

Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance

by Ian Buruma, Atlantic Books, 2008, 276 pp.

Simon Cottee

Introduction: The Question of Evil

Despite being a brute and massive fact of human experience, evil is often denatured within liberal-leftist discourse: it is redescribed, recalibrated, recategorised. People do unspeakably terrible things all the time: no liberal-leftist will deny that. But there is a general reluctance on the liberal-left to name these things, still less the *persons* who do them, as evil. Broadly speaking, this reluctance is informed by three lines of argument. The first is that as a concept evil is epistemically unsound: radically insensitive to the various shades, nuances and complexities which shape social and political life. When, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, George W. Bush seized upon the word 'evil' to describe the perpetrators, he was assailed on the liberal-left for being crass and reductive. It was further evidence, if any were needed, of his 'cowboy' mentality, of his intellectual nullity. The second argument is that the term evil can be pressed effortlessly into the service of demagoguery and the demonization of vulnerable 'others.' Evil is not just a descriptive term; it is also an evaluative resource of great power. Indeed to characterise an act as 'evil' is to condemn it in the severest terms possible. It is to construct it as something terrible, despicable, and to be fought, destroyed even. Liberals and leftists are acutely aware of this, and are thus reluctant to employ the term for fear that it will be used for inhumane purposes. The third argument is that the concept of evil serves to obstruct or impede any attempt to understand the deeper 'root causes' of the behaviour it vilifies. The argument seems to be that the invocation of the term engenders too much emotional baggage, which gets in the way of neutral, dispassionate analysis.

To be sure, these are perfectly sound reasons for expressing scepticism about the concept of evil, but they scarcely add up to a cogent case for delegitimizing the very concept or banishing it altogether from our moral and political vocabulary. And what salience they do have rapidly vanishes in the face of true or 'radical' evil.

The best case for retaining the concept of evil is that it serves to capture a range of actions which are not just brutal or barbaric but exorbitantly, elaborately and

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

uniquely so. As Eve Garrard puts it, the essential value of the concept lies in its ability to discriminate between acts which are merely wrong or even very wrong from those which are ‘specially horrifying.’ [1] Devoid of the concept, our moral awareness would indeed be less alert, ‘blander, and more impoverished than it needs to be.’ [2]

The crucial question, then, is not whether evil exists (it does) or whether it is valid to describe and stigmatise evil acts as ‘evil’ (it is, given their horrific magnitude). The crucial question is how evil can come to exist, thrive even, in certain situations or contexts. The crucial question is *why*? Why do people deliberately inflict horrific pain or cruelty on others? *Murder in Amsterdam*, by Ian Buruma, is a fascinating and profoundly insightful exploration of that fundamental question.

The Murderee

Theo van Gogh, ‘a short fat man with blond curls,’ was a ‘ubiquitous figure’ in Holland, ‘known less for his films than for his provocative statements on radio and television, in newspaper and Internet columns, and in various courts of law, about everything from the alleged exploitation of the Holocaust by Jewish celebrities to the dangerous presence of a Muslim “fifth column” operating in Dutch society’ (p. 2). Buruma reports that from an early age he was a rebel (p. 72). At primary school he wrote a pamphlet called *The Dirty Paper*, the main subject of which was shit and piss. This rebelliousness, this aversion to conformity, seems to have been inscribed into his very DNA: he was born into a family of socialists and secular humanists and anti-fascists (pp. 73-74). Apparently, he was a difficult teenager: ‘At home, he argued endlessly with his parents, dominated every conversation, smashed the neighbours’ windows, and drank his father’s best wines in all-night parties with his friends’ (p. 88). As a young man, he ‘led a drifting bohemian life, drinking, doing drugs, sleeping at different addressees’ (p. 88).

His first film, which he made in 1981, contained two remarkable scenes, ‘one of which shows a man shoot off his gun into a woman’s vagina, and another where the same man stuffs two cats into a washing machine’ (p. 89). Evidently, as Buruma says, Van Gogh liked ‘to shock, to stir things up’ (p. 87). Buruma suggests that what motivated this wasn’t malice, the desire to wound, but rather the need to be seen and heard – at all times (p. 92). Certainly, Van Gogh said, and did, a lot of inane things. Yet, remarks Buruma, he could also be gracious and generous, and possessed a real curiosity about the world and the lives of others (p. 92). It was that curiosity which

attracted him to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and which led him to direct her controversial film *Submission*, in which lines from the Koran, detailing a man's right to beat his wife, were projected onto the naked bodies of several young women. Perhaps Van Gogh's best quality was his independence of mind. Allied to this was his refusal to hold back, his ability to say exactly what he thought, regardless of the unease or offence it might cause. 'The insistence on total frankness, the idea that tact is a form of hypocrisy, and that everything, no matter how sensitive, should be stated openly, with no holds barred' (p. 94): this was the ethos which Van Gogh lived by and exemplified, and ultimately died for.

