

Europe: Between Rape and Racism

CrimethInc.

February 16, 2016

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As Europe descends further into nationalism and xenophobia, we are seeing feminist, atheist, and progressive discourses appropriated to serve reactionary ends. Following the assaults in Cologne and the media feeding frenzy about “migrant violence,” many people have struggled to find a way to speak about the situation without minimizing the issue of sexual assault or contributing to the demonization of migrants. Yet displacement and sexual assault are not distinct issues—they are interrelated components of a larger context that must be confronted as a whole.

The Story Thus Far

The past decade has seen a series of cascading disasters in the Middle East and Europe. First, there was the bloody occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, which destabilized the region and ultimately enabled the Islamic State to seize weapons and power. Then a series of civil wars from Mali to Libya and Syria, combined with economic hardship throughout the region, triggered a mass influx of migrants seeking a new life in Europe. In response, European nations closed their borders and attempted to trap migrants in internment camps. Then, in November, Islamist attacks in Paris gave the French government an excuse to declare a state of emergency and intensified the momentum of an already violent backlash against migrants.

In this charged environment, news reports circulated that “gangs of migrants” had carried out a series of sexual assaults in Cologne and elsewhere around Europe on New Year’s Eve. A new series of xenophobic attacks followed, along with demonstrations from Pegida and other nationalist groups. Many demonstrators appropriated slogans from anti-border movements, transforming “Refugees Welcome” into “Rapefugees Not Welcome” and demanding security for “Fortress Europe”—the Nazi expression for Occupied Europe during the Second World War. The overwhelming sentiment from participants was “We need to protect our women.”

On one side, nationalists and fascists sought to exploit the trauma of sexual assault survivors as a tool for promoting hatred. On the other, many people who consider themselves to be feminists and advocates of migrants’ rights struggled to find a way to speak about the situation, afraid of minimizing the issue of sexual assault or contributing to the demonization of migrants.

These are precisely the sort of difficult situations that we will be confronting as the world slides further into crisis, forcing populations into conflict and rupturing the neat and tidy narratives of a seemingly simpler era. If we don’t develop a language with which to articulate the nuances of such situations, reactionaries of all stripes will have a free hand to capitalize on them. In many regions, old-fashioned progressive politics are quickly losing ground to new waves of nationalism, while the state uses security concerns as a pretext to target anyone proposing a radical solution. Rather than ceding the discourse to those who would force us to choose between opposing rape and opposing racism, we have to articulate the ways that displacement and sexual assault are interrelated components of a larger context of oppression that has to be confronted in its entirety.

Cutting through the Tangled Web of Hatred

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 opened the latest chapter in a history of colonial intervention in the Middle East that goes back hundreds of years. Sooner or later, the consequences of this were bound to reach Europe. In 2015 alone, over a million people crossed the Mediterranean

Sea, mostly to Greece and Italy, then continued their journey further north. At least 3735 people died or went missing on the sea crossing, including many children. Well over three million more people are currently living in refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and North Africa.

Doing their best to conceal their part in creating this disaster, Europe's political elites dubbed it the "migrant crisis." This phrase reduces a complex situation to a question of security; in fact, the crisis was not produced by migration, but by destabilization and borders. Tasking security experts with managing the situation, European governments erected new border walls, expanded the authority of the military, dehumanized migrants, and criminalized solidarity efforts.

Germany is one of the primary destinations migrants are trying to reach. Despite its supposed open door policy, Germany has been dividing migrants into deserving and undeserving, welcome and unwelcome—the former being mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter mostly from Northern Africa but also from other war-torn areas such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Eritrea. This means that many migrants are being deported to countries in which their lives are in danger. Switzerland, Denmark, and some southern German states have been confiscating money and valuables from migrants, as well. Right-wing discourse maintains that most migrants entering Europe are young men—but in Slovenia, through which nearly half a million people have passed en route to northern Europe, the official numbers indicate that the majority of those crossing are women and children. Almost 300 refugee hostels have been attacked in Germany, with the pace escalating towards the end of 2015.

