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The Study of Islamism Revisited

During the 1980s and 1990s, Islamist movements and ideologies emerged as important subjects of scholarly investigation in the fields of politics, sociology, anthropology, history and religious studies. Interest in the subject grew in conjunction with such events as the Iranian revolution (1978–79), the assassination of President Sadat (1981), the Hama uprising in Syria (1982) and the World Trade Centre bombing (1993). Although they are not of the same order, these events have come to form part of a discursive phenomenon carrying the labels of 'Islamic fundamentalism,' 'Islamic revivalism' and 'Islamism' – labels which soon acquired the qualifiers 'radical,' 'traditional,' 'militant,' 'conservative' and so on.[1] These labels, qualifications and classifications have been devised in order to account for spectacular events involving groups and individuals who invoke signs and symbols associated with Islamic traditions to justify their activities. They were developed within particular frameworks of understanding and in relation to particular modes of social, political and historical inquiry into the subject of study as constituted. We now have a rather large body of literature designed to help us comprehend the varied events, actors and activities having an Islamic point of reference. The task at hand is to reflect on the tools, concepts and categories of analysis that this literature offers. In this introductory chapter, I begin with a critical survey of the most influential of the various approaches used in the study of contemporary Islamist

politics: the historical master-narratives, the Durkheimian-inspired sociological models and the statist/political economy perspectives. I then outline the elements of an alternative approach; one that is both historically informed and empirically grounded.

Before proceeding further, a note on two key terms used throughout this text. The term 'Islamist politics' is used here to refer to the activities of organisations and movements that mobilise and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic traditions. It is also used to refer to political activism involving informal groupings that (re)construct repertoires and frames of reference from Islamic traditions.[2] The term 'Islamism' is used to encompass both Islamist politics as well as re-Islamisation, the process whereby various domains of social life are invested with signs and symbols associated with Islamic cultural traditions. Examples of this process include the wearing of the *hijab* (veil), the consumption of religious literature and other religious commodities, the publicising of symbols of religious identity, the reframing of economic activity in Islamic terms. In much of the recent literature, re-Islamisation is considered to be broader and, in some ways, distinct from 'Islamism.' The distinction is not used in this book. Islamism, as I conceive it, is not just the expression of a political project; it also covers the invocation of frames with an Islamic referent in social and cultural spheres.[3]

How, then, has Islamism been constituted as a particular subject of study? Which traditions of inquiry frame the formulation of the *problématique* of Islamism? To answer these questions, I begin by looking at the constitution of Islam as a domain of study and the wider analytical frames that have been used to explain the role of religion in society. A reader of the recent literature on 'Islam and Politics' or 'Islam and the modern age' is likely to encounter a set of propositions which generalise about the role of the religion in history, and place 'Islam' within an established narrative of world history. In this narrative, a major preoccupation is to account for Western modernity. More particularly, its aim is to affirm the factors that lie behind the rise of modernity in the West and thereby confirm Western exceptionalism.[4] This account of modernity articulates the self-identity of the West by abstracting features found in the West as the essence of modernity.[5] Integral to this enterprise is to draw

contrasts between the West and Islam, wherein the latter emerges as a series of historical gaps.[6] It is in this tradition of counterposing Islam and modernity that much contemporary analysis of Islamism develops. Islamism's relation to modernity becomes the main line of inquiry, hinging, essentially, on how the relation between Islam and modernity is conceived. If Islam is seen as incompatible with modernity, then Islamism expresses a rejection of modernity. If, on the other hand, Islam is not viewed as antithetical to modernity, then Islamism is a way of embracing it 'authentically.'[7]

The view of Islamism as anti-modern rests on the assumption that modernisation is associated with secularisation and the retreat of religion from the public sphere. Islamism thus appears as an expression of an anti-modern strand that, for some, is inherent in the religion. A more interesting proposition is found in Ernest Gellner's model of Muslim societies, which purports to uncover the internal logic and mechanisms of Islam. The model sets up a dualistic structure of Islam: the High Islam of the city dwellers and the Low Islam of the tribes. The former is scripturalist and ascetic, suitable to the temperament of the city entrepreneurs, while the latter is ecstatic, meeting the needs of the tribes. These two forms of Islam are in perpetual struggle. According to Gellner, with greater urbanisation and the consolidation of the central state in the modern period, Low Islam declines and High Islam becomes ascendant. This occurs because High Islam captures the urban strata's desire for learning and upward mobility. This desire is frustrated, however, by the laxity of the rulers and their failure to modernise their countries. In this scheme of scriptural High Islam versus ecstatic Low Islam, Islamism is viewed as an affirmation of the scriptural-based egalitarian spirit expressing frustration with the blocked road to modernisation.[8] In some other accounts, Islamism is a variant of religious fundamentalism that emerges in a normative clash with modernity.[9]