The Murder

Unlike Martin Amis, Ian Buruma is not a self-appointed warrior in, as the title of one of Amis's volumes of non-fiction phrases it, *The War Against Cliché*, [3] but he is nonetheless a staunch foe of herd opinions, stock responses and trite formulations. I would be surprised, for example, to hear him say that a murder took place in broad daylight. [4] It was cloudy and raining the morning Van Gogh was murdered, but even if the sky had been preternaturally radiant that day, I don't think Buruma would allow himself to render Van Gogh's murder in this way.

This is how *Murder in Amsterdam* begins, and this is how Buruma in fact allows himself to describe the events of that fateful day in November 2004:

It was the coolness of his manner, the composure of a person who knew precisely what he was doing, that struck those who saw Mohammed Bouyeri, a twenty-six-year-old Moroccan-Dutchman in a gray raincoat and prayer hat, blast the filmmaker Theo van Gogh off his bicycle on a dreary morning in Amsterdam. He shot him calmly in the stomach, and after the victim had staggered to the other side of the street, shot him several more times, pulled out a curved machete, and cut his throat – 'as though slashing a tire,' according to one witness. Leaving the machete planted firmly in Van Gogh's chest, he then pulled a smaller knife from a bag, scribbled something on a piece of paper, folded the letter neatly, and pinned it to the body with this second knife... Bouyeri gave the corpse a few hard kicks and walked away, without hurry, easy as could be, as though he had done nothing more dramatic than fillet a fish. (pp. 2-3)

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

That act, its meaning and broader significance, and the reactions and controversies it entrained are the main subjects which Buruma addresses in *Murder in Amsterdam*.

Normalising the Criminal Other

One of the many striking and salutary features of *Murder in Amsterdam* is how vigorously it challenges the massively prevalent and deeply entrenched assumption that criminal wrongdoers are somehow different from the conventional, decent, ordinary, law-abiding members of society. Buruma doesn't buy it for a second. In the pages of *Murder in Amsterdam*, Mohammed Bouyeri is portrayed not as a demonic, wanton killer, but as the apotheosis of Everyman. He is the incarnation not of evil, but of *ordinariness*. He was 'neither poor nor oppressed,' 'had received a decent education,' 'had never had trouble making friends,' and 'enjoyed smoking dope and drinking beer' (p. 192). Buruma instructively recounts the views of two of Van Gogh's close friends: 'Theodor Holman thought it 'was a tragedy that the man who killed Theo was such a lacklustre fellow, so devoid of any spirit.' Theo's producer, Gijs van de Westelaken, added that Mohammed was so small.' (p. 191) He looked like 'a loser,' in the estimation of Anneke van Gogh, Theo's mother (p. 191).

Martin Amis perceptively writes of Mohammed Atta, the 'ringleader' of the nineteen hijackers in the 9/11 attacks, that his face was 'gangrenous,' 'almost comically malevolent': 'The detestation, the detestation of everything, was being sculpted on it, from within. He was amazed that he was still allowed to walk the streets, let alone enter a building or board a plane. Another day, one more day, and they wouldn't let him. Why didn't everybody point, why didn't they cringe, why didn't they run?' [5] Far from inspiring fear or dread, what Mohammed Bouyeri inspired was pity. He was 'a sad loner from an Amsterdam suburb' (p. 17).

Reading Buruma's characterisation of Bouyeri, I was instantly reminded of another young jihadist, the British-Pakistani Omar Sheikh, one of the killers of the American journalist Daniel Pearl. In *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, Bernard-Henri Lévy provides a riveting portrait of Sheikh. Surveying a photograph of him, he describes him as 'handsome,' his face showing no 'vice or malice though somewhat veiled.' [6] He looks 'intelligent and rather frank, tortoise-shell glasses, a strong chin under a well-trimmed beard, a good man it would seem, slightly tart smile, an intellectual demeanour, very Westernised – nothing, in any case, that signals the obtuse Islamist, the fanatic.' Clearly, Lévy is fascinated and baffled by Sheikh, this London-

born son of a Pakistani businessman. He is ‘apparently well-mannered and gentle, refined and subtle’; ‘not particularly pious’; intelligent; compassionate; generous; an excellent chess-player; a fearsome arm-wrestler; the beneficiary of an ‘opulent,’ ‘happy’ upbringing and an excellent education: Forest School and the London School of Economics. Omar Sheikh wasn’t, then, a damaged, sordid inadequate. Quite the contrary: he was, as Lévy puts it, ‘a normal young Englishman.’