This was the climate in which Cologne's 2016 New Year's celebration took place.

According to state reports, approximately a thousand men "of Arab or North African appearance" congregated around Cologne's Central Station, where groups surrounded, groped, and robbed women. By the end of January, over a thousand people had filed complaints to the police about that night, including three rapes and 433 sexual offenses; charges have been filed against 44 people, ten of whom are in custody. Of those detained by the police, dozens were identified as asylum seekers or other migrants. Similar events were described in Hamburg, Frankfurt, Dortmund, Stuttgart, and as far as away as Helsinki.

The events in Cologne were a windfall for nationalists and xenophobes who had long labored to build a narrative framing migrants as criminals, rapists, and purveyors of militant Islam, despite the fact that many of them are fleeing Islamist violence. Suddenly, all the repressive measures that governments had carried out over the preceding months were retroactively justified.

How seriously should we take this story about a wave of crime, rape, and misogyny? Contrary to right-wing propaganda, official reports show that crime rates among migrants in Germany are no higher than among European citizens. This is significant when we consider that white men are more likely to be treated leniently by the police and court system than men of color.

At the same time, we should never reduce our concern with sexual assault to a matter of statistics; the state does not document all the sexual violence that takes place, nor does it offer any constructive response to it. Likewise, we must not relativize such attacks in a way that takes them for granted. We consider the events in Cologne significant because we oppose all sexual violence, whether the perpetrators are from the upper echelons of political parties or the most oppressed sectors of society. For us, the attacks are specific acts of harm against individual human beings, not a public relations nightmare or an opportunity to promote an ideology. Addressing sexual violence and harassment is always important, even when nationalists attempt to hijack the discussion.

So we must begin from the standpoint of solidarity with everyone targeted by sexual violence, while refusing state and nationalist narratives about how to respond. We need not have the illusion that all migrants are above reproach to see the value in resisting the state repression and racist violence directed at them. On the contrary, since different forms of violence reinforce each other, we recognize that the more effective we are in interrupting the violence of governments and nationalists, the more capable we are likely to be of putting an end to sexual violence and misogyny.

The best way to counter nationalists' attempt to exploit the Cologne attacks is to take the initiative against rape and misogyny ourselves, while debunking racist narratives about who the majority of rapists and misogynists are. Likewise, one of the ways to put a stop to sexual violence is to oppose the segregation, repression, and xenophobia that fractures the population into mutually hostile factions. This is especially important in the current climate of hatred, when nationalists, Islamists, and media outlets are all bent on *representing us to each other* in ways that breed distrust and violence. All of them have an interest in fomenting a religious war, dividing Europeans and migrants between the rival camps of Le Pen and al-Baghdadi so we will not find common cause against leaders and wars together. And the more fear, the more conflict, the less trust, the less mutual accountability... the more sexual assaults.

Racist narratives aside, we can't rule out the possibility that as nationalist violence intensifies, many of those who are targeted will turn to anti-social activity. Already, we have seen how the alienation that led to the Banlieu riots in 2005 is now offering a fertile recruiting field to ISIS. This is yet another example of how reactionary movements and social conflicts spring up wherever we fail to demonstrate the virtues of fighting for total liberation. Unless we act effectively against nationalism and misogyny now, we will find ourselves more and more alone in our efforts to promote a world in which people are not divided along lines of gender, citizenship, ethnicity, and religion.

Defending Us without Our Consent

The demand for more policing complements the militarization of the borders. In a society in which the function of police has always been to preserve the state and male privilege, police will never be on the side of women and others targeted by sexual violence. If sexual violence is really the issue, it would be more effective to promote self-defense and mutual aid between targeted groups. But the nationalists who are suddenly talking about rape and misogyny were not exactly volunteering at domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centers before New Year's Eve.