A different understanding of the relation between Islamism and modernity may be found in critical readings of the Western discourse of modernity. In line with post-modernist thought, these readings identify the Western discourse on modernity as a meta-narrative asserting Western hegemony. Islamism's anti-Western posture is a rejection of that hegemony and the meta-narrative that sustains it.

It is not essentially an anti-modern movement, but an effort at dislodging the West from the position of centrality that it claims.[10] Islamism is located in the space that is freed through the deconstruction of the relationship between the West and modernity. These readings situate Islamism in a dialogue with post-modernity defined, following Jean-François Lyotard, as expressing 'incredulity towards meta-narratives.' This in turn displaces the issue of the relationship between Islam and modernity, bringing into focus the politics of identity and power relations at the global level. This perspective opens up new ways of looking at Islamism without placing the West as the ultimate referential frame and the supreme global authority. Yet, although the Western discourse on modernity has been subject to a critical reading, the construct of Islam conceived in the production of Western identity continues to animate discussions of Islamism, finding parallels and reinforcement in the discourses of the Islamists themselves.

Historical Master-narratives of Islamist Movements

A number of influential studies of contemporary Islamist movements take the history of Islam as a point of departure. This is a history constructed in particular terms. Before examining them, it should be noted that this construction serves a methodological objective. It is essential for the enterprise of 'slotting' Islamist movements into a known chronological narrative. The sequence of events or the chronological unfolding of developments appears to be self-explanatory by virtue of basic patterns that they are presumed to embody. Several prominent scholars of 'Islam in the modern period' employ these types of explanatory strategies in their work on Islamist movements. To illustrate, I will focus on two of these works: *Islam and Politics* by John Esposito (1983) and *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* by John O. Voll (1982).[11] The perspectives outlined by Esposito and Voll have their echoes in many other writings dealing with Islamist politics.[12]

In *Islam and Politics*, Esposito anchors his explanation of Islamist movements in a unitary understanding of the religion. Although he acknowledges the specificity of the socio-political contexts in which

these movements emerged, his underlying premise is the idea of a totality called Islam explained as the basic beliefs of Muslims and the ideas they all share. Thus, in his introduction, Esposito highlights 'shared Muslim beliefs': in God's revelations, in Muhammad's prophethood and so on. Most important is the belief in the unity of religion and politics. This is 'the Islamic imperative' (p. 4) which functions as the basic belief that motivates Muslims with regard to state and government and guides their assessment of whether or not their government is mandated by God.

The underlying assumptions of these simple propositions need to be spelled out in order to signal the reification and objectification that follow from them. One such assumption holds that social and national collectivities whose members adhere to the Islamic religion share a primary identification as Muslims with common beliefs, and belong to a totality called the Muslim World. In this World, a primacy of religious beliefs in guiding individual and collective action is attributed to those who profess the religion. Esposito pays no attention to how beliefs interact with the sociality of everyday life in various settings. Hence the substantive content of the beliefs that are thought to be determinant of much of Muslims' lives is not dealt with either.

The assignment of primacy to religious beliefs is questionable on two main grounds. The first is by now somewhat axiomatic. It points out that Muslims occupy differing and multiple positions in various social and national formations that shape how they relate to each other and to their government. Second, beliefs are not transhistorical, but historically and materially grounded. The belief in God in seventh-century Arabia and the belief in God at the end of the twentieth century have to be understood in relation to their material contexts. What the belief represents or signifies is part of a system of meanings that interacts with systems of meaning articulated in other fields of social life. The idea of God may not just differ from one religion to another, but from one group of practitioners to another and from one historical period to another. Islam, as a religion, developed different ideas of God and in this respect is not unlike other religions. For instance, in seventh-century Arabia, notions of agnosticism or atheism did not exist and were therefore not dealt with in the sacred

text.[13] It was thus in relation to other notions that the criteria of belief and un-belief were formulated. It follows from these two contentions that if we are to take account of the role of religious beliefs, we must view them as components of historically produced systems of meanings.

