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“The rise of Islamism is, paradoxically, both a product and a rejection of modernity”

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'The rise of Islamism is, paradoxically, both a product of and a rejection of modernity.'
Discuss.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution provoked a crisis in western modernisation theory. For much of the twentieth century, scholars claimed the Middle East was faced with a choice: it was either 'Mecca or mechanization'.¹ The successful transition of Iran into a rational Islamic republic occasioned a debate on the relationship between Islamism and modernity that continues to this day. Defined broadly for present purposes as the attempt to build an Islamic state, there are conflicting ideas about Islamism's ideological content, the social origin of its advocates, and its status either as a social grouping or a discourse. Islamism, evidently, is itself an important point of contention; indeed, much the same can be said of 'modernity'. The mutable nature of the meanings of these terms is both responsible for, and reflective of, the now dominant theoretical approach in studying them: constructivism. With its roots in critical Marxism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, and the questioning of dominant realist and liberalist paradigms, constructivism posits a theory of international relations in which social and cultural phenomena are not coherent pre-existing categories, but the products of a mutual process of constitution in relation to the external world. Constructivists view Islamism not as a reified set of social and cultural norms, but as a *discourse* – a network of language, symbols, assumptions and actions that both constitute and are constituted by social reality.² The claim that Islamism is at once a product and a rejection of modernity already implies a variability of meaning that constructivism is designed to capture. Indeed, it will be demonstrated that constructivism can illuminate many of the strands linking Islamism to modernity. It is in terming this relationship 'paradoxical', however, that the constructivist approach reveals its limitations.

Constructivism's emphasis on language as constituting as well as reflecting social reality can reveal the various ways in which Islamism rejected ideas of 'modernity'. Whereas cultural essentialist approaches have depicted Islamism as inherently anti-modern, Mohammed Ayoob has demonstrated that the variety of strands of Islamism ensures that there is no consensus either on what constitutes an Islamic political system or what aspects of 'modern' culture this involves.³ Indeed, contrary to essentialist views, which have commonly regarded Muslim politics and Islam as inextricably linked, one kind of 'modernity' rejected by Islamist movements was secularisation – the separation of the state and the religious establishment. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB), for instance, was founded as a populist religious association by Hassan al-Banna in 1928 as a means of opposing secular liberal constitutional parties like the Wafd. Likewise, the rise of Islamist parties in the 1970s and 80s can be seen as a reaction against the secular Arab nationalism dominant in the 1960s. Indeed, according to Gerges, the individuals responsible for the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat in 1981 were provoked not by Sadat's signing of the Camp David Agreement, but his failure to fulfil his promise as the 'Pious President' to restore Shari'a law.

As well as a rejection of modernity-as-secularisation, constructivism also aids an understanding of the rejection of modernity-as-westernisation. Islamism's roots in the Cold War climate of anti-imperialism, nationalism, and communist and socialist internationalism instilled it with an oppositional language of rejection

¹ D. Eickelman and J. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, (Princeton University Press, 2004), p.22.

² L. Fawcett (ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East*, 3rd edn, (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.28-30.

³ M. Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, (University of Michigan Press, 2007). For examples of the cultural essentialist argument, see S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (Simon & Schuster, 1996), and B. Lewis, *Cultures in Conflict*, (Oxford University Press, 1996); M. Ayoob, article

of western 'modernity'. In this sense, Islamism became a new kind of Arab 'nationalism': a claim to identity and authenticity against a foreign other.⁴ The constructivist approach permits an investigation of how the Islamist 'language' was fashioned in response to, and in tandem with, the waning of Arab nationalism and the rising oil-based power of Saudi Arabia.⁵ Eickelman and Piscatori have demonstrated how the concept of the 'Islamic state' – the central tenet of the Islamist programme – was 'invented' in opposition to the west.⁶ The Ottoman inheritance of the Caliphate was asserted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in response to European pressure. It was proclaimed again as a means of separation from western control by Kemal Atatürk from 1921-24 with repercussions across the subcontinent, before being pragmatically refashioned by the Egyptian reformer Rashid Rida. The espousal of the Islamic state by more recent Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the Jama'at Islamiyya in Egypt, and the Front Islamique de Salut (FIS) of Algeria thus rests upon an invented tradition developed in opposition to ideas of western 'modernity'.