In fact, the narrative that women are being victimized by people of a rival ethnic or religious group is the oldest tool in the nationalist toolbox. It is easy to revive this narrative whenever it is convenient because, in a patriarchal society, assaults against women are always taking place, so nationalists can emphasize or conceal them as it serves their purposes. One of the easiest ways to justify violence is to argue that it will prevent or avenge violence against the innocent and defenseless—so in this narrative, women are always portrayed as victims on whose behalf others must take action.

Local Europeans, not migrants, are responsible for most rapes in Europe. Again, this is not a justification for minimizing or relativizing the attacks that took place in Cologne. But the events

in Cologne must not be used to justify further attacks and racism in the name of the women who were assaulted.

Let's look at some earlier instances of this narrative about defending women. In the late 19th and early 20th century, thousands of black men in US were lynched; many of these killings were justified with rhetoric about protecting white women. In 1923, an entire black community was massacred in Florida in response to rumors that a black man had sexually assaulted a white woman. In 1955, white men killed a 14-year-old boy accused of flirting with a white woman. In some cases, lynchings occurred as a result of white women reporting that they had been raped in order to conceal their love affairs; in other cases, lynchings were provoked by the jealousy of husbands. Even explicitly consensual sexual relationships between white women and black men were interpreted as sexual attacks.

Who owns white women's sexuality? Sexual access to white women has been traditionally seen by white society as a privilege reserved for white men as a symbol of their authority. This legacy continues up to today. In June 2015, 21-year-old Dylann Roof entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, announcing "You rape our women, and you're taking over our country, and you have to go." He shot and killed nine people.

Despite the general agreement that this was a white supremacist hate crime, Roof was represented to the public as an unfortunate, mentally troubled individual. By contrast, when Muslims engage in violent acts, pundits are quick to identify those acts as terrorism, because such acts are supposedly an inherent part of Muslim identity.

If we compare the lynchings in the American South with the revenge attacks on migrants after the news spread from Cologne, we see two correlations. First, such revenge attacks are randomly directed at members of a group that is portrayed as an undifferentiated whole—in other words, they are racist violence, pure and simple. Second, even in the cases where sexual assaults had in fact taken place, the resulting attacks were not directed by the survivors and involved no real attempt to achieve accountability or take measures against sexism.

Such claims of ownership over women's bodies and sexuality often coincide with war. During the Balkan wars at the beginning of the 1990s, between ten and sixty thousand (mostly Muslim) women were raped in former Yugoslavia, often repeatedly, in front of family members, or in special camps. Sensationalist media reporting took no steps to protect the identities of women who were raped, while creating a discourse of victimization and erasing the voices of the survivors.

Most (male) politicians interpreted the mass rapes as an attack on national sovereignty. They drowned out the voices of rape survivors by speaking over them, presenting them as victims in order to fight wars in the name of their honor regardless of what the survivors actually wanted. They reduced the survivors to their ethnicities—to playing pieces in an ethnic conflict. The targets of rape were not individual human beings, but Bosnians, Serbs, Croats. This discourse was heard from all sides in the Balkan conflicts: the survivors were "their women." Not surprisingly, those same men socially rejected survivors who became pregnant as a result of rape; many of their children are still orphans in Bosnia today.

Already in the 1990s, Balkan feminists identified mass rapes as attacks against specific women, not just against an ethnicity, and openly opposed the war itself. Many women organized informal mutual aid for survivors during the war, refusing to permit the care of raped women to be left up to state institutions. These feminists were branded traitors; often, they were assaulted themselves. In 1992, an infamous article in the Croatian newspaper *Globus* claimed that "Croatian feminists are raping Croatia."

Here we see how women's attempts to defend themselves not only against assault but also against unsought "defense" place them outside the narrow zone of protection afforded under patriarchy. Insofar as men or the nation itself are understood as owning the female body, women's bodies will be considered a resource to be controlled or attacked during wartime—and the desire to own or attack women's bodies will function as an incentive to go to war. Rather than understanding rape as a weapon of war in a way that creates the demand for other weapons of war to be deployed in response, we can set out to oppose rape in ways that also oppose war itself. This offers some insight into how we might respond to the events in Cologne.