Having assumed the unity of Muslims in the totality of Islam, Esposito develops his discussion around the idea of the continuity of their history conceived as the extension, into the present, of ideas and beliefs from the religion's formative period. In the early period, the Islamic community was both temporal and spiritual, embodying the unity of religion and politics. According to Esposito, '[r]eligion provided the worldview, the framework of meaning for both individual and corporate life.' (p.30) This shared view, translated into a public commitment to the Shari'a (law based on the scripture), is a primary principle (p.31). In turn, this commitment, and the ideal of the early community, inspired pre-modern revivalist movements. In his view, it is this commitment both to the Shari'a and the model of the early community that motivates Muslims, in a variety of contexts, to engage in restorative or corrective activity. Esposito, therefore, develops his analysis within the framework of Islamic revival and reform so methodically constructed (as we will see below) by John O. Voll. It emerges that the character and legacy of both pre-modern and modern Muslim societies as well as Islamic modernism responded to 'the Islamic imperative' of uniting politics and religion. The need to do so was particularly felt because of the challenge of Western colonialism (p. 32). According to Esposito, 'pre-modern revivalism' is a response to the socio-moral decline and reveals much of the patterns of modern Islamic movements, in their worldviews, their ideology, their language and methods' (p. 32). Subsequently, Esposito postulates a continuity and recurrence of basic patterns. For instance, he asserts that Islamic modernism built on and broadened the premodern revivalist legacy (p.32).

Situated within this continuity, contemporary Islamist movements represent basic responses and express modes of action which have been patterned in earlier historical periods. Although Esposito sketches the variety of specific socio-political contexts in which the movements emerge, he does not accord these contexts adequate explanatory

weight. Consequently, contextual specificities are superseded by the shared drive among Muslims to reunite religion and politics: regardless of the differences in conjunctures, all contexts are bound to elicit the same type of response from Muslims. The formation of Islamist groups in various settings is presented as the expression of a mood of discontent towards what they perceive as generalised conditions of decay. The Muslims' assessment of decay is itself undertaken in relation to the ideal. One may then ask in what way the context influences the positions of the actors and their relations to government and state. Based on Esposito's analysis, one is led to conclude that the impact of the ideal to which Muslims aspire overrides the effects of the actual conditions in which they live. In other words, regardless of prevailing conditions, as long as the ideal society is not established, Muslims will agitate and engage in reform action.

The notion of recurrence with respect to movements, their symbols and ideas, results in a static vision of Muslim societies. From an empirical point of view, there is no evidence that Muslims have assessed their states and societies as being decayed whenever the Shari'a was not applied or when rules of moral propriety were transgressed.[14] However, it is not only on empirical grounds that I take issue with the conception of Islamist movements as reformist organisations seeking moral reconstruction. Rather, as I will elaborate below, I contest the assumption that the moral and moralising discourses articulated by the various Islamist groups express some agreement on unchanging core ideas and beliefs.

The idea that the continuity of Islamic history provides the basic framework for understanding Islamist movements is best articulated by J.O. Voll. Criticising the view that Islamic activism expresses social, economic or nationalist interests, Voll argues that '[it] is possible to see the current resurgence as a continuation of basic themes, even though those themes may be expressed in new ways' (p. 4). Two points are central to Voll's position: religious motivation lies behind the 'revival,' and the past plays an important role in guiding action in the present (p. 4). 'Islamic resurgence,' in his view, '... involves the creation of new and effective forms of continuing the vitality of the Islamic message' (p. 4). Voll's reading of Islamic history aims to construct ideal type categories of Muslim action, what he terms 'styles of action.'

Four such styles are characteristic of Muslim activism in relation to government: adaptationist, conservative, fundamentalist and individualist.

In what way do these four styles serve as a framework for comprehending the entirety of Islamic history in general and the experience of 'revivalism' in particular? First, it should be noted that Voll posits action as a response to events and actual conditions – it is more of a reaction. In this sense, the four styles are conceived as particular ways of responding to given challenges. To illustrate, Voll sees the emergence of a fundamentalist style of action embodied in eighteenth-century revivalism – an archetype of modern revivalism – in the following manner:

> Just before the time of European dominance, a reformist-revivalist tradition had been established in the mould of the fundamentalist experience. Social groups and associations had been created to meet the issues raised by the adaptationists within the Islamic community, and those groups had a fundamentalist mood, which has always been close to the surface over the last two centuries. Thus, the style of the eighteenth-century spirit of socio-moral reconstruction has provided the counterpoint to the adaptationists' secularising reforms. When the latter weaken or appear to have failed, as was frequently the case by the 1970s, the more fundamentalist style emerges into full view (p. 30).

