Postmodern Obscurantism and 'the Muslim Question'[1]

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The all-too-human proclivity to short-sightedness colludes with political perspectives of the moment, to project a fragmentary image of the present instant into the essence of eternity, and to postulate Islam as the trans-historical protoplasm in the life of all Muslims. I shall propose to you that this construal of Islam as a culture which in itself explains the affairs of Muslim collectivities and overdetermines their economies, societies, and non-religious cultures, is the fundamental element in the culture of misrecognition that I am addressing, the condition of possibility for valorising the trope of return. What I do intend to do is to return to the present point in time, and to try and understand why it is that misrecognition is so passionately willed; to probe the conditions for the exceptionalism attributed to Muslim peoples, which places them outside the remit of the historical and sociological understanding and relegates them to ethnological folklore, to consider why it is that I, like many others, have to waste so much of your time on matters that ought to be taken for granted.

"ihm doch schien, als ob irgendwo inmitten zwischen den strittigen Unleidlichkeit, zwischen rednerischem Humanismus und analphabetischer Barbarei das gelegen sein müsse, was man als das Menschliche oder Humane … ansprechen durfte"

Thomas Mann

"je voulais, moi, occuper les Français à la gloire … les mener à la réalité par les mensonges"

Chateaubriand

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I would not be in the least surprised if some of you should be somewhat vexed by the title of my talk this evening. What might it conceivably be that relates postmodernism to obscurantism, and specifically to religious obscurantism which, I am sure, must automatically come to the minds of many of you as they recall the full title of this lecture ? Might I be speaking about obscurantism in postmodern times, or might I be deliberately invoking paradox , or indeed charging postmodernism with being obscurantist in certain of its instances ?

I hope that what I have to say might convince you that I am doing all these things at once, except for the invocation of paradox, and that my assertions will carry some conviction. But let me start by stating in a preliminary way that by 'The Muslim Question' — the name is derived from an analogy with the eastern Question which bedevilled statesmen of the Great powers in the nineteenth century, and has several elements in common with it — I mean that bundle of matters concerning political Islamism on which minds have been universally concentrated after September 11, matters that may be summed up by the existence of movements and sentiments that pursue relentlessly the quest for an unattainable absolute that is regarded by their holders as a pietist Shangri-La divinely commanded. In other words, 'The Muslim Question' refers to regarding a particular inflection of political Islamism, one which might be compared to the Anabaptists and other radical groups among Protestants in relation to mainstream Lutherism, as not only central but eminently characteristic of both the broader phenomenon of political Islamism as of islam *tout court*[2]. This is of course a standard mechanism of stereotyping, in which an enthnological fragment is overdetermined and read as a total ethnological type, much like regarding all Germans as either skinheads or Bavarian rustics, every Hungarian male a melancholy Atilla or Arpad, every Hungarian woman Zsazsa Gabor. In order to understand this 'Muslim Question', I will be proposing to you that it must be made to stand on its feet rather than on its head, as it does in the common imagination, and for this to be done the name Islam must be taken apart and what it refers to reconstituted.

Some of you may well be asking themselves the question as to how how one might have the temerity to question the solidity, the fastness, indeed, the self-evidence of this monolith, Islam, represented today in the form of 'The Muslim Question', let alone talk of its re-constitution. How could one conceivably disassociate the constituent elements of an entity which has for years now been reiterating its ubiquity, its exotic fastness, the pride and prejudice of its singularity, its massive presence: a presence constantly displaying an elemental force, claiming an authentic atavism, enforcing this claim with the

spectacular display of sheer energy and senseless violence, all the while asserting its inevitability as the post-colonial, albeit pre-existent destiny of an entire host of nations, of territories, almost of entire continents, all of them termed Islamic ? How might one question this fastness of Muslim peoples, this primal condition of pre-colonial innocence, this inevitable post-colonial destiny ?

Let me first of all dispose quickly of the easiest of relevant issues, that of the 'war of civilizations', the common cant expressed in scenarios proposed most famously by Professor Huntington and by his double, Mr. Bin Laden, the two locked in a fevered mutual demonization unmitigated by the primitive political language of President Bush and of much of his constituency: quite simply because civilisations do not go to war; what go to war are societies, armies, institutions. Civilizations are not societies, though some societal forms may in certain instances be symbolically sustained by appeal to fictitious genealogies which might be called civilisations; civilisations are rather hyper-social systems. They are not entities but performative categories, now active, now not. And in any case, speaking of entities, though there are indeed many Muslims in the world and Muslim religious sub-cultures, there is no longer in existence something that might remotely be called an 'Islamic civilization' — like Hellenism and Romanity, this is a bookish memory no matter how much it might inflame the imagination and the aspirations of partisans and adversaries alike.

I think that we could go some considerable way together if we were to curb the fascination by which the imposing visibility of matters with an Islamic signature and the political stakes associated with them ensnare the imagination. Fascination is none other than beholding an object as if it were a marvel, and the spectacle of marvels suspends the normal operations of the human understanding. It is precisely this suspension of the understanding for which Paul Valéry was the spokesman in a pithy and moody contribution his fin-de-siècle spirit of disbelief and artifice, of modernism in the opium den, albeit in a celebratory rather than a melancholy or hostile spirit: he relished the intoxicating Orient of the mind, delighted in this reverie of the 'least exact knowledge', this 'disorder of names and imaginable things', to which neither logic nor chronology was available to keep the elments of this imaginary from falling together into 'their natural combinations' .[3]

I will be party, for this evening at least, to the school of spoilers of imagination transfixed by fascination, and I shall not address you in the customary manner of an oriental sage. I shall appeal to history, and will start by recalling recent memories: these will tell us that the imposing visibility and amplitude of mass political and social Islamism is a new phenomenon which

dates back a mere thirty or so years, beguiling as it may equally be to its detractors, its adherents, and its admirers. Yet the all-too-human proclivity to short-sightedness colludes with political perspectives of the moment, to project a fragmentary image of the present instant into the essence of eternity, and to postulate Islam as the transhistorical protoplasm in the life of all Muslims.

A vast culture, and indeed a vast industry of misrecognition is in place, all the more firmly after September 11, by advocates of Islamism as by Western opinion, expert and inexpert, purporting to read over and above the complex and multiple histories and present conditions of Muslim peoples a homogeneous and timeless Islam, construed as a culture beyond society and history, as a repository of 'meaning'. This, it is maintained, informs essentially all significant thoughts and actions of real or putative Muslims at all times and places, unless these be anomalous. Thus these super-islamized beings are made to yield Islamic economies unlike all economies, Islamic political systems with bizarre and irrational principles, Islamic forms of knowledge whose anachronism lends them charming or repellent, according to taste, Islamic sensibilities in pronounced distemper, Islamic dress and coiffure, Islamic law as clear, univocal, and barbarous as it is Levitically strict[4] — in short, a total and totalizing culture which overrides the inconvenient complexity of economy, society and history.

Islam thus becomes fully a 'culture' in the most inchoate, yet most comprehensive and determinative of senses: it is thus reviled, but also in many circles for long patronised in an altogether preservationist spirit, in the spirit of an ethnological Greenpeace much beloved by multiculturalists, as entirely *sui generis*, and in need of recognition in its own terms and indeed of empowerment and the recognition of agency. Islam becomes impermeable to all but its own unreason, utterly exotic, thoroughly exceptional, fully outside, frightfully different — or alternatively and correlatively, it becomes fully an affective subject with prodigious internal coherence. In this capacity, the religion of Islam becomes a term that at once fully describes and adequately explains peoples, histories, and countries that are made to fall under its taxonomic sway.