Nationalists aren't interested in protecting anyone—they just seek to justify the violence they hope to perpetrate. The rhetoric of protection is a thinly veiled threat.

“Let's Rape Leftist Women!”

Today's nationalists aspire to preserve Europe as a gated community; their aspirations are couched in the language of property ownership. At the beginning of the migrant crisis, they asserted ownership of the territory of the state: “We must defend our borders against migrants.” Then they asserted ownership of their roles in capitalist production: “The migrants are going to take our jobs.” Later, they took it upon themselves to protect their perverted version of multiculturalism: “We must defend our language, culture, and traditions from migrants.” Finally, they have started to claim ownership of female bodies as well: “We must defend our women from migrant rapists.”

This portrayal of migrants as terrorists who rape European women is nothing new; it has played a central role in right-wing political propaganda for decades. This is the Other—the Foreigner, the Perpetrator—who exists in relation to the European white man, the Protector. The events of New Year's Eve only confirmed a narrative that had long been circulating on right-wing blogs and message boards, catapulting it onto the front page of the mainstream news.

The narrative that “migrants are rapists” encourages hatred towards all migrants as a single homogenous population. In Europe, particularly in the southeast, this idea that a given ethnic group has an inborn propensity for crime has historically been associated with the Roma population. News reports of assaults by non-white individuals have always specified ethnic, national, or racial descriptors—“A young migrant (or black, or Romani) man raped a woman”—while white men from the dominant ethnic group are not similarly identified.

Today, this sort of racism is often concealed under the argument that Islam is inherently more violent and oppressive than other religions. Even setting aside the obvious counterarguments (the Inquisition, the forcible conversion of the Americas, slavery and genocide in Africa, abortion clinic bombings, Anders Brevik...) it's clear that this narrative functions to justify the same colonialist interventionism that produced the rise of fundamentalist Islam in the first place. Nationalists are trying to coopt progressive and radical ideas, including atheist critiques of religion as a whole, to craft a story in which the civilized West is forced to do battle with superstitious religious barbarians. Even some ostensibly anarchist groups have published texts that assert this narrative. In fact, if your goal is to undermine the repressive cultural values associated with some forms of Islam, it is more effective to support rebels in Muslim communities than to demonize Muslims as a whole.

The goal of these narratives is to render it impossible to imagine a world without borders. Whoever rejects nationalism is branded naïve—“What would you say if they raped you, or your sister or mother or daughter or wife?”—or else as a supporter of rape. Right-wing rhetoric alleging that “Western women” are to be “sacrificed on the alter of mass migration” in a “rape epidemic” aims to divide radical movements between two subjects we have worked hard to push into the public awareness—rape culture and migrant solidarity. Nationalists are especially eager to force this division, since they have a lot to be defensive about when it comes to misogyny.

If it is possible to make such a distinction in the first place, it is only because those critiques reached the public in a watered-down single-issue liberal form. Likewise, the storyline of man as protector or perpetrator and woman as victim only reinforces the gender binary, pressuring people to adhere to their assigned genders for fear of becoming targets. Claiming to protect women is a way to police everyone’s gender and sexuality.

By the same token, as soon as they speak out about the links between sexual violence and racism, women are considered legitimate targets for the same assaults white men claim to be protecting them from. In Slovenia’s capital Ljubljana, graffiti appeared around the city proclaiming *Posilmo Levičarke*, “Let’s rape leftist women.” In Slovenia, “levičarke” is a right-wing slur referring explicitly to anarchists, queers, and other antifascists and feminists. The message is clear: everyone who does not line up to support the nation and white manhood is a traitor who should be taught a lesson. Meanwhile, social centers throughout Europe that show solidarity with migrants have been targeted with the same violence aimed at migrant hostels.

Likewise, a month after New Year’s Eve, white Germans groped a reporter who was speaking live on television in Cologne. So long as the idea prevails that women are men’s property, all women can expect to be treated thus, even those who don’t threaten the nationalist agenda. Nationalists aren’t interested in protecting anyone—they just need a way to popularize the violence they wish to perpetrate against migrants and women alike. The rhetoric of protection is a thinly veiled threat.

