

THE MODERNITY OF ISLAMISM AND JIHAD MILITANCY

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ABSTRACT:

This essay tries to comprehend the logic behind Islamic faith-based radicalism. I will focus on the logics of action and mobilisation of the violent Islamist groups or Jihad-movements. This essay aims at (a) finding a framework of analysis that can inform thoughtful and in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon of Islamist violence. This framework sets out from a dialogical epistemological stance that tries to encompass the superficial differences between an 'Us' and 'Them', between the 'here' and 'there', or between the 'East' (Islam) and the 'West'. Furthermore, this essay aims to (b) decipher the logic behind the action of Jihad-militants by using general social scientific theories and methodologies, thus countering and debunking Orientalist knowledge on the subject.

“Liberty is changing from a liberating promise into a vested status or privileged possession. Only the rekindling of questioning — along temporal and cross-cultural links — can provide an antidote to this danger of congealment.”¹

1. WHY THEORY AND METHOD MATTER?

In order to grasp the complexities and realities of the Jihad-movement, I use a comparative political framework, i.e. *“a mode of theorizing that takes seriously the ongoing process of globalization, a mode which entails, among other things, the growing proximity and interpretation of cultures”²*. By doing so, I emphasize the fact that no group, nation or organisation can monopolise the language of globalisation. This approach is important because it takes into account several issues that are pertinent both to academic scholarship and the reality of the world we live in. It is an approach that enhances the process of de-Westernizing science, its methods and canons. Already well under way in philosophy, humanities and postcolonial studies through the ‘linguistic’ turn, hermeneutics is now bearing its first fruits within the social and political science and is more and more applied in IR theory. The issue of ‘de-centering’ the ‘West’ in comparative political science means that one, according to Marcus³, has to *“to represent a whole local world*

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¹ FR. DALLMYER, *Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory, Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2004, p. 254.

² *Ibid.*, p. 249.

³ G. E. MARCUS, *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998), p. 39.

and simultaneously a world system” and shift his attention to “places, simultaneously and complexly connected, by intended and unintended consequences.”⁴ The connection of these places historicizes the experience in a dialectical way so that we can focus “on the relationships, language, and objects of encounter and response from the perspectives of local and cosmopolitan groups and persons who, although in different relative power positions, experience a process of being mutually displaced from what has counted as culture for each of them.”⁵ The interrelatedness of the local and global, the here and there, the now and then, will make it possible to apprehend the evolutions of Islamism in general and Jihad-militancy in particular, from a trans-cultural perspective.

A trans-cultural approach entails a translation of the Other’s self-understanding, which suggests, according to the Benjaminian tradition within hermeneutics, that even though real differences between people/cultures/states/regions exist, there is still a possibility to encompass, and perhaps even conquer, incommensurability through dialogue, or a “fusion of horizons” in Gadamer’s words. Indeed, by engaging in a dialogue, the two parties are extending their discourse (language, narrative) creatively, so that it can become ‘something else’, as Susan Buck-Morss⁶ has attempted to show. Through a dialogical approach to the phenomenon of Islamist radicalism, we can open up the possibility of a critical global public sphere questioning the supremacy of ‘Western’ norms and values, incorporating the ‘voices’ of the Other and, reassert the synchronicity of politics ‘here’ and ‘there’. If not, we succumb to what Fabian⁷ has called the ‘denial of coevalness’, in which ‘political and cultural’ practices of the Other are seen as different stages of historical evolution on a linear teleological timescale. We should keep in mind that the conditions of globalisation (in practice and/or myth) are shaping both the politics of the ‘West’ and the ‘rest of the world’ at the same time. Thus we are coming close to writing ‘intertwined histories’ as advocated by Edward Said⁸ more than two decades ago or what Wallerstein⁹ has called an historical social sciences. This hermeneutical model is not just “about mutual understanding”, it is by definition interested in questions of power. Global processes and the interconnectedness of the ‘here’ and ‘there’ are based on relationships that are fraught with questions of power.

Including the issue of power means that a “(c)omparative theory has ramifications beyond narrowly academic confines because it sustains a discerning political out-

⁴ G. E. MARCUS, *op. cit.*, p.79.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ S. BUCK-MORSS, *Thinking Past Terror. Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (Verso; London, 2003).

⁷ J. FABIAN, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1983).

⁸ E. SAID, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Pantheon, New York, 1978).

