

Orlando: Making Sense of a Mass Killing

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What could have brought Omar Matten, on the night of June 12, 2016, to coldly murder 49 patrons at Pulse, an Orlando Florida nightclub that catered to a mostly Black and Latino, gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) clientele? Primarily, his hatred of the LGBT people and the people of color he befriended discreetly at night, a hatred fueled by the hyper-masculinity, homophobia, and racism of his day work environment. He was an employee of G4S, a giant private military contractor, infamous for abuses against immigrants.



A Religious Homophobia

Homophobia is an inherent aspect of patriarchal societies, thus found in all religions. Every year, thousands of murderers appeal to religion to justify their crimes against LGBT people. The morning after the tragedy, two Baptist ministers called for the execution of the “sodomites.” One regretted the low number of “predators” and “pedophiles” killed. “I wish the government would round them all up, put them up against a firing wall, put the firing squad in front of them and blow their brains out.” The other went on: “The good news is that at least 50 of these pedophiles are not going to be harming children anymore... The bad news is that a lot of the homos in the bar are still alive.”

(Washington Post, June 15)

In the countries dominated by fundamentalist Islam, LGBT people suffer incarceration, corporal punishment, and executions. In less rigid countries, the majority of Imams, including those deemed “liberal,” still condemn homosexuality as a sin, despite often calling for compassion for the sinner. St. Petersburg’s Catholic bishop (responsible for Orlando) spoke accurately when he said, “It is religion, including our own, that targets, mostly verbally, and often breeds contempt for gays, lesbians and transgender people. Attacks today on LGBT men and women often plant the seed of contempt, then hatred, which can ultimately lead to violence.” *(Washington Post, June 13).*

From Racism to Queerphobia

In the United States, religious “tolerance” of homosexuality is a relative matter. A major opinion poll carried out in 2014 shows that only 36% of Evangelicals and Mormons consider homosexuality socially acceptable, compared to 45% of Muslims, 66% of members of other Protestant denominations, 70% of Catholics and 80% of Jews and Buddhists. This variability is more indicative of the different weight of traditionalists within each religious community than of actual doctrinal differences. In the U.S. South, racist and reactionary religious Christian groups have responded to the Supreme Court’s 2015 decision legalizing gay marriage with new homophobic laws, all in the name of “religious freedom.”

But the greater part of the U.S. establishment has taken a different path, bestowing social respectability on middle-class gays and lesbians—at least those who are white or who put on a “white mask,” in Franz Fanon’s words—and extending to them the right to marry. Some 58% of Americans are in favor, and so, crucially, is the Supreme Court, which legalized gay marriage in June 2015. An important lobby of large corporations has committed to defend this right against the Christian Right. Are these not the assigned standard bearers of a homo-nationalist rampart against a

barbaric Global South, a Global South that haunts both the foreign regions dominated by the empire and the non-white inner cities of the United States itself, a Global South cast as intolerantly Muslim and violent and yet also as a vector of suspect and shady (queer) sexual practices?^[1] Was not the massacre Omar Mateen committed in an African-American and Latino LGBT nightclub in Florida the product of a hatred that was more Queerphobic than homophobic?

The Weapons of the US Special Forces

It was not by chance that the murder weapon in Orlando was the well-known Sig Sauer MCX, developed for the U.S. Special Forces. This shocking act of war drew inspiration from the same sources that feed the admiration for Donald Trump: the morbid fascination with the imperialist “special ops” and their signature light, silent, and lethal firearms.^[2] The Orlando killer could identify equally well with, on the one hand, the NYPD—which rejected him—the Green Berets, the agents of the private military contractor G4S, and, on the other hand, the Hezbollah and Da’esh units—in many ways their mirror image. These professionals of violence, often operating in the twilight of both law and ordinary morality, held the same appeal for him, regardless of their professed political allegiance.

Should that be surprising when we know that Saudi Arabia and the other Wahhabi oil kingdoms are the United States’ largest arms-trading partners, and that the State Department works with Putin’s Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran—which is Hezbollah’s ally—against Da’esh in Syria and Iraq? Aren’t the repercussions of this endless war felt also in the streets of American cities, where local police departments receive surplus army equipment and deploy it with excessive force, particularly against members of minority groups and people of color?

As the ongoing investigation reveals, Omar Mateen was not remote-controlled by Da’esh or any other terrorist organization. He carried inside him the most explosive contradictions of a world in which the war of all against all, and often of each against himself or herself, disarticulates the social body along the fault lines of class, race, nation, gender, sexual orientation, etc. For the most vulnerable and wounded, religion is sometimes no longer capable of expressing even, in Marx’s words, “the sigh of the oppressed creature” and “the soul of a soulless world.” It happens then that one would prefer a horrible death to the horror of everyday life, whatever the cost for oneself and others.

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[1] See Peter Drucker, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, December 2015).

[2] According to one expert, the Sig Sauer MCX is “as quiet as an MP5, as deadly as an AK-47, and more modular than anything ever designed.”