Nationalist violence continues the process of silencing that began with the sexual assaults, in that it replaces and drowns out the voices of the survivors who should be the ones speaking in the first place. Foremost among those are the migrants who are themselves targeted for sexual assault and harassment. Women traveling from Turkey to Greece and north through the Balkans into the European Union have reported being sexually assaulted and harassed at every stage in the journey. In the transit camps of Croatia, Greece, and Hungary, where they are forced to sleep in the same spaces as men and to use same shower and toilet facilities while being watched, some stopped eating or drinking in order to avoid having to use the toilets. They are often pressured to offer sexual favors to smugglers, camp guards or other security personnel, or other migrants. If nationalists were truly concerned about sexual assault, they would begin with what migrants have been going through.

Sexual violence threatens people everywhere that there are “secure borders” and military controls. In the process of crossing the border between Mexico and the US, almost 80 percent of women from Central America are raped by government officials, cartels, guides, or other migrants. It just came out that minors were raped by United Nations peacekeeping units in Central African Republic, following last year’s revelation that UN troops had sexually abused children in Central African Republic as well as more than 200 women and children in Haiti.

It is no coincidence that so many rapes are perpetrated by representatives of the state. Putting some people in a position of power over others structurally increases the likelihood of rape.

Sexual assaults often occur within hierarchical institutions such as prisons, mental health institutions, churches, schools, offices, and heteronormative families in which the same structures that are supposed to protect people render them vulnerable. If we grant that misogyny and sexual assault exist in Muslim communities—citing, for example, the sexual assaults in Tahrir Square, which Egyptian black bloc anarchists took the lead in resisting—that doesn't mean that white Europe is free of rape or sexism. They just don't come to light as often because the perpetrators are protected by their status.

The central question here is not who the rapists are, but how to respond to sexual assault and rape culture in a way that puts an end to them. Imposing more coercive force, exacerbating power imbalances, and creating more conflicts between “peoples” will only intensify the factors that produce rape in the first place. The fight against sexual assault and patriarchy cannot prioritize any specific group, culture, society, or territory. Sexualized violence exists in a feedback loop with other forms of patriarchy, heterosexism, trans oppression, ageism and oppression of youth, colonialism, and genocide. To fight any of these effectively, we have to fight all of them.

It's Up to Us

Racism and fascism have gotten a makeover in Europe, casting off the old uniforms in favor of suits and ties. Meanwhile, many previously apolitical people are embracing xenophobia, blaming all the problems caused by capitalism on the most vulnerable and marginalized. As discourses and power alliances are reconfigured in this context, we must be careful not to be drawn into the narratives of our enemies.

No state or nationalist security could offer us the safety that comes from social ties and solidarity that extend across the lines of ethnicity and religion. Just as we seek to unlearn our own sexism and to take responsibility for the ways we do harm to others, we have to understand our world as a single unified space in which neither exclusion nor coercion will put an end to misogyny and sexual violence. The solution to sexual assault has never been to externalize the problem behind bars or across borders. The fight against sexism is not a fight against something external, but against all identities that are constructed within gendered matrices of power, including our own identities. This is a fight we can share with migrants, with survivors, with everyone who has a stake in creating a different world.

The nationalists have no real plan for putting an end to the violence they pretend to oppose. Their strategies of division can only exacerbate it—and perhaps that is their true intention. Dehumanizing or deporting migrants will strengthen the position of the Islamic State, Ansar Dine, Boko Haram, and other groups who want to create a situation in which Muslims have no choice except to join their religious war. This makes it all the more pressing to establish a common struggle with migrants while demonstrating empowering and inclusive solutions to the problem of sexual violence. Rape and racism are manifestations of the same thing. Let's fight them together.

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CrimethInc.
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February 16, 2016

Retrieved on 2nd December 2020 from crimethinc.com

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