⁹ I. WALLERSTEIN, *Unthinking Social Science. The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991) and I. WALLERSTEIN, From Sociology to Historical Social Science: Prospects and Obstacles, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, N° 1, January-March 2000, pp. 25-35.

look — what Parekh calls a ‘radically critical perspective’ on society”¹⁰. Looking at the other tells us something about ourselves. “*In our time, political liberalism has achieved virtually canonical status, edging out of the way nearly all competing ideological perspectives*”¹¹. This means that I will look at Islamist violence or Jihad movements from its own perspective without succumbing to Orientalist pressures of ‘locking the Other up’ in his/her cultural prison, forever incommensurable with ‘Western rationalism’. Thus, this questioning along a dialogical hermeneutical analysis is also a way of protecting my inquiry of the possibility of gliding from the model of reality to the reality of the model, as Bourdieu once described the danger of working with congealed a priori and abstract definitions¹².

2. THE TERROR OF MODERNITY AND ISLAMIST VIOLENCE.

The activism of faith-based movements (and Islamism is no exception to it) is a highly modern phenomenon. It is not pre-modern by the simple fact that Islamism (just like other faith-based) movements, is only possible in a modern world. All forms of fundamentalisms need and thrive on modernity to constitute themselves. Islamism and its radical Jihadi-form do not stand on the firm ground of (Islamic) tradition but are traditionalised responses to the doubt, characteristic of our modern predicament. Within modernity, ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ are not ascribed to religious fundamentals but to society (made up of subjects) itself. The basis of secularism is then a “*movement wherein social (and individual) morality, hitherto determined by the transcending principles of religion, were now to be determined by reason, and anchored to the good of man or woman in this life*”¹³. Under modernity knowledge is not knowledge in the old sense “*where ‘to know’ is to be certain*”¹⁴. It is not Islamic tradition that “produces” Islamism or its militants. It is rather the conscious choice by the militants for what they call Islamic tradition — and one should add the re-invented forms of it — that produces Islamism. Islamism rests on a free and conscious choice of its militants to support the ideology.

The fact that it is based on choice, thus makes Islamism and its jihadi-form an utterly modern phenomenon. Choice — as the basis of the modern autonomy of the individual — is present in faith-based radicalism but only for a slight moment, the moment the autonomy (with its freedom) is surrendered to the certainty of fundamentalism or re-invented Islam. Thus, Islamism needs modernity (and with it its institutional outlook of democracy and its philosophy of human rights) in order to exclude it. To become a jihad-militant means asserting human autonomy by destroying it and opting for a transcendent heteronomy. Jihad militancy sub-

¹⁰ FR. DALLMYER, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² P. BOURDIEU, *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique. Précédé par trois études d’ethnologie kabyle* (Le Seuil, Paris, 1972 [2000]), p. 253.

¹³ A. VANAIK, *The Furies of Indian Communalism. Religion, Modernity and Secularization* (Verso, London/New York, 1997), p. 65.

¹⁴ A. GIDDENS, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990), p. 40.

mits itself to the authority of Allah and fights against the ideals of democracy and freedom¹⁵.

Islamism rejects the idea that the doubt is the only certainty within modernity and posits instead the certainty of God to “cover up” the abyss of freedom beneath the ground of modernity¹⁶. Islamists constantly use and posit the authenticity of their creed, the return to the fundamentals of Islamic religion and re-iterate on numerous occasions the fact that it is not ‘they’ who speak but Allah or the Quran. By reiterating this, through the constant emphasize put on ‘Islamic authenticity’ it is not authenticity that speaks but it is actually produced at that moment. The act of “saying” thus covers and blurs the position of choice and freedom they actually speak from¹⁷. Central to any faith-based movement is not so much the content of the ideas but much more the fact that the choice and freedom underneath it, are constantly denied.

Since the Enlightenment, the autonomous subject of modernity has regularly sought his freedom by doing violence against something or someone else, as Sas argues¹⁸. This violence can take many forms and shapes and can be carried out in the name of all possible ideals, ideologies or religions. Colonialism is a good example of a sweeping and universal movement of violence against the non-West in the name of highly acclaimed values of civilization, universalism and/or human rights.

Islamism and its jihadi-form is than only a mirror image of Western modernity. It is not so much “against it” from an outside, incommensurable vantage point (so called Islamic authenticity) but is part and parcel of the ‘dark side’ of modernity. The modern subject has always produced itself through structures of hierarchical and binary oppositions in which itself is always constituted as positive pole

¹⁵ I am indebted to the analyses Marc De Kesel (Ben Laden als cartesiaan. Over de moderniteit van het fundamentalisme, *De Witte Raaf*, Nr. 108, March 2004.) and Peter Sas (De terreur van de autonomie. Over de ‘botsing der beschavingen’, *Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift*, Jrg. 39, Nr. 1, 2005, pp. 37-44) for these ideas.

¹⁶ Nietzsche’s famous phrase “God is dead” can be interpreted as “(...) *the loss of meaning, and the end of moral and intellectual certainty. No more could anyone evaluate actions by referring to absolute standards. Henceforth, everything is relative, subjective, and uncertain. Absoluteness, objectivity, and certainty are now things of the past*” [Louay M. SAFI, *The Challenge of Modernity. The Quest for Authenticity in the Arab World* (University Press of America, Lanham/ London/ New York, 1994), p. 78].