Though he doesn’t directly acknowledge her, the spectre of Hannah Arendt is unmistakably present in Buruma’s characterisation of Bouyeri. One of Arendt’s many illuminating insights was that ordinary people can do extraordinarily bad things. Her evocative phrase ‘the banality of evil’ [7] was a reference not to the evil which people do (on the contrary: she described the Holocaust as ‘monstrous’ – an ‘unspeakable horror’), but to the human authors of evil, who were often dull and boringly mundane. With reference to Adolf Eichmann, Arendt spoke of the ‘ludicrousness of the man,’ and noted that, like most others implicated in the crimes, he was ‘neither perverted nor sadistic...but terribly and terrifyingly normal,’ and without ‘any diabolical or demonic profundity.’ [8]

‘Yes,’ wrote Elie Wiesel, ‘it is possible to defile life and creation and feel no remorse... To go on vacation, be enthralled by the beauty of a landscape, make children laugh – and still fulfil regularly, day in and day out, the duties of a killer.’ [9] I don’t know if Bouyeri could make children laugh or was able to be enthralled by the beauty of a landscape, and Buruma doesn’t say, but he was certainly capable of kindness, and often went out of his way to help people (p. 199). At the same time, he was also capable of terrible, murderous violence.

Buruma’s emphasis on the banality of Bouyeri also echoes recent historical, sociological, and psychological work on atrocity and genocide. Albert Bandura, whose research on ‘mechanisms of moral disengagement’ is at the cutting edge of this work, writes that it is ‘conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people [which] produce heinous deeds,’ and adds that given ‘appropriate social conditions, decent, ordinary people can be led to do extraordinarily cruel things.’ [10] This is a perception, I think, with which Buruma would wholeheartedly agree.

Not only does this perception, or this way of approaching his subject, allow Buruma to draw a more humanly realistic picture of Bouyeri; it also lends his narrative real drama, and explains why *Murder in Amsterdam* is such a compelling book to read. As Buruma sees it, there was nothing inevitable about Bouyeri’s conversion to the

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

death cult of Jihadism (p. 261), and it is fascinating to see the various contingent events and episodes which edged him towards where he ended up. Bouyeri, in Buruma's hands, is not some abstract, lifeless reification, but actually *lives*: he strives, he dreams, he flails, he fucks and fights, and shits and breathes. For this, Buruma must be congratulated. To write about Bouyeri as he does, with real imaginative empathy and sensitivity, is no small feat, since, in the words of Dostoevsky, 'nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer.' [11] Nothing would be easier than to rail against, or deride, the troglodytic squalor of Bouyeri's radicalised mind and enthusiasms, [12] but Buruma doesn't do that; he doesn't go there.

Nor does Buruma follow the opposite path, and try and excuse or even glamorise Bouyeri. *Murder in Amsterdam* is emphatically not an apologia. Commonly, societies abhor deviance, but there is also a countervailing inclination within them to celebrate or romanticise the deviant or criminal wrongdoer. Portrayals of murderers, terrorists, gangsters, robbers, fraudsters, and tricksters in popular literature, film and television are often tinged with more than a little admiration for the perpetrator. There is also an inclination within certain styles of leftist discourse to romanticise the proletarian wrongdoer, to construct him as some kind of crypto-political freedom fighter against capitalist exploitation and oppression. [13] *Murder in Amsterdam* certainly doesn't go there.

Even after Bouyeri's transformation into a holy warrior, Buruma refuses to see him as wholly alien to the society he chose to reject, and emphasizes the deep parallels between Bouyeri's own 'revolutionary fantasies' (p. 194) and those firmly rooted in the culture of the west. Buruma argues that Bouyeri's fascination with the idea of heroic sacrifice – at his trial he professed that he had wanted to die as a martyr to his faith (p. 3, p. 189) – is a feature of many cultures: '[T]he death wish in the name of a higher cause, a god, or a great leader is something that has appealed to confused and resentful young men through the ages and is certainly not unique to Islam.' (p. 218) Bouyeri and his fellow jihadists, Buruma says, are not so different from the European fascists of the 1930s. Buruma also remarks that Bouyeri's views on America, expressed in a document he posted on the Internet, 'have a deeply European provenance, to be found in the right-wing politics of the 1930s as well as in a long left-wing tradition of anti-Americanism' (p. 218). America, Bouyeri thought, was a 'sick society,' and believed that it was only a matter of time before it would 'collapse into chaos' (p. 219).

This theme – of the resemblance between revolutionary Islamism and the ideologies of European anti-liberalism – serves as the chief focus of Buruma's 2004 book *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism*, which he co-wrote with Avishai Margalit. It is also the recurrent theme in John Gray's *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern* and Paul Berman's *Terror and Liberalism*.