In the practice of everyday discourse, such implicit notions as I have just referred to take the form of the proposition that, in some way, Muslims have in the past three decades been *returning* to matters that constitute them essentially, that they are reverting to type, rejoining a transhistorical nature prior to their modern history, and that integralist or fundamentalist Islam is a strident and bloody yet adequate expression of this inherent nature. Impermeable to the normal equipment of the human and social sci-

ences, the phenomena islamica — 'The Muslim Question' since September 11 — thus comes to acquire more than a radical exotism, and I use the term 'exotism' in a fairly rigorous sense deriving from its etymology. Their study comes consequently to require a particular effort of distanciation and estrangement, officiated under the signature of sympathetic understanding, the *Verstehen* of alien cultural meanings, a hermeneutical procedure whereby the observer is spiritually translocated and in a sense transsubstantiated into the recesses of this Muslim other, or indeed by the two meeting at a conversational site (a 'dialogue of civilizations') in an ethereal in-between so beloved of postmodern anthropologists and perplexed politicians and strategists in Non-Governmental Organizations, and increasingly by official instances of many states and international organizations, including the UN. This accounts to a large extent for the recent tendency towards a radical relativism regarding the study of matters Islamic, under the title of cultural specificity which, like other forms of exoticism, I take to be a grid of misrecognition.

I am truly galled by this extraordinary revival of nineteenth century procedures of ethnological classification in the guise of social-scientific innovation, even after all the fertile debates on orientalism in the past two decades, and after history and professional ethnography had seriously — albeit unevently — contested its conceptual equipment. Let me remind you that, whereas ethnography carries no necessary classificatory agendas or loyalties, ethnology is above all else a theory of racial and cultural types, and is in practice never free from an implicit or explicit normative ranking. It is apt at this juncture to indicate an unfortunate by-product of the use now ordinarily made of Edward Said's critique of orientalism: While this use, under the rather grandiose title of post-colonial discourse, tapped a certain libertarian impulse, its excess of zeal — most characteristically in the United States — has led to a reverse orientalism grounded in an ahistorical notion of the West and its various others.

The late capitalist, postmodern emphasis on self-referentiality and self-representation, the drift towards conceiving difference as incommensurability, the cognitive nihilism associated with post-modernism, the dissolution of objects of ethnographic study into 'voices' : all this, to my mind, leads to ejecting the tools of the historical and social sciences implicitly, but in most cases inadvertently and unreflectively, in favour of an irrationalist and anti-historicist sympathetic sociology of singularity, and of an instinctivist theory of culture which tends, with its vitalist metaphysics, to collapse knowledge into being by relating it not to cognition, but to **re**cognition, and particularly recognition of the collec-

tive self, such that what mediates being and representation is life as Will, and such that social knowledge, represented as culture, becomes but a moment of Being itself. All this is undertaken in the name of restituting marginalized voices and histories. Such a sociology of meaning, such valorization of the voice, devolves in practice to substituting associative prolixity, self-referentiality, and political posturing for scientific practice. And such advocacy of singularity invariably results in the essentializing of identity through the irreducibility of difference, and consequently in comfinement to unassailable cliches; the vogue in recent years of the theme of 'memory' is premised in this context on obscuring the fact that collective memory itself has a history .

Thus emerges a vicious circle, in which anti-orientalism leads directly in its claims for authenticity and singularity, to the re-orientalization of orientals — much as this is denied, this denial remains rhetorical and discursively ineffectual. And thus arose a traffic in mirror-images between re-orientalizing orientals speaking for authenticity, and orientalizing neo-orientalists, now working with social rather than philological materials, speaking for difference. This takes on particularly deleterious forms in the social sciences, when the claim is made that categories of ostensibly Western provenance, like religion and class, are intransitive, incommensurable, entirely collapsible into their origins as if ontologically so fated, and therefore are applicable to Muslim peoples neither as descriptive nor as explanatory categories.

I will leave this matter for the time being, and I shall propose to you that this construal of Islam as a culture which in itself explains the affairs of Muslim collectivities and overdetermines their economies, societies, and non-religious cultures, is the fundamental element in the culture of misrecognition that I am addressing, the condition of possibility for valorising the trope of return. It is a culture of misrecognition with two main protagonists who provide mirror-images of one another: the one is the Islamist revivalist and politician, the other, the western writer or actor who shares the essentialist culturalism of the former, and who elevates his obscurantist discourse on the present, the past, and the future of Muslims to the status of indisputable knowledge: I mean here the all-too-common procedure, taken as self-evident, by which the essentialist reading of past, present, and future propounded by Islamist political or otherwise apologetic discourse, is taken for an adequate reading of the past, diagnosis of the present, and blueprint for the future of Muslims.

This reading is, of course, summed up in a number of basic propositions ceaselessly repeated and fomulaically reiterated: that the history of Muslims is constituted essentially by reli-

gion, that the past two centuries of their histories are the story of usurpation and disnature by 'westernizing elites' unrepresentative of 'civil society', that the future can be no more than, with minor adjustments, a restoration of this prelapsarian condition of cultural innocence which modernity has not altered, but only held, somewhat ravaged, in abeyance.

I can at this stage offer some elements of an answer to the question of what is meant by reconstituting Islam: If 'The Muslim Question', if phenomena termed Islamic or reclaiming this or that interpretation of Islamism, are to be understood, the first step to be taken is critically to decompose the notion of Islam, and to look instead at the conditions of its recent emergence: social forces, historical mutations and developments, political conflicts, intellectual and ideological realities, devotional and theological styles and institutions, in addition to local ethnographic detail — it being clearly understood that ethnographic detail is to be regarded for what it is, and not simply as an instance or merely a concrete figure of a pervasive Islamism of life. Without this decomposition, the totalizing category of Islam will continue performing its phantasmatic role of calling things into being simply by naming them. Once this decomposition has been performed, once the reality of history has been disengaged from wanton fancy, we might be able properly to undertand what is meant by Islam and by the appeal to this name: thus will Islam — and the carriers of this name — be subject to one manner of re-constitution, among many others that will emerge in the course of my talk.

I should like to comment immediately on the timing of the extraordinary visibility of what what today appears as 'The Muslim Question'. The conjunctural element is crucially important, and the trope of return cannot be understood without it. As we know them, and I will confine my comments largely to the Arab World, political Muslim phenomena developed out of marginal pietistic and proto-fascist youth militias and sporting club movements in the 1920s and 1930s, some in brown shirts, others in grey shirts, mainly active in Egypt, but also in Syria broadly conceived. In the 1950s and 1960s, these were nurtured and provided with extraordinary financial largesse, mainly through by petro-islamic agencies and their obscurantist systems of public education (of which Mr. Bin Laden and his cavemen are sterling, unalloyed later products) , by means of which they built local and international cultural, educational, and organizational structures animated by hostility to Arab nationalism in a conception of Muslim extraterritorialism that was commensurate with conditions in countries with sub-national political structures (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan). This took place, initiallly, in the context of an international

climate dominated by the Truman Doctrine, but was to have a wider reach later. The containment of Communism policy had a spectacular career, and in the Arab World, developed into a policy applied to counter secular Arab nationalist, socialist, and arguably pro-Soviet regimes. Those of you who may have read expert works on Arab politics published in the 1950s and 1960s will find very clear statements of the theory of Islam as a bulwark against Communism, and that the main cultural and ideological plank in pursuing the Cold War in the Arab World (and also in Indonesia and Malaysia) was the encouragement of social conservatism and of political Islamism. Later, in Afghanistan, this same policy was to have messier, bloodier, and more immediately dramatic effects, well illustrated by Rambo III, American champion of the leonine tribesmen of Afghanistan, a film some of you may have had to endure, initiating the danse macabre of recent months.