¹⁷ In the words of the French anthropologist de Certeau: “an investment of subjects in a proposition, the act of enouncing it while seeing it as true; in other words a modality of affirmation and not of content” (DE CERTEAU cited in M. D. PERROT, G. RIST et F. SABELLI, *La mythologie programmée. L’économie des croyances dans la société moderne*, PUF, Paris, 1992, p. 31)

¹⁸ P. SAS, De terreur van de autonomie. Over de ‘botsing der beschavingen’, *Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift*, Jrg. 39, Nr. 1, 2005, pp. 37-44. Ever since the post-modern critique on the autonomy of the subject, the question of difference and the ‘Other’ stands central in accounts that attempt to ‘save’ modernity from the relativity of post-modernism. The idea of violence as constitutive of the modern subject runs as a common thread through the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, ea.

(high-low, subject-object, us-them, mind-body, reason-irrationality, civilization-barbarity, white-dark, capital-labour, modern-traditional,...). The social dimensions of the autonomy of the subject are quiet obvious and have (and had) material impacts and effects on our world: slavery, colonialism, imperialism, discrimination, racism, sexism, apartheid,...

Islamism in general, and its jihadi-form in particular, are thus a anti-modern modernity, a way of dealing with uncertainty within modernity and offer a theoretical alternative. In that sense, Islamism is also a signifier of the crisis of modernity in general. The problem does not reside in the specific Islamic theology, doctrine or dogma's but in the modern human condition. However, Islamic history, theology, doctrines or dogma's only start to play a role when human beings — with their agency — act upon it to construct and produce new doctrines, theologies and strategies to legitimise resistance to modernity. While all faith-based movements share these premises¹⁹, it is on that precise moment that their paths separate, as each movement will delve and carve out of its own historical sediments the ideational “weapons” to narrate and conceptualise a “solution” (at least in the eyes of the militants)²⁰.

¹⁹ There are numerous authors who have analyzed the similarities and differences between all or some faith-based radical movements. Most of these observers clearly see a link between all these movements. Marty and Appleby argued in their vast study on fundamentalism that albeit crucial differences between the religions, fundamentalism was a ‘hypothetic family’ and defined it as “*a tendency, a habit of mind, found within religious communities and paradigmatically embodied in certain representative individuals and movements, which manifests itself as a strategy, or a set of strategies, by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a people or a group. Feeling this identity to be at risk in the contemporary era, they fortify it by a selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a sacred past. These retrieved ‘fundamentals’ are refined, modified, and sanctioned in a spirit of shrewd pragmatism (...) (and) are accompanied (...) by unprecedented claims and doctrinal innovations*” [Martin E. MARTY & R. Scott. APPLEBY (eds), *The Fundamentalism Project. Vol. 1: Fundamentalisms Observed* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1991), p. 835]. Some five years, and some 5000 pages later, there was much more doubt as to the usefulness of the concept. Marty and Appleby, however kept the term but defined it as “*a process of selective retrieval, embellishment, and construction of ‘essentials’ or ‘fundamentals’ of a religious tradition for the purposes of halting the erosion of traditional society and fighting back against the encroachments of secular modernity.*” [Martin E. MARTY & R. Scott. APPLEBY (eds), *The Fundamentalism Project. Vol. 5: Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995), p. 6]. Burrell [in R. M. BURRELL (ed.), *Islamic Fundamentalism* (The Royal Asiatic Society, 1989), p. 5] defines fundamentalism as: “*an assured and unwavering conviction that a certain body of beliefs, usually derived from ‘sacred’ writings and often associated with the life and teaching of a particular personality, unquestionably represents the truth, and that it is the duty of all the faithful to live their lives and direct their activities in accordance with those beliefs*”.

²⁰ This does not mean that the ‘three’ fundamentalisms (Jewish, Christian and Islamic) are to be analyzed according to the same macro-level variables. Without a proper understanding of the political claims, interests of people and groups, power and context, we cannot account for the logic of Islamism.

3. THE IDEOLOGY OF ISLAMISM AND THE JIHAD-MOVEMENTS.

In order to understand the specificity of Islamism (as different from other faith-based movements) and its radical offspring, the Jihad-movements, we need a working definition of the phenomenon. I define Islamism²¹ as an ideology that endeavours to appropriate the political space through the mobilisation of religious (Islamic) resources and modes of social action ranging from the daw'a (predication) to the jihad (violence, terrorism) through which certain social groups manifest their desire to control the state, or to overthrow or oppose the state and to install an order that is called "Islamic".