De-theologising the Criminal Other

Murder in Amsterdam is a challenging book in other respects too, for Buruma questions the assumption that jihadist terrorism is overwhelmingly motivated by Islamic beliefs. Buruma is even-handed about many things, but on this question he is uncharacteristically trenchant; he is almost fierce.

Of Bouyeri's 'radicalisation,' Buruma writes that it was astonishingly rapid, and took place over little more than one year (p. 193). His old habits – the beer drinking, the dope smoking, the chasing after Dutch girls – were discarded, and gave way to an 'increasingly moralistic outlook' (p. 208). He refused to shake hands with women, dropped old friends, and changed his appearance: 'Not only had he grown a beard, but a Moroccan djellaba and prayer hat were now part of his usual dress, instead of jeans' (p. 209). By the middle of 2003, Bouyeri had 'retreated into the narrow world of a few like-minded friends' – the Hofstad Group, as Dutch intelligence would brand them (p. 211).

According to Buruma, Bouyeri had embraced the revolutionary doctrine of Takfir, according to which 'Muslims who depart from the true faith and fail to live by divine laws must be declared infidels, and deserve to be killed by true believers' (p. 210). Buruma's account strongly suggests that Bouyeri was wholly sincere in his embrace of this extreme version of Islamism. But Buruma doesn't believe, as Bouyeri himself claimed at his trial, that he 'acted out of faith' (p. 189). He may have murdered in the name of Allah, but it wasn't Islam, as conceived by Bouyeri, which primarily motivated or caused his actions. Bouyeri, Buruma insists, had 'latched onto a religious faith' to 'justify his thirst for violent death' (pp. 32-33). The ideology of violent revolutionary Islamism, then, was the facilitator, the enabler, of Bouyeri's murderous actions, but it wasn't the chief cause of them, or so Buruma argues. This is a point to which I shall return.

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

Emotionalising the Criminal Other

If violent revolutionary Islamism didn't decisively motivate or cause Bouyeri's murderous actions, then what did? If the cause wasn't the cause, then what was? Or as Buruma frames the question, 'Why did a young man, who was neither poor nor oppressed, who had received a decent education, a man who had never had trouble making friends, who enjoyed smoking dope and drinking beer, why would such a man turn into a holy warrior whose only wish was to kill, and perhaps more mysteriously, to die?' (p. 192)

Buruma's answer to this question is deeply compelling, and although it can't be fully empirically substantiated, it certainly has the ring of truth to it. Buruma's answer, which I shall examine in greater detail below, is that Bouyeri was a frustrated loser, who found a sense of purpose, meaning, certainty, belonging and power in Jihadism.

There is a marked tendency in sociological thinking about crime to focus on what Jack Katz calls the 'background forces' of criminal offending, and to locate these within the offenders' psychological background or social environment. [14] One corollary of this one-sided focus in criminological theories has been a widespread neglect of the emotions behind offending behaviour: a neglect of the sentiments or feelings which animate people to offend. [15] Buruma, to be sure, contextualises Mohammed Bouyeri against the background of a set of wider social forces, social exclusion and alienation prominent among them, but he never loses sight of the driving force of Bouyeri's emotions. Indeed, they are at the forefront of his analysis.

The killing of Van Gogh, plainly, was not a rational or 'instrumental' act; it wasn't designed to achieve anything other than the murder itself. It wasn't, for example, intended to inspire fear or coerce anyone into doing anything. It was purely symbolic, *a ritual slaughter*; an act of punitive justice, of vengeance *for its own sake*: in Buruma's words, a 'principled murder' (p. 41). And this is exactly how Bouyeri saw his actions: at his trial, he bluntly said that he was divinely 'obligated to "cut off the heads of all those who insult Allah and his prophet"' (p. 189). Bouyeri's killing of Van Gogh was an instance of what Mark Juergensmeyer calls *performance violence*: [16] a public, theatrical 'symbolic statement aimed at providing a sense of empowerment.'

Bouyeri clearly felt dishonoured and demeaned – *humiliated* – by Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali, and believed that the only way to expunge the stain of humiliation was to kill Van Gogh. He saw them, and their actions, as a fundamental personal challenge

to his very moral worth and core identity, and that troubled and enraged him to such an extent that he felt he couldn't ignore it, or back down from it.

In emphasising the causal centrality of Bouyeri's emotions, Buruma's account exposes the limits of the rational choice theory of criminal behaviour, the ruling insight of which states that criminal behaviour is used instrumentally to advance the material interests of the wrongdoer. What caused Bouyeri to murder Van Gogh was not rational self-interest, but a deeply felt sense of humiliation, and the desire to punish the perpetrators of it.

Conceptualising Jihadism: Status-Frustration and Identity-Confusion

In describing Bouyeri's conversion to Jihadism, Buruma stresses the causal centrality of two psycho-social emotional states: status-frustration and identity-confusion.

