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"Islam in the Modern World-System"¹

One has only to open today almost any newspaper published in the United States, Europe, or the Middle East (at least), and you will find some story about Islam or Islamists. However, had you done this same thing in the 1950s, the opposite would have been true. There were extremely few stories about Islam in the newspapers, even in the Middle East. What has changed? To understand the current situation, we have to trace the political importance of religious affiliations in the modern world-system since the long sixteenth century.

At the beginning, religious affiliations were politically extremely important. This was the era of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Defining conflicts as those between Catholics and the others (Protestants, Anglicans, humanists, and in Spain Jews and Muslim) was central to political discourse.

At the time, Europeans defined Islam as an extra-European force that was besieging Europe. The initial Muslim conquests of the eighth century in western Europe had reached Tours in France, and Muslim rulers governed almost all of what is today Spain for centuries, until they were finally totally expelled by the Christian forces of the *Reconquista* in 1492. But at just this time, the Ottoman Empire, a Muslim empire, expanded into Southeastern Europe, reaching its high point in the siege of Vienna in 1685. And of course the Ottomans remained in large parts of southeastern Europe right up until the end of the First World War.

European cultural history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries included a large measure of secularization of Christian states. In many countries, the internal religious conflict was now seen as Christians versus freethinkers, the latter trying to detach state institutions from their formal and informal links with Christian churches. Islam was scarcely noticed by Europeans at this time. It certainly was not the center of political debate or even discourse.

By the time we get to the twentieth century, one European state after another is ending or trying to end any political role for Christian churches. Debate was often harsh, but generally speaking the progress of what we now call the separation of church and state was considerable. In much of Asia and the Middle East, there were strong forces calling for the cultural "modernization" of these areas. This meant in

¹ for Sociologisk Forskning.

practice for some the redefinition of religious values in a direction parallel to “liberal Protestantism” in the European zone. Socialist and Communist movements in the non-European zones proposed a non-religious, even anti-religious, framework for political activity.

This relegation of religion to something outside the political sphere reached its high point in the period 1945–1970. This is something that can be assessed by looking at three major phenomena. First, the definition of the central geopolitical issue was that of the “free world” versus the Communist world. This had religious dimensions. The Communist world was officially atheist and the “free world” attacked Communist systems for their constraints on religious institutions. Nonetheless the debate was primarily formulated in terms of competing political philosophies, not competing religious faiths.

Secondly, most countries who defined themselves as “non-aligned” in the Cold War were dominated by movements of national liberation. These movements were secular structures and did not use religious affiliations as major categories of their discourse or their organizing. In general, religiously-defined political groups were hostile to the movements of national liberation or at least defined themselves as alternatives. They were however in the minority.

Thirdly, resistance to the process of secularization of the state by its strongest religious opponent, the Roman Catholic Church, collapsed. This is the heart of the political meaning of Pope John XXIII’s *aggiornamento*, in which the Church accepted the idea that it was legitimate to operate in a context of religious pluralism.

We can thus say that there was a steady decline in the centrality of religious categories in the modern world-system from 1500 to circa 1970. The rise of so-called fundamentalisms throughout the world since circa 1970 represents a major political shift. It reversed a five-century trend in the other direction. We have to ask why this happened.

There are three fundamental changes: the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Old Left movements, and stagnation in the world-economy which has led to profit-making primarily from financial speculation with a consequent sharp increase in the degree of polarization. Let me elaborate on each of these.

The end of the Cold War was a dramatic development. Institutionally, it meant the end of Communist regimes not only in east-central Europe but in the U.S.S.R. itself; the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact; and the entry of most east-central European states into NATO and the European Union.

The end of the Cold War was generally hailed in the United States and western Europe as the political triumph of democracy over Communism. I have contended from the outset that the so-called victory of the U.S. was not a victory at all but rather a setback for its geopolitical position.²

The end of the Cold War served the geopolitical interests of the United States

² See *After Liberalism*, New York: New Press, 1995 and *The Decline of American Power: The U.S. in a Chaotic World*, New York: New Press, 2003.

poorly for two reasons. Despite the ideological struggle, or indeed because of it, the United States and the Soviet Union had been in tacit collusion throughout the Cold War, linked if by nothing else by the fear of mutual destruction. This meant that the Soviet Union could and did use its political influence to constrain various countries of the South from upsetting the basic East-West geopolitical equilibrium, lest that lead to a nuclear war. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the collapse of this kind of constraint mechanism. This had immediate consequences in the first Gulf war.