Central to the practice of Islamist ideology — and its distinguishing feature from the religion of Islam — is the question of politics. Islamism conflates the question of the political order (its legitimacy and organisation) with a (partially re-invented) theological interpretation of Islam. Whether coined in terms of the caliphate, the imamate or the Islamic state, the question of a polity ordered by and based on Islamic Law (shari'a) runs central to the ideology. Jihad itself is nothing but a praxis in Marxist terms of establishing and constructing the Islamic political order. Thus the quest of an Islamic political order becomes some sort of 'sixth pillar' of Islam.

The debates within and between the Islamist movements and that gave rise to numerous different "versions" of the ideology concentrate on the one hand on the organisation of the political order and on the other, on the ways (strategies and tactics) of how to proceed to attain this goal. Therefore, if one wants to assess the Islamist movements, these different tendencies, streams of thought and movements should be included in the analyses as they all have their own logic, goals and utterly internal evolutions²².

The Islamist movement has been broken into two different trends since the late 1970s. The first trend, epitomized by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, rejects the usage of violence to obtain political goals. They have favoured an approach

²¹ This definition is based on several definitions and analyses of Islamism. The definition bears the traces of the works of i.a. Fr. BURGAT [*L'islamisme au Maghreb. La voix du Sud* (Karthala, Paris, 1988); *L'islamisme en face* (La Découverte, Paris, 1995); *Face to Face with Political Islam* (I.B. Tauris, London, 2003)], O. ROY [*L'islam mondialisé* (Le Seuil, Paris, 2002)], B. SAYYID [*A fundamental Fear. Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (Zed Books, London, 1997)], L. BOUKRA (*Terrorisme islamique et stratégie de riposte antiterroriste en Algérie*, Paper delivered at Advanced NATO Workshop "Security in the Mediterranean", Madrid, 22-24 June 2005).

²² This means that my analyses is also necessarily archeological in the sense that I am concerned by elucidating the concepts through which people and collectivities organize and constitute themselves, how their vocabularies are always historically and conceptually changing and how political legitimacy is therefore always embedded in and constrained by the set of political vocabulary at any given time and within any given context. (Duncan S.A. BELL, Language, Legitimacy, and the Project of Critique, *Alternatives*. No. 27, 2002, pp. 327-350).

to politics which is based on community-building, predication and social work. Even though they tried (and still are trying) to enter the political realm — only stopped by the Egyptian's state repression — they see themselves as one movement among others. From this stance developed within the 1990s — and based on internal self-criticism of the movement and ideology — the method of 'hizbiyya'. Islamist movements who want to enter the legal political field (even on the terms of conditions the regimes dictate) have altered significantly the Islamist ideology. As an Egyptian Islamist put it: "*The Islamic discourse is not the word of God. It's the interpretations of Muslims throughout time and space and is therefore plural and multifaceted. The history of the Muslims is therefore also the history of this multiplicity and plurality*"²³. While still a conservative political force in terms of social issues and the position of women, these movements and parties want to positively influence and collaborate within the political sphere²⁴. These parties and movements are, according to many observers, possibly re-articulating Islamism to such an extent that they give rise to Islamic democracy (in comparison to Christian democracy).

However, the second trend choose to accept the use of violence as a means of political action. For that trend jihad became the central concept to legitimise their endeavour.

4. THE QUESTION OF VIOLENCE

The notion of jihad, as argued, has been translated as 'holy war', a war based on religious convictions against non-believers (however defined). The adjective 'holy' which imbues the more common term 'war' with a religious connotation is somehow deceitful. It posits from the onset that violence carried out under the banner of jihad is motivated by religion. This explains why, after 9/11, nearly all Western television networks, magazines and journals aired or published special features on Islam, its history, theology and values; much more than on Islamist movements and their different ideologies, strategies and tactics over the last decades. It is as if Muslims were suddenly reduced to *automatons* endlessly repeating en reproducing century-old immutable religious dictates. This idea gave way to the familiar and ever growing popular theme of the clash of civilizations. The violence of jihad could then be ascribed to a group of 'barbaric' people, thus rendering exotic — as opposed to a peace-loving 'us' — the act of 9/11 and its blurry political claims.

²³ A.-W. AL-MASIRI, Ma'alam al-khitab al-islami al-jadid (Signs of the new islamic discourse), *al-Muslim al-Mu'assir*, nov.-dec. 1997- jan. 1998, p. 49.

²⁴ For descriptions and analyses of this trend see: R. MEIJER, Taking the Islamist Movement Seriously: Social Movement Theory and the Islamist Movement, *International Review of Social History*, forthcoming; O. ROY, *L'islam mondialisé* (Le Seuil, Paris, 2002); Fr. BURGAT, Veils and Obscuring lenses, John L. ESPOSITO & Fr. BURGAT ed., *Modernizing Islam. Religion in the Public Sphere in Europe and the Middle East* (Hurst & Company, London, 2003), pp. 17-41; Gr. FULLER, The Future of Political Islam, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, Issue 2, Mar/apr. 2002, pp. 48-61.