Speaking of second-generation Moroccan immigrants in Holland, Buruma says that the 'most vulnerable' among them are those 'who find their ambitions blocked despite their attempts to fit in with the mainstream of Dutch life' (p. 22), and adds that 'anything can trigger a mood of violent resentment and self-destruction: a job offer withdrawn, a grant not given, one too many doors shut in one's face' (pp. 22-23). Bouyeri, he says, fitted that profile, and felt excluded from Dutch society. To read the single chapter that Buruma devotes to Bouyeri, entitled 'A Promising Boy,' is to read a catalogue of failures and disappointments: Bouyeri applies for a security job at Schiphol Airport, but is turned down because of a negative police report (p. 200); he dates a half-Dutch, half-Tunisian girl, 'tall and striking in miniskirts,' but the affair doesn't last long (p. 200); on holiday in the Canary Islands, he hits on Spanish girls in the streets, without success (p. 201); his family's apartment is scheduled for renovation, but the housing authority reneges on its promise – 'another disillusion' (p. 201); his seventeen-year old sister Wardia begins to date a boy, named Abdu, from the neighbourhood, and he is outraged that his father doesn't act to put a stop to it (pp. 205-206); he plans to organise a new youth club in his old school, but nothing comes of it (p. 208): these failures and disappointments, one after the other, not only frustrated Bouyeri, but also made him angry and resentful.

In detailing these failures and how Bouyeri responded to them, the figure of the 'radical loser,' as described by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, is ever present. [17] This figure, as Buruma has written elsewhere, is 'the kind of person, usually a young man, who feels victimised by the entire world, and hates himself as much as the forces

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

that oppress him.' [18] The 'radical loser' cannot, as Buruma writes at one point in *Murder in Amsterdam*, 'bear to live with themselves' and 'wants to drag the world down with them' (p. 140).

According to Enzensberger, the 'radical loser' self-pityingly thinks that it is not others 'who are constantly being insulted, humbled and humiliated, but only ever' themselves. [19] Equally self-pityingly, they blame others for their own sorry predicament. And yet, they can never entirely rid themselves of the suspicion that their predicament is self-inflicted, that they themselves are responsible for their humiliation, and that they don't merit the esteem they crave. Hence the attraction of homicidal-suicidal violence, which allows the radical loser not only to 'triumph over others by annihilating them,' but also to put an end to their own existence, which is subconsciously felt to be worthless. [20]

Drawing on Enzensberger, Buruma suggests that the best way to understand the roots of jihadist violence is not, pace Sam Harris [21] and Hirsi Ali, to look at the life and sayings of the prophet, but rather to look at such figures as those 'desperados' which populate the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Joseph Conrad: those 'resentful young men' who 'imagine themselves as part of a small elite, blessed with moral purity, surrounded by a world of evil. They are obsessed with the idea of violent death as a divinely inspired cleansing agent of worldly corruption.' (p. 195)

In addition to the theme of failure, there is also the theme of identity-confusion. At many points in *Murder in Amsterdam*, Buruma refers to Bouyeri and his fellow second-generation Dutch-Moroccans as 'confused,' and observes that they are doubly alienated – from both the culture of their parents and the culture of their host society (p. 32). He also makes reference to research which shows that 'a young Moroccan male of the second generation is ten times more likely to be schizophrenic than a native Dutchman from a similar economic background' (p. 121). About this, he comments: 'When the process of integration goes too fast, when the son of Moroccan villagers throws himself too quickly into the bewildering maelstrom of Western temptations, his "cognitive wiring" can go badly awry. The desire for strict religious rules is a form of nostalgia, as it were, a way to regain the world of one's parents, or what people think was the world of their parents. To remain sane, they long for the security of a paradise lost.' (pp. 221-222)

Jihadism, then, as framed by Buruma, can be seen as a 'solution' to the problems that young second-generation Muslim immigrants face in the advanced, secular societies

of the west: problems specifically bound up with status and identity. Rejected by the western society they initially embraced, and torn between two cultures, they are in the market for a solution to their problems. The jihadist subculture not only provides a potent vocabulary for expressing outright contempt for 'western' values – values which humiliatingly scorn and mock the jihadist, since they cannot live up to them; it also confers a heroic status upon its members, and legitimises violent revenge against the sources of their frustration. Moreover, it provides them with a powerful sense of identity, and an unambiguous and infallible guide for negotiating their lives in the face of the vertiginous array of choices and possibilities and temptations that advanced western societies have to offer. Jihadism, Buruma convincingly suggests, offers a ready-at-hand solution to the twin problems of status frustration and identity-confusion.