Yet these movements, particularly in the Arab World (though not in S. E. Asia) had little initial success, and only came conspicuously and strongly to the fore in the mid and late 1970s, in a specific conjuncture, marked by two elements. The first of these elements is the continuing trend towards a minimalization of state action in economy and society, under the impact of new international structural conditions, characterized by the correlative elements of deregulation and of the ascendancy of finance, complemented by a natural theology of the free market. In social terms, this entailed the break-down of the post-Second-World-War Keynesian consensus, with its emphasis on social and cultural no less than on economic progress. This breakdown led, in the West, to structural unemployment and attendant results, like the rise in the influence of extreme right-wing ideologies, and the counter-racism of various brown European and North American groups, some of which define themselves as Muslim. Let me add that attendant upon these trends was the growing incidence of cult phenomena with bizarre cosmic beliefs. Correlatively, unremitting structural disorientation and various forms of deracination in some Muslim milieus under present conditions of globalization took to a virulent xenophobia as an antidote to anomie and to national frustration, and produced nihilistic political phenomena such as the so-called Arab Afghans which, with the sustenance of certain Islamist political forces, conjure up and pursue an apocalyptic 'war of civilizations' waged against a spectral enemy. And please note than though I shall be speaking of a general mood permeating Islamist movements, I will also be speaking of a specific sub-culture within them represented by Bin Laden, arising of very specific circumstances: networks that go determinedly about a war of civilizations are marked by a metapolitical rather than a political

calculation, in which the criteria of efficacy are extra-mundane, even when they are not declared to be eschatological.

In the Arab World as elsewhere in the South, these new conditions, under titles such as 'structural adjustment', have been exacting a very heavy social price correlative with the breakdown of both the will and the capacity to carry out policies of development. States came increasingly to be reduced to pure administration and to policing the effects of global deregulation. With economic deregulation came also correlative social and cultural deregulation, ideologized by communalist, anti-state paternalism on the part of western Non-Governmental Organizations and their local analogues, which became not only distributors of aid, but also loci for the production of culturalist knowledge and social practice in the name of Difference, a sort of gentrification of backwardness. Mass social and economic marginalization also led in the South to results analogous to those in the North. Among these is the strong appeal of the ultra-conservative hyper-nationalist populism with a chiliastic flavour which we call radical Islamism, or which in India is associated with movements like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). Both political Islam and the RSS — and indeed also Revisionist Zionism so overwhelmingly central in Israel today — followed the rhythm of modern world history: in their emegence simultaneously with Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s under al-Banna, Golwalkar and Jabotinsky, and in their revival simultaneously with the retreat of modernism and with the spurning and denigration of the Enlightenment, and the correlative revival in the West of conservative ideologies, religious and secular — a revival officiated under a benign signature as well as a malignant one, the one xenophobic and the other xenophilic, both premised on a culturalist differentialism which has recently become hegemonic, and both of which, in two different spirits, speak of 'cultural specificity' which, towards the end of the twentieth century, came to perform the same conceptual functions as race had earlier performed[5]. Racial, national and religious 'profiling' as practiced since September 11, most hysterically the US where it is accentuated by the stridency of Republicanist Protestantism, is unthinkable without the differentialism I am talking about.

So much for the singular rhythm of political Islam. Let me add this, before I widen my purview : The Islam of militant and conspicuous Islamism repudiates the lived Islam of its milieu in its attempt to 'return' to the atopian Islam presumed to have been out there before the Fall and imagined to be still seething below the surfaces of falsehood and inauthenticity. This accounts for the extraordinary violence it has always needed to deploy in the quest for authenticity. It constructs an imagined Muslim

past, using symbolic materials derived from Muslim canonical and quasi-canonical texts, but cast in ideological moulds common throughout the international history of conservative populism, as well as anti-Enlightenment motifs, associated with a ferocious subalternism, which makes it, somehow, adorably post-modern. These moulds and motifs use vitalist and fiercely social-Darwinist figures of history and of society, a romantic notion of politics as restorative Will and direct action, an organismic conception of culture and of law, all of them reminiscent not of Muhammad and the Koran, but rather of Herder, Savigny, and Spengler, of de Bonald, Gobineau, Le Bon, and perhaps most pertinently in present circumstances, of Nechaev, Osinsky and Morozov. Two of the most influential works of revolutionary Islamism in Arabic and Persian (by Sayyid Qutb and `Ali Shariati) both specifically esteem most enthusiastically the work of Alexis Carrel, a Frenchman who, as some of you might know, started his highly distinguished medical career in New York, where he developed highly elaborate social-eugenic theories crowned with the Nobel Prize, and then went on to become the cultural and scientific oracle of the Maréchal Pétain at Vichy. His works are now standard reading material in youth summer camps run by the Front National in France. Carrel's emphasis on the creative salvational minority, his strictures against cultural and racial degeneration, were of course not as systematic in spirit, broad in reach, and sophisticated in approach and conceptual wealth as those of German thinkers such Nordau, Klages, Nietzsche, and Jünger[6]. Let me say parenthetically that it is too early to predict how the postmodern reclamations of obscurantism and its predilection for the backward in the name of post-coloniality, will react to September 11, and whether it will feel the waves of disorientastion, dislocation, and terminal menace that have started seriously to beset Islamist political movements of all shades. What is certain is that I have not yet seen descriptions of the destruction of the World Trade Center as quite simply a performative speech-act[7], nor anything comparable to Lyotard's playful characterization of the Second Gulf War as an irreal, virtual happening[8] — although, I must say, feminist descriptions of the events as an act of supreme phallicism have indeed been voiced.

Be that as it may, the point is that this notion of degeneration and decadence, sometimes but not always hankering after a precapitalist arcadia, has generic affinities of an ideological and conceptual nature with the Islamist critique of contemporary society; both are the products of times of considerable commotion and disorientation, and both are anchored in a vitalist conception of society. But whereas the Germans (and Americans like Albert Freeman and Henry Ford) blamed the proletariat and the massification of

society and polity for this degeneration, Muslim thinkers like Mawdudi and Qutb blamed what they termed *jahiliyya*, unislamity pure and simple, or Occidentosis or Westtoxification according to the English translators of the Iranian priest of authenticity, Jalal Al-i Ahmad. I might add that all the European figures I mentioned are of prime importance for political life and thought in modern European history. The fact that they are not so very well-known today, or that they have until recently been relegated to minor positions in textbooks of political and social theory, can only be read as a rather hopeful collective amnesia organized by liberal regimes following the Second World War. The post-modernist adulation of difference is not often enough aware of its own ideological and conceptual provenance.