The difficulty of grasping the issue of ‘Islamist violence’ has not so much to do with Islam than our difficulty of apprehending violence. Ever since Hanna Arendt’s seminal work on violence it seems as if violence is only understandable from any vantage point but itself. Violence as a disruption of social order is always explained as ‘an instrument to’ or a ‘function of something’. Maybe it is even the essence of violence that it always “*blurs the language that tries to account for it*”²⁵. Violence is always legitimated in the discourse of the one who perpetrates it, but to him only (or the group he belongs to), because his objectives seem valid to him. That is why violence cannot be analysed separately from its representation in discourse. Violence entails indeed a hermeneutical fight. In Arab countries, for example, the armed Islamist groups spoke and speak of a ‘jihad for Islam’ while the governments were and are speaking of ‘(residual) terrorism’.

These discourses are important because they are the means through which actors (the violent groups and the states) reproduce themselves²⁶. The armed Islamist groups (and *al-Qaeda* is no different) have to produce a discourse on their violence in order to sustain their fight and for the violence to become self-validating. Such a discourse is always a reordering of reality, a social construction and representation, on which the own discourse becomes a ‘truth’ for the actors involved. This ‘truth’ turns into a logic or becomes a system when it is presented as the basis for redemption, salvation and the complete change of society. However, for this ‘truth’ to become a real logic, there is a clear need for human agency²⁷. The ‘text’ (ideas) comes after the act, and not vice versa. Bin Laden or the armed Islamist groups in Algeria and elsewhere were not reading the Quran and other Islamic sources in their homes, looking at the world and suddenly felt the need to radically change it through violence, it was the other way around. Bin Laden and his ilk opposed the US policy towards the Middle East and took up Islamic sources (while at the same time remodelling them into a new ideology) to attack the US.

At the basis lays a political disgruntlement, a feeling of injustice. Therefore, there is no direct correlation between norm and practice. A certain norm, whether retrieved from the past, or newly (re)invented, does not have a social meaning in itself if there is not a human agent narrating the norm and giving it a (new) meaning in a logical (re-)construction of the present. The ‘in-group’, those who wage the jihad, see themselves as a small group devoted to jihad and therefore will be ‘saved’ by God’s power. They define themselves as the genuine Muslims who are incorruptible because of the fact that they risk their lives on a daily basis devoid of any material or egotistic intention.

²⁵ J. LECA, *La méthode comparative appliquée au monde arabe. De l’universalité dans l’étude de processus spécifiques à la spécificité dans l’étude de processus globaux*, L’étude du monde arabe contemporain, Colloque des 3-5 juillet 1989, CERI, Paris, 1989, p. 12, roneoed text.

²⁶ The following paragraph is based on a prior publication of the author of these lines [S. ZEMNI, ‘Post-Positivism and Constructivism: Any Promises for Middle East Studies? A short Essay’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 & 2, Winter 2004, pp. 289-310].

²⁷ David E. APTER, *Political Violence in Analytical Perspective*, in David E. APTER ed., *The legitimization of Violence* (MacMillan Press Ltd., London, 1997), pp. 1-32.

The images of martyrs, the videos posted on the internet with scenes of executions or violent attacks, are there to give the viewer a feeling of shame and powerlessness. Watching the atrocities of war in Iraq, instills a feeling of shame with the viewer, as he already knows that the ‘Muslim’ will be defeated by the overwhelming US military power or by sacrificing himself. This shame should lead to a sense of outrage in the face of the power of the ‘invader’. But the feelings of outrage also entail some twisted sort of ‘debt’, a ‘debt’ that the viewer wants to repay the sacrificed human being. The feelings of debt and outrage can easily be molded in a feeling of righteousness. The victim of violence has thus not died in vain but for a cause that is undoubtedly just. His death testifies the righteousness of the cause²⁸. Because of the fact that political violence is only considered acceptable when in the cause of defense, we see images of victimization appear everywhere (in material video- and photography productions but also in perpetual discourses on the enmity of the ‘Other’). Images of victimization are cultural products that can easily legitimize violence and military operations²⁹.

5. THE CAUSES AND MECHANISMS OF VIOLENCE.

Even though we can make sense of the violence, it is still unclear what triggers some people to engage in violence, while other individuals with the same characteristics do not. Bruno Etienne, in the late 1980s once summarized Islamist mobilization in the phrase: “Ph.D. + beard = Islamist”. Highly educated youngsters were indeed among the first and most active militants of Islamism. Later on, during the 1990s, the thesis of those “*laissés-pour-compte*”, the disinherited became common currency. However, with the attacks on the WTC and the pentagon on 9/11 of 2001, it appeared that all those who were involved in the attack, were highly educated young men who were definitely not the “poor of the earth”.