The second reason why the end of the Cold War was undesirable from the point of view of the United States was that it eliminated the logic that underlay the alliances of the United States with western Europe as well as with Japan and South Korea. These alliances had been based on common commitments to uniting against the Soviet Union. The alliances, having lost their *raison d'être*, risked coming unstrung. And, of course, we have seen in the second Gulf war how much unstringing there has been.

The failures of the Old Left movements had their first major political consequence in the world revolution of 1968. In the post-1945 period, the Old Left movements had managed to come to power all around the globe - as Communist movements in the so-called socialist bloc, as social-democratic movements in the pan-European world, as national liberation movements in much of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and as populist movements in much of Latin America.

They had come to power but they had manifestly not changed the world, which was the heart of the critique against them by the revolutionaries of 1968. They no longer believed in the ability of the Old Left movements to guarantee a better world for the future. Quite the contrary. They asserted that these movements rather sustained the existing system. This reversal of attitude led to the downfall of many of these regimes as well as to the emergence of new kinds of movements which claimed they could substitute for the Old Left movements with movements a different strategy, one that was less state-oriented and therefore would work better.

Finally, the capitalist world-economy since circa 1970 has been in one long Kondratieff B-phase. Such B-phases are marked by standard features: the increase worldwide in the unemployment rates and a generalized attack on wage levels; the shift of erstwhile leading industries that are no longer as profitable to semiperipheral states (which thereupon assert that they are "developing"); the shift of capital from profits via investment to profits in the financial sphere; the attempt to reduce costs by attacking measures to internalize costs (in order to protect the environment) and by seeking to reduce taxation by reducing the welfare state.

All of this has of course happened since the 1970s. We have been calling the discourse of these political efforts "neo-liberalism."

Whatever the economic benefits for small groups of the elite, the overall situation is quite difficult economically for the majority of the world's population. The political consequence is generalized fear about economic prospects, and hence a widespread search for protection.

If we put these three elements together, one can immediately see why political Islamism became a possible focus of the discourse. It offered the United States the im-

age of an enemy that might restore its alliance system in the absence of "communism." For those deceived by the failures of the national liberation movements to ensure a better future, political Islamism presented itself as an alternative that claimed it could achieve the objectives of the national liberation movements far more efficaciously. And for all who were living amidst increased economic fears, it offered either a scapegoat or a symbol of hope, but in any case, something concrete and different.

In the last thirty years, we have seen everywhere the rise of "fundamentalisms" - not only among Muslim, but among Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists, whose movements, however different, have some very obvious similarities.

The first is their complex relationship to state structures. On the one hand, all these movements assert that their legitimacy derives from instances more important than the state, whose moral injunctions take priority over anything that states enact. Yet, at the very same time, these movements seek to obtain state power in order that the state legislate the laws of God, and thereby impose them upon all who are disbelievers.

In addition, they assert that the states have failed to provide basic social services to the mass of the population. This assertion is largely correct. Feeling it futile to ask of corrupt state authorities to rectify this failure, the various movements have created substitute para-statal institutions: schools and dispensaries; their own equivalent of social workers to help individuals and families solve everyday problems; and para-judicial institutions to deal with violations of moral norms. In short, they seek to become the state *de facto* even when not yet *de jure*.

This assumption of a para-statal role has the double consequence of attracting popular support from persons who have indeed been let down by the formal state apparatus. And by performing these functions, they deligitimate the state structures still further.

It is often alleged that these so-called fundamentalist movements are anti-modern. This is quite incorrect. To be sure, their ideology tends to be formulated in terms of reviving moral rules that are claimed to be the truly traditional ones and are said to have been in operation in earlier times. Actually, this is only partially true. Some of these "traditional" rules have been recent inventions. Others are enforced in ways more rigid than they were in earlier times. But even when the rules seem archaic in terms of modern value-systems (particularly in relation to gender), they are in fact proposed as a way of dealing with present realities.