And to round up the picture, I must also add that there is also between the parties I mentioned — Islamists and representatives of European political irrationalism — an affinity far more than subliminally elective, respecting the mystique of death and sacrifice as the morbid edges of life and antidotes to a vision of decay, and the glorification of blood and fire and steel as direct forms of political action beyond the world of daily life. One might mention here by way of example Ernst Jünger's memoir of the First World War and the notion of *jihad* according to radical Muslims[9]. Just as pertinently, the Russian Narodnovoltsy and certain fringes of European anarchism, particularly in Russia and Spain, might be cited: Morozov's immortalization of the revolutionary, Nechaev's Cathechism, more generally the metaphysical rather than immediately functional status given to the insurrectionary act of terror, the cult of self-sacrifice including death regardless by whose hand it might come, the 'absolute present' (Karl Mannheim's term[10]) which conceptualizes insurrection, rendering the present moment an instance in an indistinct eternity[11]. I am not suggesting that Mr. Bin Laden might have heard of Mikhailovsky or Morozov or that he might have read Carl Schmitt, but rather that all of these and many others were possessed by an apocalyptic language of ultimate war, of death as the ultimate affirmation of life, and that all of them belong to a modern world in which the distictiveness of political violence, unlike the Middle Ages, is correlated to the emergence of the notion of 'the people' who might be made to rise by means of acts of exemplary violence[12]. in order to precipitate a predetermined outcome. They equally all belong to a modern world in which it was possible in vitalist terms to think of war as the ultimate manifestation of collective energy, acting as an antidote to decadence and degeneration, believing the world will again rise from the ashes of the Götzerdämmerung they intend to precipitate[13], with an *amor fati* and in a spirit of the

Dionysian nihilism of an Absolute Subject in which life and death are seen to be interchangeable, and where the latter is indeed proof of the former and the supreme testimony of it, the nihilism of a transcendental Narcissus which in its defiant reversal of degenerate values generates the heady sense of freedom I believe energised the perpetrators of the acts of September 11, who were also clearly possessed of a keen sense for the postmodern mediatic aesthetic of the absolute event in real time. In a sense, these matters might be subjected to an analysis as instances of what Hegel termed Absolute Freedom and Terror, where freedom 'ascends the throne of the world', albeit one without real antitheses, as if they were a throwback to a previous moment of consciousness, in which the normal dialectical movement of a self-referential subject in a struggle of master and slave is condemned to unconsummateness, in which individuality is condemned to remain an instance of ahistorical, pure, perpetual and singular negativity[14] outside historical time and without the labour of the negative.

I think it is crucial that one resist the habit of looking at these acts as being entirely inspired by the promise of a tumescent Paradise, for what we have is a cult of martyrdom and of war in which self-sacrifice is a rite of passage and an act of intense socialization, and radical Islamic political movements do subject their members to intense resocialization[15]: It may be recalled that Goebbels declared that war was the most elementary form of love for life[16], an attitude which to my mind provides the fundamental affective element of Carl Schmitt's theory of the state. That Bin Laden warned what he termed Jews and Crusaders that he and his people loved death more than their enemies loved life, belongs to the same tropes of militaristic nihilism, and this is a matter that may be approached, and sense made out of apparent senselessness, in terms of anthropological theories of sacrifice and of the feast[17].

Such analogies as I am drawing may appear to some of you as improbable and indeed gross. But they are very suggestive, and the analogy I am making between religious zealotry and romantic anarchism and nihilism, imperfect as its definition might be, is premised on a shared repertoire of vitalist notions not available before the era of modernity or, better stated, both emerging from the same conditions of possibility, which allows for convergence and comparability. Thus I would also add that radical Islamists use much the same political language and make similar use of archaic political iconography as do vitalist romantics everywhere, for all atavism harbours a primitivist aesthetic which appeals to a concrete image of a prelapsarian, arcadian nature to be restored. This was evident in the Balkans recently, among other places. The penultimate televisual

appearance of Mr. Bin Ladin took place before a cave, recalling the Cave of Harra', where Muhammad first received his divine inspiration. This is all not too dissimilar to certain colourful fringe phenomena in the Vienna of Hitler's youth, with the revaluation of racial purity and of ancient Germanic myths by Guido von List, who adopted the swastika as the emblem for his Aryan fraternities, and particularly of Georg Schönerer's folkishness[18]: Thus Bin Laden and his associates adopted a medievalising coiffure and manners of dress and holy relics and, as well as ways of private behaviour and affected turns of phrase not very much out of keeping with the lurid and exhibitionistic culture of bad taste evident in analogous cult groups, in a sort of dandyism in reverse. They acted according to a notion of authenticity which is analogous to the Hindutva of the communalist Right in India, and they combine together the political mysticism of the secular Zionist Right with a mild form of the doctrine of divine election propounded by Jewish fundamentalism

It is important to note that the rhetoric of authenticity and the trope of return according to which matters I mentioned are cast by religio-political revivalism is not the unmediated voice of the natural history of a culture or of a race, but rather a recherché self-representation of this or that social force presuming normative hegemony. It is precisely such a process that people commonly call an identity, a word much overused and abused in current public debate. Authenticity, in this perspective, is highly inauthentic, indeed, a counterfeit identity, for identity is a performative category, not one of indication; it presents, as described by Adorno in another, aesthetic, context, a *für andere* masquerading as an *an-sich :* such is the case of the wholesale invention of vestimentary and intellectual traditions by Islamist movements, and the simultaneous assertion that these correspond to social practice, and such also is the deification of the Buddha in the atheistic religion of Buddhism, and such is similarly the elevation to divine of primacy of Ram by Hindu communalists in what has been termed the Semitization of Hinduism.

In all these and other cases, we witness a traditionalization as distinct from traditionalism; we witness the folklorization of classicism, in which elements from the remote past are presumed to constitute the lived present, which often results in varying degrees of a Disneyfied psychodramatic self-parody — one may most appropriately be reminded here of one among many great anthropologists little read today, of Edward Tyler, who asserted that 'the serious business of ancient society may be seen to sink into the sport of later generations, and its serious belief to linger on in folk tales'[19] . In this way are produced tangible tokens or icons of authenticity such as a particular manner of dress or of

punishment, and thus also are virtual collective memories exhumed from old books made into elements of a populist rhetoric, by asserting them to be actual memories. Through these virtual memories, an historical romance is construed which is then put forward as an utopian social programme whose purpose is to construct a finalist and definitive Shangri-La where everyone and everything might be authentic, be this called an Islamic state, a tausendjäriger Reich, life in the Ramrajya according to the Sanskritik *dharma*, or indeed the arrival of the Messianic age once the impeccable red heifer has been genetically engineered by Jewish Ayatollahs in the occupied territories. Under such conditions, therefore, life most frequently devolves to performance, the performance of a socially and politically disembodied psychodama, which might indeed gather social momentum and come to constitute a facet of social reality. But this constructed facet is a measure of the distance between the past itsef and its iconographic monumentalization or bloody memorialization. I might add by way of clarification that though this primitivism has become standard fare in Islamist movements, the radical primitivism that came to the fore in the figure of Bin Laden goes further, and relentlessly abstracts itself from both its conditions of genesis and its present condition and lodges itself in perpetual psychodramatic performance, enforced by the tropes of extraterritoriality and exile made possible by the social and physical topographies of provincial parts of Saudi Arabia and Yemen from whence many members of al-Qaeda came, and Afghanistan, to which they moved — or indeed the self-alienation possible in a country like the United States, or under conditions of multiculturalist placelessness afforded by situations of ethnic cantonement in various European countries — not unlike the Hasidic cantonement at Borough Park, Brooklyn, for instance, or at Finsbury Park in London, where the Hasidim coexist with an equally insular Muslim community, with whom they cooperate over matters concerning public morals and multicultural educational demands. It is from such conditions that al-Qaeda and the Jewish Defence league recruit their membership.