In order to understand the different backgrounds of the militants — which makes it nearly impossible to draw up a ‘model’ of the activist — we have to take into account a two-step model. The first step, which we already discussed above, is the putting into place of the ‘structure of violence’. The structure of violence is put into place by the intellectuals of the ideology who are almost always part of the higher classes. They manipulate the theologies and doctrines to such an extent that their beliefs turn into a system or logic that is self-validating. Thus their beliefs become absolute and transcendent. The absolute, the ‘truth’ that is posited can only validate itself through violence. In that sense every ideology — whether based on religion or not — entails by definition violence.

²⁸ This paragraph is based on insights and ideas as discusses by Elliot COLLA (A Culture of Righteousness and Martyrdom, *ISIM-Newsletter*, June 2004, pp. 6-7).

²⁹ These mechanisms of cultural victimization as underlying the acceptance and/or legitimacy of violence is very much present in the post 9/11 United States and is insightfully described by Elliot Colla. On another level, Negri and Hardt’s *Empire*, seem to allude to the same processes of victimization operating as the moral bases for humanitarian-militaristic interventions.

However, the structure of violence is only a possibility and does not, by itself, make the individual act according to it. In order to pass from the stage of possibility to the actual act of violence, there is the necessity of subjectivity. The people who are susceptible to engage in violent acts must have a sense of a necessary radical change. The need for such a radical change is fueled by feelings of insecurity and injustice but also of envy and jealousy. Even the most ardent Islamist militant secretly admires some of the ‘Western’ features (mainly its technological advancement and wealth) while despising others. These diffuse sentiments and feelings, this imperative of change is molded by a variety of vectors necessary to capture the energy of the masses. Islamist violence can only spread on a wide scale when the energy of the masses is channeled through political parties/movements or intellectuals in a context where the ‘structures of violence’ are already present. This explains why for example in countries such as Algeria and Colombia violence has raged over decades while their neighboring countries facing mainly the same social and economic problems, have not seen a contamination of violence.

The notion of jihad has always been present within Islamism during the last decades. Forcefully it is not a ‘roadmap to atavistic violence’ but rather a form of political action that is intimately linked with the Islamist’s understanding of the world and the need to rebuild the Islamic community or *umma*. Jihad changed over the course of the last century into a revolutionary concept, a means of transforming the world in the light of a better future³⁰. This sounds very reminiscent of communist and/or socialist revolutionary ideals. To a certain extent, there are similarities. It is not so much the revolution itself that is important, but what it asks from the men and women engaging in it. “*La révolution consiste à aimer un homme qui n’existe pas encore*”³¹. “*La justice a cela de commun, et cela seulement, avec la grâce, qu’elle veut être totale et régner absolument*”³². In that sense, both communist or anarchist terrorists as the Islamists today, stipulate that man and history can only be created through sacrifice and killing (whether in terms of man made justice or Divine Law). The idea that idealism can only be rendered apparent and useful but with the acceptance of ‘the risk of life’, is a very modern (and first Western) idea³³. Thus, in revolution it is not the act of killing that is worshipped but the effort — needed and wanted — to become ‘immortal’ through

³⁰ Jihad cannot be reduced solely to the armed struggle. Jihad is first and foremost an inward act of believing, a strife towards becoming a ‘better’ (ergo Muslim) human being. Jihad signals a righteous act for the sake of God and his Law, and an action undertaken with the purpose of serving God and Islam and not intended as an act for personal gain. The question of intent stands central in Islamic theory on Jihad. Throughout history the issue of the proper intent, devoid of any egotistic or individualistic goals, must be solely for the higher purpose of Islam and God. This is what usually is referred to as the higher jihad.

³¹ Albert CAMUS, *L’homme révolté* (Gallimard essais, Paris, 1951 [1999]), p. 126.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³³ Camus however describes very well the differences between the idea of killing and sacrificing for the *homo homini deus*, man turned God and the sacrifice with a transcendent basis (*Ibid.*, pp. 188-190).

action. Where communist and/or socialist violence and revolutions saw the ultimate proof in total liberation of the man-God or man without a God, religious movements acquire immortality in accordance with ‘divine law’. Even if eternity separates both types of revolt, they are quiet the same: whether the penultimate goal is the ‘total freedom of man’ or the ‘instauration of God’s will’, they are united in their historicity of killing, will to power and the conquest of totality.

