

Islamic Fundamentalism: Religious Fanaticism to Reinforce the State

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The past decade has been a wave of “Islamic fundamentalism” roll over the Muslim world. The Shia world has seen the consolidation of an “Islamic republic” in Iran, under the charismatic leadership of the Ayatollah Khomeini. In the suburbs of West Beirut, the Party of God or Hizbollah has become a powerful military and political force as hostile to the Baathist regime in Syria as to the Zionist state of Israel and a major factor in the Lebanese imbroglio. In the Sunni world, the “fundamentalist” Muslim Brotherhood is an increasingly potent political force in a string of Arab states, and a particular thorn in the side of Assad in Syria and Mubarak in Egypt, whose regimes it is determined to overthrow. In Libya, Colonel Khaddafi has made himself into the avatar of “Islamic fundamentalism”, which he is determined to spread across North Africa. Islamic fundamentalism has also become a decisive factor in the politics of South Asia, from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Both academics and politicians in the West and mullahs and partisans of “fundamentalism” in the Muslim world present this phenomenon as a revival of religion a rebirth of the faith of the Prophet, which in the West can be portrayed as a recrudescence of superstition and obscurantism, and which in the East is portrayed as an ethico-utopian revival directed against the evils of modernity and capitalism. Both views of Islamic fundamentalism, each serving the ideological interests of those who articulate them, are wrong. Unfortunately, revolutionary Marxists, mesmerized by the religious trappings and symbols of this phenomenon, have accepted its claims to constitute a religious revival, against which it is sufficient to respond with Marx’s famous phrase – itself most often ripped out of context – about the “opium of the people.” While there can be no doubt that Islamic fundamentalism is a mystification, its political potency, its capacity for mass mobilization and the constitution or consolidation of a state apparatus, and its real thrust as a bulwark against socialism and proletarian revolution in the Muslim world, will be completely misled if it is seen as a religious phenomenon.

A real de-mystification of Islamic fundamentalism rests on two basic insights, which will be elaborated in this article. First, the very term “Islamic fundamentalism” with its theological overtones is a misnomer. Despite its religious trappings and symbolism, Islamic fundamentalism is not a religious phenomenon at all. Indeed far from representing a revival of the doctrines and traditions of Islam, this movement is based on a rejection of much of the doctrinal core and traditional institutional bases of Islam. Second, the real character of Islamic fundamentalism is that of a political ideology generated by the imperative of state capitalism. It is the social conditions peculiar to the Muslim world in the era

of capitalist decadence, the necessity for an ideological response adequate to the needs of capitalism, that have generated the phenomenon designated as “Islamic fundamentalism.”

The extent to which Islamic fundamentalism has repudiated the very traditions of Islam which it claims to defend can be seen in its cultural and political monolithism. Classical Islam was doctrinally and theologically pluralistic. The absence within Islam of any supreme doctrinal authority such as Western Christianity historically possessed in the form of the Councils and the Papacy, both encouraged and reflected its pluralism. Whereas in the Christian world outside of doctrinal orthodoxy there was only heresy, on the classical Muslim world widely divergent schools of thought and a multitude of sects and movements flourished – all within the ambit of what was generally accepted as Islam. The ruthless monolithism and intolerance characteristic of Islamic fundamentalism and its political regimes stands in stark contrast to the pluralism of the classical Islamic world. Indeed, these features of Islamic fundamentalism are shared with fascism and Stalinism and constitute the very embodiment of the most barbarous tendencies of twentieth century state capitalism. This can perhaps best be seen in the Salman Rushdie affair, where the death sentence handed down by the Ayotollah Khomeini not merely violates both the spirit of traditional Islam and the letter of its law, but corresponds solely to the totalitarian requirement of the modern capitalist state for a mass mobilization and xenophobic reaction so as to insure ideological control over the population.

The relationship between civil society and the state provides a further indication of the degree to which fundamentalism violates the traditional framework of the Islamic world. In classical Islam, there is no basis for an assimilation of religion to the state. Nothing comparable to the tradition of Caesaropapism in both occidental and oriental Christianity with its merger of church and state. Furthermore classical Islam permits no reduction of civil society to the state. In fact Muslim law, the Shari’at, as the codification of an ideal ethical system was a check on the unrestrained political power of the despotic state. The ’ulama, the specialists in doctrine and the interpretation of the law, was traditionally a formidable counterweight to and opponent of the state apparatus. Indeed, following the depredations of the Abbasids (8th century) the ’ulama and the Shari’at “became the expression of the autonomy of society at large against the absolute monarchy.”(Marshall G S Hodgson, “Islam and image”, *History of Religions*, vol. 3, 1964, p. 234). This pattern is not confined to the Sunni world. In Shi’ism distrust of worldly power and the state is historically ubiquitous.

By contrast, Islamic fundamentalism is committed to the ruthless suppression of civil society and the subordination of religion to the needs of the totalitarian state. The very social fabric of traditional Muslim society, already in tatters under the impact of capitalism, receives its coup de grace from the state apparatus constructed by those who claim to preserve it: the Islamic republic under its Khomeinist or Kaddafist forms is the totalitarian state form which uproots the last remnants of traditional social and cultural forms ill suited to the requirements of capitalism in the Muslim world. This is but one more example of the ruse of history!