Where the constructivist approach is at its strongest, however, is in demonstrating how the Islamist discourse is also a *product* of modernity, as well as a rejection. It is successful in this respect due to its emphasis on Islamism as a political construct – a legitimising ideology for national politics. In this sense, a constructivist approach to the rise of Islamism is compatible with a more realist perspective on the centrality of the nation state to the regional politics of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's establishment of the World Islamic League in 1965, the King's adoption of the title of 'Khadim al-Haramay', and the funding of Islamist groups in the 1980s, were part of a programme to rival Egypt as leader of the Arab and Muslim world.⁷ Saudi Islamism was thus a pragmatic and self-serving political construction; a product of the 'modern' state system and the regional power dynamics it had created. The same might be said of the origins of a variety of Islamist movements: during the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, Hezbollah stressed the defence not of the ummah, but of the 'Lebanese nation', and established working relationships with Christian circles. Meanwhile, while the Iraqi government was publicly proclaiming support for the Palestinians and pronouncing Baghdad the 'qala'a' (citadel) of the Islamic world, Saddam Hussein was ordering the killing of PLO representatives in Europe who favoured negotiations with Israel.⁸

The importance of aspects of 'modernity' to the rise of Islamism is not limited merely to the organising framework of the nation state, however. Constructivism reveals how aspects of western 'modernity' also provide much of the vocabulary of Islamism. The very language used in rejecting western modernity demonstrates Islamism's modernist debt. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the Iranian revolution. Whereas essentialist approaches have tended to regard Shi'i Islam as inherently revolutionary, Zubaida has demonstrated that Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of government – the 'vilayet-i-faqih' – borrowed heavily from western liberal and enlightenment vocabularies.⁹ Not only was the concept of rule by clerics a radical departure from traditional Islamic rule by princes, but the proclamation of revolution ('inqilab') and the building of a republic ('jumhuri') also owed a clear debt to western 'modernity'.¹⁰ Meanwhile, despite lip service being paid to the pre-eminence of Shari'a law through the proclamation that ultimate sovereignty lay with God alone, the constitution revealed the dominance of the state over Islam. Chapter 3, article 36 reads: 'the passing

⁴ S. Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East*, 3rd edn, (I.B. Tauris & Co., 2009), p.xxx.

⁵ G. Kepel, *Jihad: the trail of Political Islam*, (I.B. Tauris & Co., 2002), p.9.

⁶ D. Eickelman and J. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, pp.28-37.

⁷ F. Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.195.

⁸ *Ibid.* p.218.

⁹ S. Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State*, pp.1-38.

¹⁰ F. Halliday, *The Middle East*, p.204.

of a sentence must be only by a competent court and in accordance with law'.¹¹ In other words, state law trumped rulings by a qazi in Shari'a law.

What are we to make of these coexisting yet seemingly incompatible attitudes to modernity? It is here that the limitations of the constructivist approach become evident. While constructivists readily accept the mutable and political nature of the Islamist discourse, they have often too readily adopted 'modernity' as a reified sociological and historical phenomenon. When it is understood that Islamist discourse is present-oriented and based upon an abstract notion of modernity (while rejecting modernity-as-westernisation), it becomes clear that there is nothing 'paradoxical' about the simultaneous dependence upon, and rejection of, 'modernity'.¹² In fact, far from being paradoxical, Islamist attitudes to alternative modernities are entirely logical, and even necessary: the rejection of certain aspects of western modernity is an essential part of the legitimising power of the Islamist ideology. Just as Nasser used Arab nationalism and confrontation with the west in the Suez Crisis as a means of gaining domestic and regional influence, so Islamism must reinvent traditions in opposition to western secularising modernity.

