazine articles for its second hand book sellers flanking the Seine, but by regular visitors for its underwhelming, given-up-the-ghost subway system. A 58 second video appeared later that night showing some Chelsea supporters preventing a man from entering one of its carriages. That man was, and defiantly remains, black. The video starts with the dying of a chant.

"Where were you in World War II? Where were you, where were you, where were you...?" etc. sang a group of Chelsea fans. It is a traditional Brits abroad post-libation attempt at nationalistic intimidation, tinged with humour for the lads. Tens of millions of English

viewers will immediately recognize the exhausted milieu from which this job trill derives. Some might even smirk in amused shame. But then there's the reality for the people stuck within the dirty-aired confines of the waiting subway train, conceivably among whom are at least a few whose living and deceased relatives were also once stuck, in a Paris occupied by Nazis. Greater than the noise of these six or seven lagery berks is the tight-lipped let-this-be-over nervous silence you hear as the chant dies. No one is talking. This may be normal for the Paris subway, but it's not normal for the French. And on this occasion the silence acts as a vacuum; into it seem to disappear all other potential and actual noises, such as footsteps or the sound of idling engines. You wouldn't want to be there.

At which point one Souleymane S attempts to board a carriage. Someone shouts "Chelsea" in his face. Mr S has one foot on the train and one on the platform. He tries to force his way on and he is pushed off. Mr S then makes an inaudible but articulate plea for himself to be allowed onto the train, using all the arts of his nation's considerable powers of gesticulation. But, for the moment, he is debating with belligerent clowns. They won't allow him his square foot of personal space. Now he stands erect and makes it clear that he understands the underlying motivation for their refusal. He is a momentary hero of civil decency. We then see a five second close up of the Chelsea fans standing in the carriage, hands in pockets, like they did in the school dinner line, having twisted the words, "We're racist, we're racist, we're racist, and that's the way we like it, we like it, we like it, a whoa-whoa-whoohhhhhh," round another recently popular football chant melody.

All done.

Mr. S. later said he knew what was going on but had no intention of even telling his children. "What would be the point?" he asked. The British liberal press will take care of that, Mr S.

For in the following few days, this incident convulsed the *Guardian* newspaper as if the Reichstag had been incinerated by Pegida. A slew of frantic articles engulfed its URL, as if automatically conjured by a *daemon* journobot algorhythmised to mash out prose reaction to any random act of Caucasian boorishness. The *Guardian* pasted a variety of interchangeable names and byline photos above each headline. Deborah Orr, in one of the world's most confused articles ever written on the subject of race and crime, once related [the following](#):

A decade ago, after I'd had my bag snatched by black youths outside my home several times, I called the police, but felt oddly traitorous about the prospect of describing my assailant to the police as black. I gave a detailed description of the clothing my main attacker was wearing, without mentioning his racial characteristics. Finally I

told the police he was wearing trainers.

When the policewoman enquired, "colour?", I stammered (in shock at her blatant line of questioning), "Oh, he was black."

"No," said the officer wearily. "What colour were his trainers?"

Her final paragraph ends, "We have now reached a point where it is more insidiously racist to turn a blind eye to this, than it is to face up to it." But it had begun, "As long as racism continues, we need political correctness as a counterbalance, however inadequate." So which is it? Given that she began the piece by using the example of a twelve hour gang rape and then later mentioned social exclusion, as if the one "counterbalances" the other, I think we can guess which. But where does the "criminals are victims" trope begin and end? It begins and ends with race and culture, and belonging to the "correct" one of either. Orr affirmed this in her headline response to the minor fracas footage which is shaking the occident to its boots: "The menacing Chelsea racists probably think they are the victims now," a subeditor helpfully summarized. Well, you started it. And aware of this, Orr is back to remind us there will always be a grey area when the perpetrator belongs to a minority status; never so when he doesn't.