Not so, of course, are the suicide bombers active in Israel and the occupied territories in past months. There we witness acts within a very specific political situation, with discernible and specific antagonists, acts perpetrated in a situation of national disempowerment whose proportions are almost absolute, where the embryonic structures of Palestinian self determination were being systematically destroyed by unspeakable acts that go radically counter to all norms except those of a primitive tribalism— the destruction of civil service records, cultural institutions, security forces, water and power resources, and the physical liquidation of all political cadres, ac-

cording to a savage political doctrine, echoing some that have been taken up above, and eloquently put by Ariel Sharon when he stated that it was an "iron law" of history "that he who won't kill will be destroyed by others", and that it was "better a live Judeo-Nazi than a dead saint" (Interview with Amos Oz in *Davar*, December 17, 1982 — English translation: http://www.counterpunch.org/pipermail/counterpunch-list/2001-September/01).

In the same interview, Sharon stated that "We shall start another war, kill and destroy more and more, until they have had enough. And do you know why it is worth it ? Because it seems that this war has made us more unpopular among the so-called civilized nations": quite apart from the mass psychopathological condition underlying the need to be feared rather than admired (ibid.), this unfinished "dirty work of Zionism" (ibid.) takes on the aspect of a sub-political, biological, vitalist predation (comparable to the notion of *Lebensraum*). The unspeakably savage (the words are used deliberately, to convey the sub-political and sub-civil) character of this political genocide provokes a response in kind equally captive to the impotence of language and of reason. Thus the young woman who exploded herself in Jerusalem on 12 April, 2002, declared on video that she was intending to "state with her body" what the Arabs had not said with words: in a situation where the means of resistance and of national self-determination had been rendered bereft of politics and transformed into Darwinist predation, a vitalist counterpoint appears eminently purposive.

Here martyrdom becomes not an apocalyptic cult, as with al-Qaeda, but a nationalist act of resistance rather akin in its mechanisms and conceptions to Sorel's myth of the national strike. In past months (these lines are being written towards the end of April, 2002), the religious character of the discourse surrounding suicide bombers has gradually receded in favour of the more decidedly and sometimes unmitigatedly nationalist, not only on the part of suicide bombers belonging to the secular al-Aqsa Brigades (al-Aqsa mosque being a national symbol), but also by bombers belonging to Hamas. This is not too dissimilar to suide bombers in South Lebanon belonging to the Communist Party and the Syrian Nationalist Party whose actions had more consequential effects.

Having indicated a very specific and important distinction, I will return to the mainstream of this essay, and state that I conclude from all this that, over and above iconography, there is precious little that is generically distinctive about Muslim integralism and fundamentalism, beyond the specific way in which the tissue of each of its different times and places is created by its vari-

ous conjunctural and structural elements. The 'return' to Islam is in fact to a place newly created. Its different components are generated from romantic and vitalist ideological elements present in the repertoire of political ideas universally available, no matter how much the rhetoric of identity and of authenticity might deny this; they are socially crafted out of a social material which requires for its understanding a sociology of structural marginality, another of elite competition, as well as a social psychology of middle and upper class youthful radicals in situations of normative schizophrenia and structural closure, not an ethnology of pre-colonial Arcadia; and last but not least a sociology of subcultures and of cults. The understanding of islamic political phenomena requires the normal equipment of the the social and human sciences, not their denial[20]. Let us not forget in this context an extremely important novel feature that has supervened onto the international legal order since the collapse of the Socialist Bloc, namely the fact that the indeterminate fluidity evident in regimes of extra-legality and extra-territoriality is, under a normative signature overdetermined by hegemonic military capacity deploying the 'power of exception' as a novel legal norm[21], rendering previously prevalent modes of legality (including notions of national sovereignty) virtually irrelevant— the best examples of this are the embargo against Iraq and Israeli policies in the Occupied territories. That lawlessness in a situation of normative legal fluidity is seen to be legitimate is unsurprising: this is the lawlessness in international relations as in economies structurally beset by illegal transactions. This requires precise analysis and cannot be understood through moralist condemnation alone.

Nor is Muslim revivalism today itself generically specific . The construal of the utopia desired as a re-enactment of supposed origins or beginnings, the trope of return to authentic beginnings, is a constant feature of all religious discourse and of nationalist and indeed much conservative discourse. In the Christian religious traditions it is termed typology, where present and putative origin are organized as type and re-enactment, as beginning and manifestation, original and figure, and where Reformation announces itself as no more than fidelity to origins: thus many Christian kings were described as a New David and as *typus christi*, Byzantine emperors were likewise regarded as instances of *Christomimesis* , and their capital was regarded as the New Jerusalem. All this forms a standard component of a broad sweep of *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history) which is foreign to no monotheistic religion. That this also occurs in Islam is entirely unremarkable, and is a matter to be investigated in the context, not of an unrecon-

structed ethnology of the *homo islamicus*, but of the history of religions, which has much to say about beginnings as types and mythological charters, of stereotypical reproduction, of mythopraxis (in Sahlins' expression), and of the relation of these to ritual.

Before I go any further, I shall briefly try to dispel the surprise of some of you at hearing how Islamism is an offspring of modernity rather than of tradition. Let me remind you that the Arab world, like all parts of the globe, was variously and unevenly incorporated from the mid-19th century, into an international order of ideology and culture, in which circulated discursive forms and ideas which, albeit of Western European origin, were to become universal, and came to be produced and reproduced locally, being enracinated in the cultural, legal, and educational apparatus of Bonapartist states — that is, states that made it their business to become the hegemonic instance in the cultural and legal spheres. These states spread throughout the world from the early 19th century: By Napoleon himself, in Spain, Italy, and Poland, by direct Napoleonic example, as in the states created by Simon Bolívar and his example in Latin America, and as in the Ottoman Reformed state, which is the one particularly relevant to the Arab World. This was a state of extraordinary innovativeness, which incorporated into its reforms some of the most advanced ideas of the age, such as non-sectarian education, ideas which in their countries of origin were thought to be dangerously avant-garde. The reformed Ottoman state of the mid-nineteenth century was almost a veritable laboratory for Comtean ideas and of positivist social engineering — Auguste Comte was quite aware of this, and his delight was evident in the open letter to Reshid Pasha that he printed at the beginning of the first volume of his *Système de politique positive*. We could actually say that the history of the Arab world in the past century and a half is an accelerated history of acculturation, in which major changes occurred very rapidly, much like the cultural history of England in the 17th century, including the absorption of irrationalist ideological motifs and concepts.

Of the new cultural forms were the journalsitic article , the pamphlet, evolving forms of the novel, all of which utilized a new form of Arabic, generated in the mid-nineteenth century, incorporating substantial lexical, some syntactic and extensive stylistic developments. Of the ideas, one might cite ideas of the nation, of the economy — which was born as a determinate conceptual field only in the 18th century — , of society itself which in the early 19th century superseded the notion of estates, of the body-social as the assembly of individuals that we gain from English philosophy most particularly, and the related idea of an abstract assembly of rights that we find in natural right theories. That the

ideas of progress, of popular will, no less that romantic notions of the organic continuity of history and the homogeneity of society, and others, are of the same order, goes without saying.