Seen in this light, the roots of Jihadism lie not in Islam, but in how young Muslim men respond to personal feelings of failure and uncertainty over who or what they are. This doesn't mean that the ideology of violent Islamism is causally unimportant: on the contrary, it provides the justifying and exculpatory narrative which enables jihadists to overcome civilised moral constraints. Buruma clearly recognises this, and gives the ideology its due causal weight as a device for harnessing and unleashing murderous rage. But he also recognises that Jihadism has its roots in the subjective emotional experiences of the actual jihadists.

Murder in Amsterdam: The Fall-Out

Among the many objects of Mohammed Bouyeri's insatiable contempt, Ayaan Hirsi Ali was especially prominent: not that she knew it of course, but she tormented and frustrated him, and drove him mad with murderous thoughts. The letter he stabbed into the chest of Van Gogh was addressed to her, and in it he not only condemned her as an apostate who had rebelled against her childhood faith, but also threatened her with death.

Before the murder of Van Gogh, Hirsi Ali's fame was confined only to the Netherlands. A Somali, a Muslim, a woman and a refugee, she arrived in Holland in 1992, having fled an arranged marriage and the severe limitations imposed on women by her clan, culture and religion. Once in Holland she embarked on an extraordinary journey in which she learned Dutch, attended university, and eventually won a seat in the Dutch parliament. Along the way, she not only renounced but repudiated her Muslim faith, and became a convert to, and a

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

vehement proselytizer for, Western liberalism. As an MP, she was an energetic critic and opponent of the violent mistreatment of women within Muslim communities in Holland. This won her many enemies, including not only the Islamic radicals, but also various liberal-left multiculturalists.

Among the many things Mohammed Bouyeri did to Hirsi Ali was to transform her modest fame into something much larger: he made her world-historical; an essential reference-point in the global debate about the 'civilisational clash' between Islam and the west.

In *Murder in Amsterdam*, Buruma describes Hirsi Ali as 'a delicate African beauty,' [22] who 'had caught the public imagination by the eloquence and conviction of her public warnings against a religion which already had a sinister reputation' (p. 5). Her central message, he says, is that Islam is incompatible with secular liberal democracy, and is itself a source of violence, especially against Muslim women (p. 5). She speaks 'softly, almost self-effacingly,' but this is 'deceptive,' for 'behind the polite smile and soft voice is a steeliness that deflects all challenges to her convictions' (p. 148). Buruma also notices in her 'hints of jealousy, echoes perhaps of her earlier enthusiasm for the Muslim brotherhood, before she was converted to the ideals of the European Enlightenment' (p. 158). This is a recurring motif in Buruma's portrayal of Hirsi Ali: ten pages later she is relaying to Buruma the achievements of the Enlightenment, and he detects 'a spark of almost religious fervour in her eyes' (p. 168); and earlier in the book, Buruma remarks that what drew Hirsi Ali to the philosophies of the Enlightenment is not so different from what drew Bouyeri to Jihadism: the search for a universal narrative, detached from, and in contention with, local tribal traditions (p. 32). Hirsi Ali, Buruma implies, is prone to fundamentalism: to the allure of universal, transcendental ideals. The person whom she most reminds him of is Margaret Thatcher: 'the same unyielding intelligence, the same impatience with those from a similar background who lack the wherewithal to "make it", and the same fascination with America' (p. 169). And like Thatcher, Hirsi Ali 'is clearly a radical' (p. 169).

In his review of *Murder in Amsterdam*, Timothy Garton Ash went even further: he described Hirsi Ali as a 'slightly simplistic Enlightenment fundamentalist' and reinforced Buruma's observation that, like many converts, she had exchanged one absolutist credo for another. [23]

This characterisation of Hirsi Ali as a fervent and dogmatic defender of the Enlightenment provoked a minor controversy within the small community of liberal-leftists to which Buruma belongs, and was largely played out in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* and the German online journal *signandsight.com*. [24]

Pascal Bruckner was especially disgruntled by Buruma's and Garton Ash's portrayals. He opens his *signandsight* article by castigating Buruma and Garton Ash as 'the enemies of freedom,' and asserts that they belong to an 'enlightened elite' who want to 'deny the benefits of democratic rights to the rest of humanity, and more specifically to their compatriots, if they're unfortunate enough to belong to another religion or ethnic group.' [25] He asserts that it is Hirsi Ali's 'wilful, short-fused, enthusiastic, impervious side to which Ian Buruma and Timothy Garton Ash object, in the spirit of the inquisitors who saw devil-possessed witches in every woman too flamboyant for their tastes.' [26] Regarding the claim that Hirsi Ali is fundamentalist in outlook, Bruckner points out that the 'argument of equivalence is not new,' and that the difference between Hirsi Ali and Mohammed Bouyeri 'is that she never advocated murder to further her ideas.' [27]