Even looked at sociologically, Islamic fundamentalism is not an expression of traditional Islam. The social roots and class bases of Islamic fundamentalism are not the clerics (’alim and mullahs) of the traditional Sunni and Shia worlds, the remnants of which still exist, but rather are by and large to be sought in the modern, capitalist, sectors of society: the urban centres, the universities, school teachers, academics, engineers, etc. Even in Khomeini’s “Islamic republic” where mullahs play a decisive role, this stratum was, in fact, deeply divided. Many mullahs objected to the role allotted the state, which so clashed with traditional patterns, and many of the Ayotollahs opposed Khomeini’s assumption of

dictatorial powers and pretensions to be the Imam as contrary to the doctrines of Shia Islam (one thinks, for example, of the ill fated Ayotollah Shariat Madari). In many cases these clerics who opposed Khomeini's project acted in defence of traditional landed interests. Nonetheless, this only points up the incompatibility of traditional Islam and the fundamentalism enshrined in the "Islamic Republic". Those mullahs in the forefront of the Khomeinist regime are closely linked to the urban strata which constitute the decisive social base of fundamentalism throughout the Muslim world today. Their goal is to absorb civil society into a totalitarian state which they will direct and administer – a state which of necessity is the embodiment of the capitalist law of value.

Under the ideological guise of reconstituting the political structure of the earliest Muslim community, and by directing their mass appeal to the peasant and traditional petty bourgeois masses seething with discontent, these urban strata which direct the fundamentalist movements seek to become the functionaries of a statified capital. Whereas traditional Islam was indifferent if not outright hostile towards the state, Islamic fundamentalism is an ideology dedicated to the formation of an omnipotent state. The fanaticism of Islamic fundamentalism is not a religious fanaticism, a throwback to the Middle Ages as it is portrayed in the West, but rather a state fanaticism typical of decadent capitalism everywhere, however much the particular forms may vary from one sector of the world market to another.

There remains the question of what specifies configuration of forces has generated fundamentalism in the Muslim world as a movement and ideology while can respond to the imperatives of state capitalism. State capitalism is not a phenomenon confined to the backward capitalist societies or the result of a failed proletarian revolution as some have claimed. It is the universal tendency of capitalism in its phase of permanent crisis and as such its classic embodiment is in the most advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe and North America. In these societies, state capitalism has been built so to speak from the bottom up. The capitalist law of value, originally confined to the actual process of immediate production (formal domination of capital) spread to the process of circulation and consumption, ultimately invading every facet of social and personal life and subjecting the whole of civil society to its sway (real domination of capital). This coincided with the permanent crisis of capitalism, and ended in the state becoming the crystallization of the law of value and swallowing civil society itself. In the backward societies where the process of capitalization itself largely coincided within set of capitalist decadence, the imperative of state capitalism made itself felt well before such an organic process could run its course (in some cases when it had scarcely begun). As a result in large parts of the world state capitalism emerged in the absence of the socio-economic and political foundations which existed in the West; to a considerable degree it had to be constructed from the top down. To compensate for the weakness of its foundations, state capitalism in these societies took on more violent forms, the totalitarian state operating less with the enormous power of surveillance and control represented by a well articulated civil society now thoroughly incorporated within it, than through the more direct application of force and violence which its weak articulation necessitated.

To compensate for its weaknesses, the capitalist state in these societies has typically had recourse to the most racist and xenophobic forms of nationalism as the only ideological glue capable of consolidating its rule. In the Muslim world, however, even nationalism, in the absence of well articulated nation-states, has often proven inadequate to the task of providing an ideological basis for the capitalist state. Throughout North Africa, for example, the existence of different ethnic groups (Arab, Berber), and the persistence of tribalism, makes an Islamic ideology a far more effective basis for mass mobilization than nationalistic appeals. Such the same is true in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where there is no such thing as an Afghan or Pakistani nation and where only an Islamic ideology promises

to provide a basis for the construction of a stable entity. In Iran and Indonesia, the existence of rival ethnic groups within the frontiers of the same state (e.g. Azeris, Baluchis, Arabs as well as Farsi speakers in Iran) has made recourse to an Islamic ideology an alternative to possible civil wars and disintegration of the politico-economic entity. In each of these cases, Islamic ideology functions not as a religion, but as an ersatz nationalism, a means by which the functionaries of capital can seek to forge a mass base and try to legitimize their rule.

The spread of Islamic fundamentalism across the Muslim world can only be understood and resisted if it is clear that we are facing a phenomenon that is modern, not medieval, and capitalist, not traditional. The capacity of the Islamic ideology to mobilize the impoverished masses of the Muslim world is certainly enhanced by its anti-capitalist rhetoric, its crass appeal to a traditional world destroyed by the "Satanic" forces of modernity and westernization. Nonetheless, behind this ideological cloak lurks the imperative of state capitalism and the law of value itself. In that sense, the Islamic ideology cannot satisfy the hopes which the masses who have rallied to its cause have invested in it. Moreover, Islamic fundamentalism cannot assure the construction of a stable socio-political entity as a necessary framework for the operation of the capitalist law of value. This effort to construct a durable state capitalist entity from the top down is doomed to fail. The existence of a permanent crisis of capitalism as a mode of production, the existence of an open economic crisis, which is most devastating in the Third World, and the absence of the necessary framework in the form of a well articulated civil society shaped by the law of value, mean that the state apparatus forged in the name of the Islamic ideology will simply preside over a process of increasing capitalist barbarization.

The world of traditional Islam is dead, and the Islamic ideology which promises to preserve it, in reality is its gravedigger. However, what it brings in its place is not historical progress, which in this epoch can only take the form of international proletarian revolution, but rather the dark night of totalitarian state capitalism.