Even one of the Guardian's football correspondents, who usually spends a third of his analyses of the characters and events of the game in gleeful witty metaphor construction, never taking any aspect of the sport entirely seriously, was gravely, solemnly put out. Barney Ronay wants Chelsea FC to "launch a bespoke campaign," as if Gieves and Hawkes were setting out to capture a wealthy market of cereal café-patronizing unmarried tech graduates. The tone was set for a deluge of comment and reportage on what the Guardian obviously thought the police forces of two European nations should stop everything else for: [Chelsea fans allegedly involved in Paris Métro racist incident identified](#), [Chelsea invite racism victim to the club as José Mourinho admits ...](#) were just some of them.

Ronay's piece was appended by this:

Name*

Location*

Do you know any of the fans in this video?*

Yes No

Do you know the man pushed off the train?*

Yes No

Did you witness any other incidents in Paris before the PSG – Chelsea match?*

Yes No

Tell us what happened in as much detail as possible*

Can we use this for publication?*

Yes, entirely Yes, but contact me first Yes, but keep me anonymous No, please keep this confidential

Email*

This will be kept confidential but will help us significantly

Phone

This will be kept confidential but will help us significantly

For the record, nothing else that day in this land of ever increasing sexual assault and domestic violence warranted the appending of an interactive procedural report form, not the “sickening mugging” of a 95 year old London man, and certainly not that which had happened a few days before in another European capital. For the low level bigotry behind a subterranean transport altercation was serving as the *butwhatabout* pretext for evasion of an incalculably more ominous crime.

Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein first shot and killed 55 year old film director [Finn Nørgaard](#) outside an event called, Art, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Expression. Later he shot and killed Dan Uzan, who was guarding The Great Synagogue on Krystalgade in central Copenhagen. Abdel Hamid El-Hussein, former street gang member and cage fighter of Palestinian extraction, and of late “radicalized” whilst in detention for the subway stabbing of a fellow passenger, died in a shootout with police later that night. Over 500 members of Copenhagen’s Muslim community attended his burial service, and not to express their sympathy for his victims. Where do you begin with what this might portend?

You begin where you left off after last month’s murder of cartoonists: with appeasement. Fight and flight are two of man’s quickest responses, and the *Guardian’s* Andrew Brown quickly

revealed his choice from among the two, a choice which is trending across the continent, a few hours later. Under the headline, "Scandinavians value free speech, but now they need to be practical," he proceeded to present, for some reason, a comparative analysis of Swedish and Danish attitudes to immigration. He talked about Lutheranism, social democracy, and civic morality, all with an eye to their need for either bolstering or critical self-analysis in the wake of, what seems to everyone else, like their completely passive role in the murderous events of the weekend before. Like many of his colleagues in Europe, Brown is laying bets at the roulette table while the casino burns to the ground around him. At no point does he mention the Koran, Islamic State, the precepts laid out by the life of the prophet, the principal source of anti-semitism in Europe today, or even Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussein himself. And one has lived long enough to know that his views would not have been changed by seeing those 500 men mourning a murderer early the following day.

Brown is toeing an excruciating party line. If his colleague Hugh Muir was a caricature of the single issue race and culture obsessed columnist, he would write and sound just like himself. He simply calls for surrender.

Even after Paris, even after [Denmark](#), we must guard against the understandable temptation to be provocative in the publication of these cartoons if the sole objective is to establish that we can do so.

So if men threaten you with guns for publishing a mere image, you must not publish in order to courageously defy their threats. You must not publish because you are being "provocative." Had, say, a Latin American regime of the 1980s been offering independent journalists for portraying the leader of their junta in cartoon form, I doubt the Hugh Muir of the 1980s *Guardian* comment pages would have cautioned that "with rights to free speech come responsibilities." Because, in that Latin American country, *there would have been no free speech*. And that is what is happening in Europe, incrementally, but with progressing sureness of outcome. The timorousness of a continent's media in its refusal to print cartoons after the Paris massacre is being parlayed into a discourse-supported *status quo*.

Speech acts are all over the football, but not Art, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Expression. It might be said to be, in moments of pessimism, a summation of modern European men, with the exception of its cartoonists and a couple of loosely organized outlier groups reviled as neo-fascist and islamophobic by the people who gave you "the subway events in Paris." Nor was it solely the *Guardian*