Nick Cohen, writing in the *New Statesman* was also uneasy at Buruma's characterisation of Hirsi Ali. 'For all his subtlety and seriousness,' Cohen remarked, Buruma in *Murder in Amsterdam* materialises the 'slur that those who believe in the emancipation of women are the moral equivalents of those who would keep them subjugated.' [28] In another article, this time for *The Observer*, Cohen amplifies his critique, and accuses both Buruma and Garton Ash of *attacking* Hirsi Ali, and defaming her as 'bigoted.' [29] Christopher Hitchens similarly rushed to her defence and in a direct riposte to both Buruma and Garton Ash, declared of Hirsi Ali that, in the title of his Slate article, 'She's No Fundamentalist.' [30]

Buruma's most trenchant critic in this debate, though, has been Paul Berman. In his long essay on Tariq Ramadan, published in *The New Republic*, Berman is stringently critical of Buruma's approach to Hirsi Ali. Speaking of *Murder in Amsterdam*, he says that it is:

mostly filled, in connection to Hirsi Ali, with one argument or insult after another, accusing her of being a fanatic, of entertaining intellectual arguments that are substantially no different from those of van Gogh's murderer ("two fundamentalisms"), of retaining the zealotry of the Muslim Brotherhood

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

in her own arguments against the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood, of exaggerating the dangers facing her, of being strident and arrogant, of being an aristocratic snob (“It was this wave, this gentle gesture of disdain, this almost aristocratic dismissal of a noisome inferior, that upset her critics more than anything”), and so on: pages written with an unmistakable flash of anger, relative to Buruma’s normally phlegmatic manner. [31]

For Berman, Buruma is guilty of launching ‘a prolonged, inexplicable, and reactionary campaign against arguably the best-known liberal champion of women’s rights ever to come out of Africa.’ [32] In a reply to Buruma in *The New York Review of Books*, Berman indeed calculates that in Buruma’s ‘extraordinary campaign against Ayaan Hirsi Ali,’ he ‘has now deplored, condemned, patronised, sneered at, or otherwise assailed [her] on at least five occasions in print in the last two years – though he has always besprinkled his attacks with enough begrudging compliments and seeming retractions to allow him to pretend that his campaign is loftier than a low vendetta.’ [33]

I shall not speak for Garton Ash, but the responses detailed above are, I think, deeply unfair to Buruma. Certainly, on the evidence of what Buruma says in *Murder in Amsterdam* and elsewhere, it is obvious that he isn’t particularly fond of Hirsi Ali. Indeed she clearly irritates him, and this irritation is evidenced in how he writes about her: though impressed by her courage and audacity, he is sparing in his praise of her other attributes, and is not afraid to point out her shortcomings. This frostiness towards her is partly a consequence of her personally rubbing him up the wrong way: he finds that she can be patronising and high-handed, and he doesn’t like the excessively trenchant way in which she expresses her views. But it is also a result of how he rates her intellectually, which is not very highly: he is especially critical of her view that Islam causes jihadist terror, and is critical of her approach to the question of how Muslims should adapt to secular western societies.

Granted, then, Buruma can be begrudging towards Hirsi Ali, but it is misleading to suppose that his intention is to defame her or that he thinks she and Mohammed Bouyeri are morally equivalent. The real issue, actually, is not whether Hirsi Ali is an ‘Enlightenment fundamentalist’ (she is, a little bit), or whether Buruma is ungracious in his portrayal of her (he is, a little bit). The real issue is how the increasingly diverse and fractured and embittered populations of Europe can coexist peacefully with one another. Hirsi Ali thinks that Islam is antithetical to the foundational values of European societies, and hence views the Islamic religion as a

serious impediment to the integration of Muslims in Europe. Islam, she says, must be frontally challenged, reformed, and ostracised from European public secular life. Buruma, however, profoundly disagrees, and advocates greater recognition for Muslims, in order to help them feel that they properly belong to, and have a stake in, the European societies in which they are living. Who is right? This is one of the many crucial issues which Buruma raises and illuminates in *Murder in Amsterdam*.

Simon Cottee is a Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Wales, Bangor. He is co-editor, with Thomas Cushman, of *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics: Terror, Iraq and the Left* (New York University Press, 2008). A longer version of this article is forthcoming in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*.