A crucial difference seems to be the fact that the revolutions and revolutionaries of the 20th century have killed the Gods and History itself and can find justification of their deeds only in the future ‘good society’ and; in the meanwhile “*charge the police of justifying the provisional*”³⁴. Islamists, on the contrary, balance between an adulation of a reified past and the promise to re-install it in the (near) future. This balancing is a very potent force to justify not only the acts of violence but also to instill culpability in the ‘victims’ of that violence. From Qutb — writing in the Cairo prisons in the 1960s — to Ben Laden, step by step, the idea of innocence of people disappears. The right to kill is licensed by very particular and sometimes peculiar (in the sense that they are very new to Islamic thinking) justifications at the heart of which subsides the idea that everybody is guilty and can therefore be a legitimate target of violence. Violence is for Islamists a “*legitimate expression of political action because (...) it is not solely distinguished by its instrumental character*”³⁵. On the contrary, violence is seen as guided and justified by Divine order and God’s plan with/for humanity. After that, there were and are numerous debates between and within the Jihadi violent groups over the methods, scopes and targets of the violence. Gradually the image of the ‘enemy’ evolved from the Arab states — considered only nominally Muslim — to the concept of ‘the West’ and more specifically the US.

6. THE CASE OF MARTYRS AND MARTYRDOM.

The notion of martyrdom is closely tied to the concept of Jihad. Especially during the last two decades a growing number of Jihadis have carried out attacks in which they killed supposed enemies by killing themselves. 9/11 or the Palestinian ‘human-bombs’ are examples of these ‘new’ acts of Jihad. For ones they are the uttermost example of the ‘barbarity’ of Islam and plain murderers of innocent civilians, for others, they are martyrs.

Martyrs or not, if we want to understand the logics behind these acts it is imperative to try to understand the motivations of those carrying out the attacks, to decipher the ideological changes they involve. This inquiry goes further than framing the ‘Islamic martyr’ in a general history of martyrdom. Indeed, the figure of the martyr is present in other religious traditions (Christianity, Sikhism,...). It is not enough though (just like the ‘just war’ theories in regard to the concept

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

³⁵ Roxanne L. EUBEN, Killing (for) Politics. Jihad, Martyrdom and Political Action, *Political Theory*, Vol. 30, N°1, February 2002, p. 26.

of Jihad) to compare and highlight similarities and differences between these traditions. An account of the internal logics is still important to make sense of attacks, murders and killings such as 9/11, the bombing of the Bali discothèque or the Palestinian ‘human-bombs’.

We are faced with the same paradox as with the concept of Jihad (rather ‘classical’ in the field of the sociology of religions) in which the perpetrators are clearly in rupture with traditional Islamic theology. However, this rupture is masked through constant reference to the ‘authenticity’ of the act in regard to a ‘pure’ Islam. This paradox can only be understood if we describe the shifting interpretation of the concept of martyr and martyrdom in relation to the traditional Islamic teachings and, at the same time, the ideological changes of the last decades in relation to global political changes.

Traditionally, the concept of martyr is tied to the concept of Jihad. The Muslim *shahid* (martyr), is different from the Christian martyr in the sense that the latter dies because of the fact that he does not want to conform to the power of his enemy. The traditional Muslim *shahid* is less defensive in the sense that he fights, under the authority of a legitimate political power, against the power of the perceived enemy in order to restore God’s power. The martyr fights in the ‘name of God’ and thus is promised great rewards in the afterlife. When someone is killed in battle during a Jihad, then he becomes a martyr. Thus, it was considered as an unintentional consequence of the possible death in battle through the actions of an enemy. The martyr was someone who was actively engaged in fighting, thus giving the use of violence a legitimacy that stands in contrast to Christianity. There is a clear willingness of neutralizing or even annihilating the enemy in order to preserve Islam. Violence can be used in such an endeavour, as long as the intention of the martyr is not egotistic or coached in material interests. Violence in this view becomes legitimate because it serves a purpose that is far greater than the interest of the martyr³⁶.

Farhad Khosrokhavar describes intelligently how this classic idea of martyrdom within the boundaries of Jihad has changed throughout the last decades. The idea of martyrdom and its use within the modern jihad, has been altered significantly; first through the ideological re-interpretations of ideologues such as Mawdudi, Qutb, Khomeiny and Shariati and the translation of their works in several languages. Secondly, through the development of the modern media and, thirdly, through the peculiar fact that martyrdom gives the possibility to youngsters to assert themselves as individuals in death. Martyrdom is in a way a chance for individuals to assert themselves as confident and strong beings; procuring them what they lack in their real lives, a post mortem immortality³⁷. Khosrokhavar

³⁶ It is obvious that this theoretical ideal-type does not preclude the possibility that in reality other motives and explanations are possible; i.e. the individual’s motives can clearly differ from the ‘ideals’ but the social interpretation will tend to obfuscate or negate these reasons.