Furthermore, most of these movements are adept at the use of ultra-modern technologies, attracting thereby the support of science and engineering students. These movements seldom endorse romantic returns to pre-modern life, unlike the Christian evangelical movements of the eighteenth century that still survive as isolated pockets among us. These movements should be thought of as alternative forms of modernism, seeking to impose their version of modernism on the world.

If these movements exist almost everywhere, with comparable agendas, why is so much attention paid to Islamism? No other form of politicized, "fundamentalist" religious movements get comparable notice, except perhaps the so-called Christian right

whose base is in evangelical Christian churches. The two sets of religious movements form a pair. The secular Tamil movement in Sri Lanka, whose adherents are largely Hindu, is fighting against a government whose power base is among Buddhists. The Tamil Tigers more or less invented the idea of suicide bombers. Yet almost everyone associates suicide bombing with Islam. So something else is going on here.

One reason is the obvious one. Political Islamists have identified the United States as the guiding evil force in the world, and have taken to attacking the United States openly and directly. We refer to this phenomenon by the shorthand of 9/11.

The image of a large and continuing threat from "Islamic terrorists" has served the political interests of the Bush regime, which has sought to enracinate this concept in the popular consciousness. In a chaotic geopolitical arena, such blurry but powerful concepts are hard to deal with, even harder to eradicate, and still harder to contain.

Since Muslims in many areas are part of oppressed minorities, Islamist extremism becomes a theme that local power structures find useful to justify their repression and seek political support from the United States and other pan-European powers. A rolling stone thereby begins to gather quite a bit of moss.

It is then possible to call upon memories of historical conflicts that had been long buried: the Crusades and the long and successful Muslim resistance to the twelfth-century Christian occupation of Palestine. It is not that very many people today want literally to revive the Crusades. But this reference serves as a dim legitimization of present-day sentiments.

This is in fact where Israel comes in. Whatever the attitudes of Israelis and Jews elsewhere in the world, it is clear that Israel's existence and policies are a major bone of contention between large numbers of Muslims and Christians. On both sides, there has come to be a Christian-Jewish identification in political terms which is truly remarkable, considering how recent were the terrible consequences of historic Christian anti-Semitism for Jews. But politics, as always, makes strange bedfellows.

There is also great utility in states with a largely Muslim population to emphasize the Islamic character as a mode of national identification. The most secular of movements finds it hard to avoid.

So, there we are today. We live in a world with multiple violences committed in the name of constructed cultural oppositions between a reified Islamism and a reified pan-Europeanism (which scarcely hides its Christian character). Such concepts are self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating. Rational analysis has little impact on their hold on popular imaginations. The question is simply, how long can they last, since for the most part they are built on straw. What is going on in the world today is much more than a debate about religious values and institutions.

The world left has not known how to handle the rise of religious "fundamentalisms." They have been totally unsure whether they should see them as a new variety of antisystemic movement or, at the other extreme, consider them a major enemy of left movements to be thought of as a new variety of fascist-like movements. Most left movements have responded by saying very little and relegating themselves to observing the political consequences of the rise of such movements.

There is good reason for such ambiguity. On the one hand, the world left is heir to movements which more or less agreed with Marx that religion is the opiate of the masses. Of course, there have always been leftists who espoused religious values, but they were a barely tolerated minority within the ranks of the world left. The contemporary world political left throws a somewhat skeptical eye, if not a frankly hostile one, on religiously-based "fundamentalist" political movements.

On the other hand, the world left often finds that such movements are fighting the same enemies that it is fighting. Most specifically, the world left and most "fundamentalist" movements (but especially the Islamist ones) consider the United States as the principal force to oppose. The old political wisdom is that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

If one looks at the primary meeting-ground of the world left today, the World Social Forum (WSF), one will see that, while some religiously-based movements attend and even play an important role (for example, the left Christian movements in Brazil), no "fundamentalist" movement of any religious persuasion is there. Secondly, neither "fundamentalism" in general nor political Islamism in particular seems to be on the agenda for debate. In a forum that discusses virtually everything, the absence of such debate is striking. Even when one of its major meetings took place in a Muslim country - the meeting in Karachi in March 2006 - this issue did not seem to have been on the agenda.