In this framework of constructing and understanding Islamic history, modes of action identified with 'the Islamic experience' appear in cyclical or recurrent patterns. These modes of action are posited as responses to challenges unleashed by changes at the local and global levels, in particular, the challenge of modernity. Voll contends that different styles of action predominate at different historical periods. For instance, adaptationist reformers prevailed under eighteenth-century Ottoman rule while fundamentalism and conservatism were in minority positions. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reform continued to be the major issue for Muslims but came to involve adaptation to Western techniques and ideas (p. 92). Adaptationism in the twentieth century took the form of Islamic modernism, secular reformism and radical reformism (p. 158). Other styles, namely fundamentalism and conservatism, were present but only at the level of everyday life or at moments of contestation. While adaptationism

was the main response to the challenge of modernisation and Western dominance during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, fundamentalism re-emerged during the last quarter. This resurgence has come about with the westernisers' loss of control over the process of popular mobilisation (p. 159). Given the religiosity of the popular sector, and its mobilisation through mass communication, fundamentalism was adopted as the only style capable of appealing to the religious sub-stratum in Muslim societies (p. 159). It turns out, then, that adaptationism was no more than an elitist style that failed to achieve modernisation (p. 290), while fundamentalism was an expression of the desire for authentic modernisation as opposed to westernisation (p. 332).

The four styles of action in Voll's narrative are too general to capture any specific process or to be seen as particularly unique and defining of Muslim societies. Voll's effort to provide substantive definitions of the four styles proceeds by describing events, actions and phenomena and then assigning them to the respective categories. In this way, a wide variety of developments and events from different periods and places are slotted into pre-conceived categories under common labels. This methodology allows for a classification of events, responses, actions and so on, but it compromises their historicity. Moreover, the labels used to classify Muslim responses and actions amount to characterisations that do not permit analysis or explanation of what is being characterised. By adding the qualifier 'Islamic,' the labels are rendered simplistic and reductive. They are so not just by virtue of parallels drawn between various historical periods – affirming their repetitive occurrence – but also because the underlying logic of the narrative is that 'things are Islamic because they are constituted by Islam.'[15] Thus, policies of modernisation are labelled Islamic adaptationism – a style which developed in the early period of the religion and was repeated in later periods. No clarification is offered of the parallelism or isomorphism between the different historical contexts in which this style was adopted. We cannot, therefore, know under what historical conditions adaptationism or any of the other styles is likely to be favoured by Muslims. Ultimately, Voll's enumerative exercise depends on a notion of Islam as an agent that imprints its essence on all particulars subsumed under it. As Aziz Al-

Azmeh puts it, in this mode of conceptualisation Islam arises as 'the self-explanatory, self sufficient and utterly *sui generis* nature and reality whose vicissitudes are internally propelled by 'the community' in its successive generations, responding to 'their vision' under different external circumstances. But these circumstances are sheer accidentals in connection with the solidity of trans-historicity.'[16]

It should be noted that while Voll finds it necessary to devise four categories to classify the actions of Muslims across the multitude of Muslim societies and across varied historical periods, his account is developed around the organising principle of revivalism. The idea that a revival mode of action is always close to the surface, about to erupt on the scene, is used to substantiate the claim that the revival spirit is a constant in Islamic history. This narrative of reform and revival is problematic in several respects. Although it makes reference to the variety of Muslim settings and different historical junctures, it elaborates an Islamic history totalised in terms of an episodic recurrence of movements of reform and renewal that embody some inherent modes of responding to general socio-political conditions. Further, these conditions are characterised in abstract terms as representing decay. Built into the revival perspective is the view that Muslims are bound to be unhappy with their societies as long as they judge them as having strayed from the ideal model of the early period. This ideal is an enduring and ubiquitous thought occupying the minds of Muslims everywhere, at all times and manifested in ideas of reform that have developed historically and that are seen to lend continuity to Islamic history.