References

- Amis, Martin (2001) *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971-2000*, London: Jonathan Cape.
- Amis, Martin (2008) *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom*, London: Knopf Jonathan Cape.
- Arendt, Hannah (1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press.
- Arendt, Hannah (1971) 'Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,' *Social Research* 38 (3).
- Bandura, Albert (1990) 'Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement,' in Walter Reich (ed.), *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, Washington: The Woodrow Wilson Centre Press: 161-191.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Berman, Paul (2007a) 'Who's Afraid of Tariq Ramadan?' *The New Republic*, 4 June: <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=fd52e6a4-efc5-42fd-983b-1282a16ac8dd> (accessed 30 January, 2009)
- Berman, Paul (2007b) 'His Toughness Problem – and Ours: A Rejoinder,' *The New York Review of Books*, 8 November: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20801> (accessed 30 January, 2009)
- Browning, Christopher R. (1992) *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: HarperCollins.
- Bruckner, Pascal (2007) 'Enlightenment Fundamentalism or Racism of the Anti-Racists?' *signandsight.com*, 24 January: <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1146.html> (accessed 30 January, 2009)
- Buruma, Ian (2006) 'Extremism: the loser's revenge,' *The Guardian*, 25 February, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/feb/25/terrorism.comment> (accessed January 20, 2008)
- Chase, Allan (1980) *The Legacy of Malthus*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Cohen, Nick (2006) 'How the left was lost,' *New Statesman*, 30 October: <http://www.newstatesman.com/200610300051> (accessed 30 January, 2009)

COTTEE | A Murder in Amsterdam

- Cohen, Nick (2007) 'How condescension benefits terrorism,' *The Observer*, 25 November: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/nov/25/comment.terrorism> (accessed 30 January, 2009)
- Collier, Peter (2008) 'Backbone, Berman, and Buruma: A Debate that Actually Matters,' *World Affairs*, Winter: <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/2008%20-%20Winter/comments/comments-backbone-berman-buruma.html> (accessed 30 January, 2009)
- Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (2005) 'The Radical Loser,' *signandsight.com*, 1 December: <http://www.signandsight.com/features/493.html> (accessed 23 January, 2009)
- Garrard, Eve (2004) 'Is there anything wrong with the concept of evil? Part 1,' 12 January: http://normblog.typepad.com/normblog/2004/01/is_there_anythi.html (accessed 12 January, 2009)
- Garton Ash, Timothy (2006) 'Islam in Europe': A Review of *Murder in Amsterdam* by Ian Buruma and *The Caged Virgin* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *New York Review of Books*, 5 October.
- Harris, Sam (2004) *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, London: The Free Press.
- Hitchens, Christopher (2007) 'She's No Fundamentalist,' *Slate*, 5 March: <http://www.slate.com/id/2161171/> (accessed 30 January, 2009)
- Juergensmeyer, Mark (2001) *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, California: University of California Press.
- Katz, Jack (1988) *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil*, New York: Basic Books.
- Kelman, Herbert C. (1973) 'Violence without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimiziers,' *Journal of Social Issues* 29 (4): 35-36.
- Lévy, Bernard-Henri (2003) *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, London: Duckworth.
- Loader, Ian and Willem de Haan (2002) 'On the Emotions of Crime, Punishment and Social Control,' *Theoretical Criminology*, 6/3: 243-53.
- Richardson, Louise (2006) *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat*, London: John Murray.
- Thompson, Edward P. (1980) *Writing by Candlelight*, London: Merlin Press.

Notes

- [1] Garrard 2004.
- [2] Garrard 2004.
- [3] Amis 2001.
- [4] I am amazed at how frequently this phrase appears in stories or commentaries about Van Gogh's murder: enter into your Google search engine 'Theo van Gogh Murdered in Broad Daylight' and stand to be amazed too.
- [5] Amis 2008.
- [6] Lévy 2003: 82. The quotations which immediately follow are from Part Two of Lévy's book: 77-171.
- [7] Arendt 1963.
- [8] Arendt 1971.

Democratiya 16 | Spring/Summer 2009

- [9] Quoted in Chase 1980: 1.
- [10] Bandura 1990: 182. See also: Kelman 1973, Bauman 1989, and Browning 1992.
- [11] Quoted in Richardson 2006: 1.
- [12] One of which was an addiction to atrocity porn: p. 4 and p. 212.
- [13] See Thompson 1980: 166-167.
- [14] See Katz 1988.
- [15] See Loader and de Haan 2002: 243-244.
- [16] See Juergensmeyer 2001: 124-128.
- [17] Enzensberger 2005.
- [18] Buruma 2006.
- [19] Buruma 2006.
- [20] Buruma 2006.
- [21] See esp. Harris 2004: 28-36, 108-152.
- [22] I haven't yet read a profile of Hirsi Ali which *doesn't* mention her physical beauty.
- [23] Garton Ash 2006.
- [24] For an useful overview of the controversy, see Collier 2008.
- [25] Bruckner 2007.
- [26] Bruckner 2007.
- [27] Bruckner 2007.
- [28] Cohen 2006.
- [29] Cohen 2007.
- [30] Hitchens 2007.
- [31] Berman 2007a.
- [32] Berman 2007a.
- [33] Berman 2007b.