None of these has precedents in Muslim traditions; all belong to the universal regime of modernity, which in one of its aspects constituted an exclusive repertoire of the conceptual apparatus by which peoples world-wide thought and wrote on public affairs. These imperative global forms of cultural expression are analogous to what were called 'modules' in an influential book on nationalism. I do not deny the pervasive existence archaism in the political and social aspirations of Islamists and other conservative populists elsewhere. What constitutes the specificity if Islamist groups is their appeal to a particular historical experience and its symbols, construed as a foundational myth, what I wish to insist upon is that this is not some explosion of ethnological force long repressed, but is a very recherché primitivism deliberately crafted of the universal modularity of modern ideologies, and the discourse of inwardness, of authenticity, of particularity, expresses a political sentimentalism, formulated in a language and by means of concepts that are entirely heteronomous: sentiments of what is called identity are not immediately translatable into politics, but need to be sensualised in emblematic or iconographic form which then acts as a node of ideological interpellation, then parsed in the form ideological propositions. When such sentiments do explode immediately, they take the form of direct action: as melanchoy musings normally associated with the romantic sensibility, but also, when wrath in unbridled, sentiment pours forth as inarticulate terror.

The broader current in which religious sentimentalism was thus articulated ideologically was not the work of theologians, but of a group that emerged from the new public educational system, which marginalized the public role of the Muslim priestly establishment (and I am not here speaking of the peculiar conditions of Saudi Arabia[22]), and which was analogous in its purpose and some of its effect to the role played by the lycée system in France or the Gymnasium system in Germany. A new class of intellectuals arose, analogous according to a poor man's analogy to that which some German scholars, with reference to their own history, refer to with some dread as the Bildungsbürgertum. It is this same class of the intelligentsia that sustained secularist and otherwise secular ideologies, in concert with and by participation in the state. But it is the subaltern components of this intelligentsia that produced Islamism: reformist islamism at the end of the nineteenth century, and political revivalism at the end of the twentieth. In both cases, effective secularisation led to

the possibility of defining religion separately from social realities with which it had previously been embedded, and for giving it the internal homogeneity, coherence and consistency of a total social and political programme[23].

None of the matters I have highlighted is particularly mysterious or inaccessible to the understanding. The socio-economic conditions, the birth of Islamism from the interstices of universal modernity, the virtual reality of particularity which uses universal modules to construct itself, the multiple causalities that work to produce — amongst some Muslims as well as others — projects of involution and interiorization: all these, and many other collateral matters, are well-documented, and in some instances well-studied in published work, and they alone, unlike the postmodern mood, can help us clarify 'The Muslim Question, quite apart from Valéry's relish in the 'disorder of names' . What is particularly striking is that there is so much resistance to perceiving the realities of the situation, so much insistence upon misrecognition.

I do not intend all over again to review the debates concerning orientalism, nor do I wish to dwell now on the foetid alleyways of collective European memories of historical antagonisms, clearly but not always articulately evident in Bosnia, Iraq, and Palestine in the last few years; I do not wish to mention more than in passing and by way of reminder, the systematic and fevered demonization, under the title of terrorism, of various Muslim peoples, or the never-ending story of immediate political interests and the interests of arms manufacturers[24].

What I do intend to do is to return to the present point in time, and to try and understand why it is that misrecognition is so passionately willed; to probe the conditions for the exceptionalism attributed to Muslim peoples, which places them outside the remit of the historical and sociological understanding and relegates them to ethnological folklore, to consider why it is that I — like many others — have to waste so much of your time on matters that ought to be taken for granted.

To a considerable extent, this has to do with the social and political organization, in western countries, of knowledge concerning Islam, of the production and circulation of this knowledge, of its criteria of public validation, and of the position that rigorous research as distinct from what is publicly claimed as expertise occupies in this organization — quite apart from the spectacular newsworthiness of similar reclamations emanating from Islamist political movements in quest for normative hegemony in their lands of origin. It is manifestly the case that expert knowledge — institutionally known as orientalism and as area studies — on these matters is marginal; it has no social authority to arbitrate knowledge on Islam; members of the public and persons in positions

of authority seem free to make all manner of whimsical or irresponsible statements and assumptions concerning matters Islamic without serious fear of disgrace or even of definitive correction. There is hardly a body of exact knowledge concerning Islam which is publicly authoritative and self-perpetuating, and this also applies, grosso modo, to the organization of university faculties, in which studies of Islam occupy a marginal and rather slight position which some scholars of Islam regard as rather a seraphic blessing — this explains to a large extent not only the manifest conceptual retardation of this field and its vulnerability to common cant, but also facts such as the virtual absence of Islamic materials in the context of other disciplines, including the history of religions.

This marginality is evident in many other ways: that the substantial though scattered advances in the study of Muslim societies in the past two decades has been unable to come into general circulation, that the excellent products of contemporary research published in Arabic are not read, for lack of linguistic competence of western experts no less than out of their contempt for Arabic scholarship , and above all that public primacy is generally given to forms of expression and of discourse of higher ideological density and authority and of wider reach than orientalist or area expertise. This is not new, of course: perhaps most glaringly but by no means uncharacteristically, we find that the public authority on matters Islamic in 19th century Germany, for instance, was no other than Otto von Ranke . Some of you may know that Ranke wrote what was then regarded as the definitive history of the Ottoman and Spanish empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which he paid scant attention to the results of orientalist scholarship or to Ottoman sources, and preferred to rely instead on Venetian archives.

At present, such authority is assumed most specifically by mediatic forms of representation and their pre-literate techniques of semiosis, to whose conditions and categories university experts frequently succumb, not necessarily because of dishonesty, but rather because of conceptual vulnerability and disorientation, rendered all the more acute by the constraints of the medium. This general situation applies also to scholarship in general public circulation and with a public credibility far exceeding that of more careful research.

I would cite as an example the work of Ernest Gellner, which theorises the demotic notions of Islam in common currency and shares with this demotic notion one of its constitutive features, that of overinterpreting an ethnographic fragment (or, more traditionally, textual fragment) as a total ethnological type. Gellner studied a village in the Moroccan Atlas in the 1950s, then came to conclude that the bird's-eye view from

these panoptical heights revealed an apparition or indeed an epiphany of Islam in its full integrality as history, society, culture, a view which at once exemplifies it and sums it up. General and particular in this totalising vision correspond absolutely, just as, in myth, concrete and abstract classifiers and mutually convertible[25]. Thus Islam is fully representative of Muslims and can indeed be substituted for them : you will remember that I did say earlier that naming is conjuring, and this is a very good case in point.

