



Revolutionary Beards

I HATE SHAVING. In fact I have always hated shaving. When I was at university I very rarely shaved and had stubble well before anybody thought of designing it; people just thought I was scruffy. I could have grown a beard, but I associated them at the time with hippies and folk singers and could well understand why Enver Hoxha's proletarian dictatorship banned beards throughout Albania. In fact at least one bearded man did manage to get into Albania avoiding both the razor and the police cells; he was the footballer, Danny McGrain. During the 1979 European Cup Celtic was drawn against Partizan Tirana. Consequently Danny, a Celtic defender, had to enter the beardless country. He was prepared to shave, but in the interests of international peace and harmony Hoxha decided to ignore Danny's facial blemish, described by BeardReview.com, as "a fine follicled face-hugger".

Despite my antipathy towards beards I once had a boyfriend who wore a beard. He was very nice. Well, he was much more than nice, but we won't go there because I have avoided men with beards ever since. Strangely, this is not true politically. When I was fourteen or fifteen I became enamoured with Fidel Castro, long before curly-faced Che Guevara made his mark on the T-shirt market. I wrote to the Cuban Embassy from my bedroom in Kilburn and much to my Mother's dismay copies of *Granma*, the official

organ of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, relentlessly kept thumping through our letterbox for years after.

In my late teens I graduated to Stalin, who although beardless wore handsome Georgian moustaches and smoked a pipe in a rather comforting Stanley Baldwin manner. Soon after, I graduated to Lenin who sported a rather natty beard known rather embarrassingly as an “imperial”. From Lenin I ascended to Marx and Engels who were equipped with facial hair of biblical proportions and compared very favourably with Charlton Heston’s *Moses*. Mao Zedong, of course, was clean-shaven but that didn’t seem to matter because he was Chinese, and anyway Ho Chi Minh, the heroic leader of the Vietnamese revolution, made up for the Great Helmsman’s omission with a beard worthy of a mandarin landlord.

Despite these fine examples I have steadily worked my way from old-style safety razors to twin-bladed disposables, to triple bladed without power to ones with battery power, graduating finally to a splendid Gillette Fusion Power, with no less than five blades that vibrate gently as I scrape through the facial foam. Never attracted to fully electric ones I have often pondered on the relationship between beards and revolutions. Beards are evidently important because, by and large, women can’t grow them. Indeed, growing a beard is one of the few things that men can do which women can’t. It distinguishes the men from the boys, and the lads from the lasses; beards are evidence of masculine maturity.

With this maturity comes a sort of gravitas, a sense of entitlement and wisdom well beyond the scope of the simple physical accomplishment. Although almost any man can grow a beard, having one does appear to confer authority on the hairy one. This is, no doubt, why they are *de rigueur* for Islamists and revolutionary Muslims in general. Of course, most Muslim men see nothing wrong with shaving their faces or even trimming their eyebrows, while the extreme sort, in keeping with most Rabbis and all observant Sikhs, insist upon

growing fine beards, in order to distinguish themselves both from women and the infidel.

Obviously, Victorian and Edwardian revolutionaries can be forgiven their hirsute condition. After all, the safety razor wasn't invented until 1895 and the aptly named, King C. Gillette didn't found his company until 1901. So, until around 1920 a revolutionary man, could easily justify his hairy face simply on the grounds of habit or practicality, but following the Second World War, such excuses became more difficult to sustain as the wide inroads made by the safety razor was confirmed by the shiny-faces of Eastern Europe's dictators. However, just as the beardless ones were about to triumph, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh burst upon the world stage, and they were emulated by many a hairy, glamorous, though perhaps *dilettante*, revolutionary youth. Then in 1979, much to everybody's astonishment, the revolutionary baton passed to the religious sages of Tehran and the revolutionary beard was back with a vengeance.

Revolution was no longer about the victory of the workers over their employers or of the peasants over their landlords, or a struggle to root out the age-old subordination of women; it was henceforth to be about obedience to religious authority, obedience to the Police Guidance Patrols, obedience to those possessing a perfect knowledge of God and the Quran. Above all, it was about obedience not simply to men in black, but to men in black wearing beards.

Since then, things have gone from bad to worse in Afghanistan and throughout the Muslim world where Islamists are seeking to wrest control both from traditional despots and republican politicians alike. Now, events in Pakistan have taken an even more unnerving turn with the advent of Taliban rule in Swat. Swat is the area of Pakistan that used to cover the territory of the princely state of Swat. Although the principality was abolished in 1969 and the royal status of its rulers was abolished in 1972 the feudal relations enjoyed by the landlords and the princely families

continued until 2007 when the Taliban arrived in the valley. Now, the bearded revolutionaries are busily upsetting the feudal applecart. The Taliban have won over large numbers of landless peasants to their side initially by squeezing the landlords for donations and forcing them to give up their irreligious Western ways, and finally by driving the landlords out of the region altogether.

What has happened is that since the early years of this century landless peasants have been organising throughout Swat against Pakistan's courts and local authorities run exclusively by traditional landlords and their relations. Since 2007, the Taliban, reinforced by Uzbek fighters and armed militants from the tribal areas of Waziristan, have linked up with local groups to carry forward what amounts to a social revolution. Surprisingly, the bearded Taliban are a modernising force, which after fighting the Pakistani Army to a standstill, are sweeping away feudal relations. Enormously rich feudalists like Shujaat Ali Khan, Jamal Nasir, Fateh Ali Mohammed and Mohammad Sher Khan, have fled in fear of their lives as their houses are demolished, and the emerald mines and the region's tax revenues have fallen to the Taliban.

This is a revolution fought against landlords in defence of landless peasants, and in the ruthless defence of patriarchy. Girls' schools are being burnt to the ground, women are forced entirely out of the public realm, and the property in women held by the bearded ones, the property they hold in form of their wives and daughters, is confiscated at every turn. Public humiliation, beatings, mutilations, and beheadings, have, like many a revolution before, become commonplace.

The Taliban have brought revolutionary terror to Pakistan in a holy alliance between landless peasants and religious zealots. Forged from the expulsion of landlords and the subordination of women it is a revolution destined to succeed unless the well-shaved soldiers and politicians of Islamabad seize the initiative from the bearded ones by hurriedly crushing the power of feudal landlords throughout Pakistan.