A second limitation of constructivism that leads to a view of Islamism as paradoxical is the tendency to neglect the social bases of Islamist discourse. Constructivism privileges discourse to the detriment of historical agency. The result is that the division and contest between bottom-up organic Islamist movements and top-down statist Islamism is often neglected in favour of a view of Islamism as an anti-western and anti-modern political language. In fact, what Olivier Roy has termed 're-Islamisation' – the adoption of more conservative Islamic policies by state across the Middle East in the 1980s – was itself often a reaction to the growing popularity of non-state Islamist movements. In Algeria, for instance, in response to the growing popularity of the FIS, the Family Law of 1984 reintroduced elements of Shari'a, while in Turkey religious teaching in schools became compulsory in 1983 and graduates from religious schools were given access to the civil service.¹³ Different groups made use of Islamism for different reasons, and the relationship between Islamism and modernity varied accordingly. While state-based Islamism and independent Islamist movements both reject modernisation-as-westernisation, for instance, it is evident that state Islamism is based on a notion of modernity-as-state system, whereas bottom-up Islamist movements, with their leftist, anti-imperial roots, are the product of modernity-as-transnationalism. In other words, while state-based Islamism conforms to a constructivist-realist approach, bottom-up Islamism is perhaps more akin to a constructivist-neoliberalism. Understanding the context of the use of Islamism is therefore essential to understanding the logic of its relationship to modernity.

Critical theory provides some useful correctives to the constructivist approach. Firstly, at a specific level, what Shmuel Eisenstadt has termed 'multiple modernities' might be applied to the study of Islamism. Instead of perceiving modernity as an essentially linear and universal phenomenon (as has been the case from Marx and Weber to modernisation theorists of the 1950s and 60s like Immanuel Wallerstein), Eisenstadt sees it as the 'continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs'.¹⁴ Islamism's conception of the ummah does not conform to any western modernity, but seeks to fashion its own. A second, a more general corrective comes from what might be called 'de-constructivism': although the political and discursive nature of Islamism remains essential, the historical agents, ideological resources, and mental and physical constraints on the possibilities of construction must be emphasised.¹⁵ A pertinent example is the common reliance on

¹¹ O. Roy, *Globalized Islam: the Search for a New Ummah*, (Columbia University Press, 2004), pp.86-7.

¹² S. Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State*, p.38.

¹³ O. Roy, *Globalized Islam*, pp.92-6.

¹⁴ S.N. Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus*, 129.1 (2000), p.2.

¹⁵ P. Burke, *What is Cultural History?*, 2nd edn, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pp.99-101.

Hobsbawm's notion of the 'invention of tradition'. While it is certain that traditions are modified over time, and especially in times of social crisis, this does not mean they are 'invented' out of nothing. A more appropriate term, to borrow from Michel de Certeau, might be that of 're-employment' – the construction of the everyday from repertoire of possible ideological resources.¹⁶ Finally, there is a danger that constructivism can, ironically, give the author a false sense of objectivity.¹⁷ A unified and coherent 'Islamism' exists only as an idea held by western scholars, and perhaps among certain Islamists themselves. This self-consciousness need not be intellectually crippling, but it is nevertheless an important exercise in understanding exactly *why* western scholars might assume Islamist attitudes to modernity to be 'paradoxical'.

There is no fixed relationship between Islamism and modernity. This is because neither Islamism nor modernity is a coherent category, apart from perhaps in the minds of certain western scholars. A constructivist approach to the rise of Islamism is revealing of the multiple ways in which Islamism relates to modernity. By focusing upon the discursive nature of Islamism as an unstable and changing body of ideas, language and practices, constructivism can elaborate the dialectical relationship between Islam's dependence on, and rejection of, modernity. It has been demonstrated, however, that this is not enough. Instead of concluding that Islamist attitudes to modernity are paradoxical because they are difficult to reconcile, we must seek to understand *why* there are such varying attitudes to modernity. It has been suggested that the multiple meanings of 'modernity', and the variety of social actors involved in 'Islamist' movements, account for a large part of these seeming inconsistencies. But answering such questions needs more than merely closer attention. It requires a revision of the constructivist approach itself in order to make it more self-conscious, more aware of contestation, and more socially grounded. By partially de-constructing constructivism, it becomes clear that there is nothing at all paradoxical about Islamism's relationship with modernity.

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¹⁶ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (University of California Press, 2011), pp.xi-xxiv.

¹⁷ F. Volpi, *Political Islam Observed*, (C Hurst and Co., 2010), p.198.