Briefly stated, discourse on matters Islamic at present is characterized , broadly and in the form in which it enters the public sphere, by what we might call a neo-Renanism, the reference being, of course, to Ernest Renan's famous theories about the congenital incapacity of the Semitic mind to produce science and philosophy, but to excel nevertheless in the realm of poetry — a discourse based on taxonomic antitheses. We have a politilogical neo-Renanism which speaks, among other things, of the essential inappropriateness of democracy for countries characterized as Muslim because democracy goes against the grain; as a corollary, we have the proposition propounded in many circles that democracy for such countries is best achieved if they were to be ruled by groups which best correspond to the authentic nature of these societies, which is Islam. Correlatively, we also have a neo-Renanist pseudo-sociology, which takes the populist declamations of authenticity for accurate descriptions of social reality and which denies the realities of secularism in Arab life on grounds of congenital incapacity, served up under the title of 'revivalism' and the trope of return.. This discourse has as its Leitmotif a culturalist differentialism, that is to say, a culturalist ethnology which supposes 'cultural meaning', including the trope of return, to be determinant at once of action as of the interpretation of action. This is a matter to which I have given considerable thought and I have concluded not only that culturalism uses the same figures and tropes that had been previously employed in racialist discourses, but that like racialism it operates in a rather simple manner, which consists of selecting visible tokens of ethnographic distinctiveness, which could be the colour of the skin, a certain manner of dress, or certain propositions concerning the organization of gender relations, then proceeding to give these the status of iconic markers or of stigmata of otherness — or correlatively of inwardness, as nodes of ideological interpellation as I indicated earlier. These are finally served up as totalizing criteria of ethnological classification broadly conceived, constituting Muslims by analogy with ethnotypes or what older American anthropology referred to as 'patterns of culture', though I must say that Ruth Benedict was far more conscious of her appropriate intellectual

genealogy than present-day proponents of the post-modern version of this conception, citing few anthropologists but appealing rather to German vitalist thinkers like Dilthey and Spengler. This is really not unlike regarding, for instance, Lederhosen and skinheads as the iconic markers of Germanity, of cowboys and mobsters as markers of the north American identity, corresponding to its inner nature and constituting its cultural genetic capital, and proceeding to construct an ethnic type based on the associations of these images.

I think it will be clear to all of you that this procedure partakes of all the characteristics of polemical rather than of scientific discourse, notwithstanding copious footnotes. It would be highly instructive to compare narrative features of this commonplace discourse on Islam with the tropes of polemical discourse generally, including anti-Masonic, anti-Arab, anti-Communist, anti-Semitic, and other writing and other forms of propaganda designed in antagonism. One might well compare Muslim history conceived in this fashion with left-wing histories of the Society of Jesus written in nineteenth-century France, in terms of structure, imagery, and argumentation, in which the record of Jesuit history was read as a symptomatolgy of the Jesuit spirit, and in which links between events were ones of mythical significance rather than ones of causality.[26] All polemical discourse, like religious discourse, is typological: a history of beginnings and reenactments, in which change is illusory and where every particular is a mere illustration of the general, and in which the primacy of mythical signification is undisputed.

Yet all this has in the recent past been expressed in terms of a disarming condition of innocence, often described as a post-modern concern for diversity, individuality, the empowerment of the marginal, and a whole host of other propositions on which there is a concurrence between xenophobes, liberals, and third world communalists and integralists, all of whom speak the rhetoric of diversity, of difference, of particularity, a rhetoric which conflates the banal realities of diversity and of particularity with the topoi of culturalist and ethnographic classification . All in all, the kitsch and the spectacular, are taken for the authentic and invariant, and this procedure is often freely encouraged not only by spokesmen for authenticity, but by various other native informants, some of them professional, who play to an eager gallery, although this is not often noticed by anthropologists, journalists, or other experts[27].

This post-modernist delight in the pre-modernity of others is all the rage; what it subtends really is a vigorous and triumphalist post-modernism, premissed on post-Communism, and bereft of the normative, aesthetic, and cognitive attributes of modernism. It is hence captive to the

relativistic drift inherent in the use, by history and sociology, of the metaphor of the organism to describe identities as absolute subjects. This, I have repeatedly reminded you, is a standard component of European irrationalism and political romanticism.

It is therefore particularly disturbing to me that Gellner — note that I refer to him specifically because he captures with particular eloquence and limpidity and increasingly firmer demotic mood, and expresses clearly and explicitly matters that others prefer to state more guardedly, and carries them with authority and with considerable ideological density outside the field of area studies and into general circulation — it disturbs me particularly that Gellner, the anti-relativist par excellence, should state 'In Islam, it is all different' [28] — which once again reminds me of an anti-Jesuit polemic of 1880, by a forgotten novelist, Jules Durantin, who wrote: 'Everything progresses, except the Company of Jesus'.[29] Gellner liberates himself from the burden of proof — but equally, and most saliently, he liberates himself from the discipline of his trade of sociologist, anthropologist, and theorist of history. He proceeds to state and re-state an entire interpretation of Muslim histories and of present-day Islam, which he reduces to an invariant model, supposedly emanating from his rustic observatory in the Atlas Mountains, whose schematism is breathtakingly peremptory, and empirical objections to which he simply ignores. Briefly stated, this notorious 'pendulum-swing' theory of Islam postulates two forms of religiosity, the enthusiastic-rural and the puritanical-urban, in a primordial conflict and cyclical alternance which fundamentally constitutes Muslim history — so fundamentally, indeed, that the present condition of the Muslims can be conceived in no other terms, and which can have no outcome other than the triumph of urban puritanism. Correlative with this religious characterization of a history, reduced to religious culture, is the proposition that no modernism for Muslims is inconeivable in terms other than those of the Muslim puritanical doctrine and its corollaries..

Gellner's Moroccan village is an ethnological fragment he construed in terms of an ethnological theory which he reads into the work of David Hume and of Ibn Khaldûn (whom Gellner needed to read in the poor standard English translation), who based his own theories on a particular reading of the history of North African Muslim dynasties — Ibn Khaldun is less a guide to the interpretation of North African history than a Maghribi phenomenon interpretable historically. Yet this is a theoretical genealogy which appears largely fictitious when one looks at the actual origins of this theory in French colonialist historiography of North Africa, which had a substantial input from the German deterministic so-

cial geography of Ratzel, and which is best exemplified in the work of Emile-Félix Gautier and Robert Montagne [30] — the latter is much praised by Gellner overall. And if it were assumed — and this would be a very decidedly dubious assumption — that this model be applicable to certain moments of North African history, the fact that it is still utterly foreign to, say, Ottoman history, he seems simply and implicitly to regard the 500 years of Ottoman statehood over central Muslim lands to have been anomalous and uncharacteristic: he never said this explicitly, but it arises from the logic of excision and abridgment he deployed in the various versions and redactions of his theory..

What this procedure displays, in fact, is a certain will to conceptual arbitrariness — arbitrariness with regard to facts of history and society, one which construes central facts as anomalous, and partial or local phenomena as normative; a conceptual arbitrariness which allows for an indiscipline flourishing under the title of exceptionalism. There is a definite objective correlation between this arbitrariness and its historical conditions of possibility in the world outside the university, for this intellectual unaccountability is matched only by the presumption of unaccountability built into an article published by Gellner in *The New Republic* (December 5, 1983, p 22) which opens with the following statement: 'Muslims are a nuisance. As a matter of fact, they always were a nuisance' — I shudder to think what would have happened to the author and to the *New Republic* had he said the same about Afro-Americans or Jews, for instance. But that which is of particular salience in this statement was that it was simply a preface to reducing to a unity, in islamic exceptionalism, of Moroccan corsairs off the coast of Newfoundland in the eighteenth century, Khomeini, and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. Clearly, the will to conceptual arbitrariness is correlative with the will to a certain form of combat which is bound by no rules. Societies, countries, territories, histories — all are reduced to a specific aspect that makes them manageable for purposes of confrontation or containment. The connection with, and anticipation of , the theses of Samuel Huntington is manifest; both repeat commonplace prejudices with equal banality .