Of course, for the world left, religious "fundamentalism" is not the only thorny issue. There is the issue of the role to be allotted intellectually and politically to "ethnicist" or "indigenist" movements. But unlike the "fundamentalist" movements, "ethnicist" or "indigenist" movements have not only been active in the World Social Forum, but their even greater participation has been actively solicited by the others.

To be sure, there is some debate about the attitude that should be taken towards them. There have been critics from a traditional Old Left view who have argued that these movements are divisive of the left and unreliable because they refuse to recognize the centrality of class issues. But at least the matter is debated, indeed debated loudly and with passion, but debated also intelligently as a question of basic left strategy in the twenty-first century world.

One might have thought that the WSF would have had the same kind of debate about the "fundamentalist" movements, especially since most of them have been politically on the right. This is certainly true of the Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist movements. The only ones that are not unambiguously on the right are indeed the Islamist movements. But they are certainly not unambiguously on the left either.

Are we perhaps discussing this matter too early? As these Islamist movements begin to assume state power in more and more states, will they be coming into more direct conflict with secular left movements? This happened in Iran and to some extent in Sudan and Yemen. It may be happening in post-Saddam Iraq. Everywhere, the secular left in Muslim countries is caught between its unhappiness with the regimes in power and its fears about what would happen - to them - if Islamist movements came to power. Consequently, they have been politically paralyzed.

It is no doubt far too early to say the religious "fundamentalist" movements have passed their prime and beginning to decline as central political forces in their countries. But it does seem to me likely that this point will come, and perhaps sooner than we think. No doubt, we may expect a weakening of the "fundamentalist" character of religiously-based movements precisely as a result of their successes in achieving state power. We have seen how much the achievement of state power gutted the commitments of Old Left movements to their ideologies and political promises. Why should this not be the same with "fundamentalist" movements when they come to state power?

The real question is not what will happen to these movements as a result of their successes in the coming decades. The real question is what will happen to the world left and to their present major incarnation, the World Social Forum, in the coming decades. The WSF, after just a few years of existence in which it grew steadily and became a relative political success, is now facing a turning-point.

There has long been a tension between two large groups: those who emphasized the role of the WSF as an "open space," one that was "horizontal" as opposed to the hierarchical structures of the various historic internationals, and those who think the WSF must become a locus of concerted world political action.

The logic of each side is clear. To emphasize horizontality and open space is to opt for a vast coalition of groups of very different kinds and projects, whose sole unifying requirement is a commitment that they are opposed to neo-liberalism and to imperialism in all its forms. To ensure the breadth of the coalition, the WSF has no officers and passes no resolutions. It is simply a forum in which different groups of activists may exchange views and increase their practical collaboration outside the WSF framework.

For the others, the horizontal structure reduces the WSF to being a "talking shop," which is ultimately politically irrelevant. The WSF must rather organize worldwide political activities. The first group answers that this formula would lead rapidly to exclusions of those who had different views and reduce the WSF to repeating the failures of the previous internationals. Unless the WSF can overcome this division with some formula that is possible for both camps to accept, it will disintegrate.

The merit of the open forum formula is obvious. It seeks to create a very large coalition of every movement that is somehow "left of center." Indeed, the only question one might raise is that of the few exclusions: political parties, movements which engage in military action, and implicitly the "fundamentalist" religious movements. Since the open forum formula allows for no voting, no officers, no agreed-upon resolutions, there is little risk that including these groups in the forum would lead to some kind of "takeover" by them, thereby changing the character of the WSF.

On the other hand, it is clear that world political activity is an essential element of transforming the world in this period of systemic transition in which we are living. One could organize multiple ad hoc coalitions of groups that were ready to engage in specific political campaigns, and recognize that these are outgrowths of WSF's open space but not endorsed as such by the collectivity of those present.

It will only be in the intellectual and political give and take of the unlimited discussions at the open space and the multiple ad hoc political activities that may be created that the world left can hope to achieve that combination of united front and meaningful political activity that gives it the possibility of bringing into being that "other world that is possible." This combination of lucidity and political effectiveness would probably relegate religious credos to their appropriate place in the public political sphere, and set us once again on the path to a greater democratic participation by everyone and a more egalitarian world structure. If this happens, in 2050, we shall look back to the period 1970 to perhaps 2020 at most as an interesting interlude and not at all the face of the future.