³⁷ F. KHOSROKHAVAR, *Les nouveaux martyrs d’Allah* (Flammarion, Paris, 2003), p. 83.

clearly states that the act of becoming a martyr has crucially been changed as there are clear signs of modernization, in the sense of individualization, at work in this process. While traditional accounts of martyrdom saw it as a ‘risk of life’, a possibility one has to face in the light of the battles against the enemy, it is now becoming more and more an inevitability, an ‘ardent desire’ or an ‘unquenchable thirst’³⁸. In order to make the new militants accept the ‘risk of life’ or the inevitability of death, the Islamist ideology and especially the Jihadi theories are appealing to individuals and not to the Muslim community as such. The new Jihad ideologies address the individual who has to ‘re-connect’ to the ways of Islam. Through these individuals they want to “re-create an Islamic *umma*” or community. In this view, there is no Islamic *umma* anymore and thus, it is up to the individual to re-establish it along new frontiers and spaces that do not coincide with the classic boundaries. The Islamic individual can, in this ideology, only be asserted in the face of the creation of an Islamic *umma* somewhere in the future. It is a neo-*umma*³⁹ or a virtual *umma*⁴⁰ because it is without a definition, a center.

Islamist ideologues struggle with the question whether the Islamic individual can only come about underneath an Islamic political system or vice versa, whether the individual can assert himself before the system comes in place. The modern day Jihad fighter is a person without center, without culture, without a clear perception of the Islamic system, the ideal they supposedly fight for. Instead it is a de-localized (global) state of mind that is becoming more and more mortified.

The global Jihad fighter (and possible martyr) is not connected directly to the Palestinian, Chechen or Lebanese martyr, who perpetrate their acts within the confines of a nation-state devoid of its constitution. The global Jihad warrior, on the contrary, is someone who lives in a multicultural environment (but rejecting it) but sees it as the Absolute Evil that can only be conquered through the act of dying. In a sense the global martyr is a sign of our modern day world. He is but a reflection of our late capitalistic societies in which consumerism, hedonism, sexual liberty and democratic politics are reduced to evil and replaced by a longing to become a member of a fraternal group, tied together and bonded by feelings of spirituality and brotherhood that transcend the ‘simple’ enjoyments of ‘Western’ life. They want to bring sense to what they see as senseless Westernization.

7. SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS.

Islamism and its violent offshoots are part and parcel of the modernity. They are but a reflection of the crisis of the autonomy of the modern subject. In order to grasp the logic behind the formation of the Islamist ideology and the appearance of extreme violence carried out by jihadi-militants against Muslims and non-Muslims alike, I have used a comparative political framework of analysis.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

³⁹ F. KHOSROKHAVAR, *Les nouveaux martyrs d’Allah* (Flammarion, Paris, 2003).

⁴⁰ O. ROY, *L’islam mondialisé* (Le Seuil, Paris, 2002).

Islamism as a faith-based movement is not very much different from other faith-based movements. There is a certain “family-resemblance” to all fundamentalist movements in that sense. However, to understand the logic of Islamism and the Jihad movements one has to incorporate a dialogical and cross-cultural way the internal logics at work in the ideology.

The ‘triggers’ of Islamism and violent Jihad are not to be discovered in Islam or its theology but in the human agency manipulating and thus re-creating and re-inventing the “Islamic theologies” while it posits itself as being authentic and pristine. We have seen that at the basis of the revolt lies the disgruntlement with the unjust world in which we live. Then, and only then (when the need for a radical change is felt), the vast historic deposit of Islam is manipulated as to become a new system or logic capable — at least in the eyes of those who follow it — of dealing with the modern world problems. This happens through the exclusion of the other who becomes the enemy to kill as he epitomizes Evil.

The problem of coming to grips with the phenomenon of jihad lays not in its supposed archaic, nihilistic or ‘barbaric’ character but in our political ‘blind spot’. The answer lies not in a hereafter but in the realm of politics and thus, according to Euben, “*suggests that contemporary conditions do not foreclose the possibility of escaping a world in which political action is concerned with mere necessity, pursuit of self-interest, and the play of power; on the contrary, it may be that it is precisely in the revolt against such purportedly inescapable ‘modern conditions’ that alternative conceptualizations of politics and what it may mean to be modern emerge and are at times violently pursued*”⁴¹.

By this I mean that the de-politicization of our global condition makes it difficult to understand and apprehend the utterly political content of the jihad. It will not suffice to see jihad as a movement of violence if we wish to (a) devise constructive policies towards it and (b) try to bypass growing antagonisms between wrongly identified incommensurable entities such as civilizations. That is why, I have developed and used a cross-cultural framework of understanding.

⁴¹ Roxanne L. EUBEN, Killing (for) Politics. Jihad, Martyrdom and Political Action, *Political Theory*, Vol. 30, N°1, February 2002, p. 25