What this will to violence no longer symbolic since Sptember 11 — this will to reduce complexity to simplicity, will wantonly to ignore reality, will to conceptual indiscipline, will to contradict both history and ethnography [31] — leads to in scholarship is precisely what I started with, the over-islamization of Muslims, their endowment with a superhuman capacity for perpetual piety, the reduction of their history and their present life to a play and recovery of religious motifs, and hence a denial of their actual history

and present. It would be wrong to suppose that Gellner's statements and theories always amount to no more than vulgar Islamophobia , or to some immediately political position. Yet they are, like Gellner's last theories about the impossibility of secularization for muslim lands — the very secularization that is so evident in the fundamental thrust of modern Arab history [32] — based on an imperious will to denial, during the time of global post-Fordism when outsiders are barbarized in terms of a discourse of cultural incapacity: incapacity for economic, social, political, and cognitive development, cultural incapacity predisposing peoples to violence, overpopulation, factionalism, even to famine[33].

Notes:

Parts of this paper were delivered in a variety of forms over recent years as lectures in a variety of fora, and has benefitted much from keen and diverse audiences, at the universities of Georgetown, Columbia, Harvard, California (Berkeley), and Lund; at The Central European University, Budapest, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, and the Institutes of Advanced Study in Berlin and Uppsala. An early version was published as a pamphlet under the title *Reconstituting Islam* by The Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, in 1995 (Swedish translation as "Att rekonstituera islam", in *Tidskrift för mellanösternstudier*, n. 2, 1998, pp. 4-21)

[1] For the term "postmodern obscurantism" I am indebted to a conversation in Beirut with Aijaz Ahmad, to whom this article is dedicated

[2] For a clear statement of the radical position, see William E. Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*, Leiden, Brill, 1996; Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, translated by Jon Rothschild, London, Al-Saqi Books, 1985

[3] Paul Valéry , 'Orientem Versus', in idem., *History and Politics*, New York, 1962 (*Bollingen Series*, XLV.10), pp. 380-381

[4] We also have now an 'Islamic archaeology': Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam*, Oxford, Blackwells, 1999, proposes that there are 'islamic' archaeological traces which find their unifying principle in the Muslim religion as a total and ineradicable 'way of life'. That the empirical evidence sketched in the book (on the domestic environment, dress, war, visual imagery, and much else) indicates conclusions that are almost wholly directly in contradiction to the basic proposition of the book does not dent the spirited enthusiasm with which this proposition is repeated

[5] Aziz Al-Azmeh, 'Culturalism, Grand Narrative of Capitalism Exultant', in idem., *Islams and Modernities*, 2nd. ed., London, Verso, 1996, chapter 1

[6] Various facets of the relation between Islamism and universal irrationalism in politics are explored in Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 2nd. ed., passim

[7] Cf. Sascha Lehnarzt, 'Auch Muslime müssen müssen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 December 2001, p. 53

[8] Cf. Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory. Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War*, London, 1992

[9] Much uninformed writing has been devoted to this historically very complex notion by Islamist as well as by

western authors. See the exemplary historical account of Mahmud al-Rahmuni, *al-Jihad. Min al-Hijra ila'-d-da'wa ila'd-dawla* [*Jihad: Emigration, Proselytism, State*], Beirut, Dar at-Tali'a, 2002

[10] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966 , pp. 215, 225 ff.

[11] Cf. Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1989, pp. 263 ff.; Mark Juergenmeister, ed., *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World*, London, Frank Cass, 1992, pp. 106 ff. and passim

[12] Franklin L. Ford, 'Reflections on Political Murder: Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in Wolfgang Mommsen and Gerhard Hirschfeld eds., *Social Protest, Violence and Terror in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe*, London, The German Historical Institute in association with Berg Publishers Ltd., 1982, pp. 182 and passim

[13] Cf. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics*, p. 299

[14] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, edited by Hans-Friedrich Wessels and Heinrich Clairmont, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988, pp. 387 ff., 130 ff. (English translation by A. V. Miller, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1977, §§ 585-6, 184 ff.)

[15] For instance, the memoir of a former member of one such group: Khaled al-Birri, *al-Dunya ajmal min al-janna* [*The World is Preferable Paradise*], Beirut, Dar an-Nahar, 2001

[16] Cf. Roger Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, Paris, Gallimard, 1950, pp. 223, 231 f.

[17] For instance, Roger Caillois, 'Guerre et sacré', in idem., *L'homme et le sacré*, Appendix III; Juergenmeister ed., *Violence and the Sacred*, passim

[18] See Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler's Vienna. A Dictator's Apprenticeship*, translated by Thomas Thornton, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999 pp. 206 ff., 236 ff.

[19] E. B. Tylor, *The Origins of Culture*; Gloucester, Mass., Peter Smith,1970, p. 16

[20] For an exemplary analysis of a comparable phenomenon, see Aijaz Ahmad, 'Fascism and National Culture: Reading Gramsci in the Days of Hindutva' in idem, *Lineages of the Present. Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia*, London, Verso, 2000, ch. 5

[21] Antonio Negri and John Hart, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University press, pp. 13 ff.

[22] On the character of religious radicalism in Saudi Arabia, see Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World*, New York, Praeger, 1982, ch. 9; A. Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 2nd. ed., ch. 7; Mahmud A. Fakhash, *The Future of Islam in the Middle East*, Westport and London, Praeger, 1997, ch. 5. The best study of this and other aspects of saudi arabia remains Waddah Sharara, *Al-Ahl wa'l-ghanima: Muqawwimat as-siyasa fi'l-mamlaka al-'Arabiya al-Su'udiya* [*Clansmen and Booty: The Pillars of Politics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*], Beirut, Dar at-Tali'a, 1981

[23] Cf. Serif Mardin, 1989, p. 118. A similar development took place in modern Buddhism and Judaism, and in other religions as well; see Aran, 1986, p. 122 and passim and Swearer, 1991, pp. 649 f.

[24] On this theme, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, 'The Middle East and Islam: a Ventriloqual Terrorism', in *Third World Affairs 1988*, London, Third World Foundation, 1988, pp. 23-34

[25] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966, ch. 5, passim

[26]See particularly Geoffrey Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth. Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Ninetenth-Century France,* Oxford, Oxford University Press,1993, ch 5, pp 192-3 and passim

[27] This is perhaps most poignantly apparent in the cultural determinism of Margaret Mead, which has had a truly structuring impact on cultural anthropology – a cultural determinism empirically built on an 'aberrant' construction of the object of her field-work in Samoa, a construction based upon the credulous acceptance as serious of a prank played upon her by local adolescent girls, which 'produced such a spectacular result in centers of higher learning throughout the western world': This 'wonderfully comic' matter is traced in detail by Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and the Heretic*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1996, pp. xiii, 107, and passim

[28] Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p 62

[29] quoted in Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth* , p 193

[30] On this constellation of topics, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship*, London, third World Centre for Research and Publishing, 1981, ch. 5

[31] For ethnography, see particularly Martha Mundy, *Domestic Government*, London, I. B. Tauris, 1995, especially pp 52-54

[32] Aziz Al-'Azma, *Al-'Ilmaniyya min manzur mukhtalif* [*Secularism from a New Perspective*], Beirut, Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 1992

[33] Aziz Al-Azmeh, 'Civilization, Culture and the New Barbarians', in *International Sociology*, vol.16, no. 1 (2001), pp. 75-94