Continuity is often conceptualised by Voll in terms of intellectual lineage. Voll speaks of conceptual continuity, affirming that contemporary discourse taps into the legacy of revival as a dominant and recurring theme.[17] As Eric Davis points out, this idea of continuity creates an intellectual bridge between the Islamic reform of the nineteenth century and the 'revival' of the late twentieth century. In his critique of the revival and continuity framework, Davis questions this historical link given the differences in social background, ontological views and modes of action of the participants in the various movements.[18] Indeed, the reception of ideas and discourses is contingent on context. Contemporary Islamist movements cannot be understood simply through the slogans they brandish. Indeed, the call for the application of the Shari'a, the claim that 'Islam is the solution' and the denunciation of society as *jahiliya* all enter into the constitution of particular systems of meaning that are themselves historically and materially inscribed.

Sociological and Political Economy Approaches

Sociological and political economy approaches offer alternatives to the understanding of contemporary Islamist movements and to the essentialist views of Islam found in the master-narrative accounts discussed above. Sociological analyses of the movements have, on the whole, developed within a conceptual apparatus inspired by Durkheimian views of social change. These analyses interpret the social reality of Islamist action in terms of the actors' backgrounds and socio-psychological states. Thus, studies by sociologists such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim examine the social characteristics of Islamist activists, sketching a profile of group membership in terms of age, education and family conditions. This profile is set against a background of rapid social transformation marked by industrialisation, urbanisation and so on. Within this perspective, Islamist activism is understood as the expression of frustrated aspirations. Concepts such as uprootedness, disenchantment and disintegration are deployed to account for the socio-psychological states that lie behind decisions to join Islamist groups and to become active in them.

Based on case studies of two Islamist groups active in Egypt in the 1970s, Ibrahim has developed a profile of militant activists. He indicates that the members of these groups were of rural background and recently urbanised. For the first time, they were experiencing life in large cities where foreign influence was most visible and where impersonal relations characterised social interaction. The resulting psychological effects of this experience were intertwined with the prevailing national crisis. The weakening of adjustment mechanisms for these migrants resulted in alienation. Membership in Islamic groups fulfilled a de-alienating function.[19]

Although the conceptual problems associated with this model are raised in subsequent chapters, it is worth recalling here some of

Charles Tilly's objections to Durkheimian influences on analyses of social transformation. The most important of these relate to the idea, expressed in the Durkheimian model, that the social differentiation involved in processes of industrialisation and urbanisation is accompanied by societal disintegration.[20] Tilly questions the theoretical and empirical validity of the argument that integrative mechanisms dissolve during moments of social change and that anomie, violence and disorder express the disintegrative effects of urbanisation. He contends that processes of social transformation bring new forms of struggle based on new types of organisation in the urban setting.[21] His emphasis is on the solidarity of the actors and the resources of mobilisation.[22] Conflict and protest are not the products of uprooting, dissolution of controls and individual disorganisation. Rather, they build on organisation and strategies designed to achieve shared goals. Action is conceived as being shaped by the opportunities and the constraints of the city. In light of this, the study of social movements should be concerned not with the mental states of the actors but with 'infrastructures of action': resources, socially produced norms of interaction, and frames of social organisation and community formation.

Propositions about frustrated aspirations among the youth and members of the middle classes are also found in political economy explanations of Islamist movements.[23] Using data from the social profiles of the members of Islamist groups, some analysts have put the emphasis on social conflict and class struggle. Eric Davis has argued that the Islamist movements express the contradictory socio-economic positions and the psychological states of their members.[24] Arguing from a view of ideology as embodying an expressive relation to class interests, Davis contends that the radical Islamist discourse has had a greater appeal to a particular social strata, namely the petite bourgeoisie. Although Davis explicitly rejects the notion of ideology as false consciousness, it seems to underlie his reading of the discourse of the militants. Thus the articulation of an Islamic ideology '... can be understood in terms of social strains as Islamic militants do seek refuge in Islam to soothe the alienation stemming from deprivation. The transference of their hostility on to scapegoats such as liberals, imperialists, communists and Jews ... is a classic syndrome associated with social strains.'[25] According to Davis, this

ideology is functional for the social groups that use it, offering them categories that can mediate their reality.[26] The particular appeal of Islamist ideologies to the petite bourgeoisie is also asserted by Michael Fischer in his analysis of the structural conditions of the revolution in Iran. In this instance, Islamic ideology expressed not only the petite bourgeoisie's discontent, resulting from frustrated aspirations for social mobility, but also its protest against the modern way of life.[27] However, it is not clear in what way 'Islam' contains a better reservoir of symbols of protest and in what way it offers 'reality-mediating' categories that are more suited to the interests of particular classes, especially the petite bourgeoisie.

What is important to note is that signs and symbols with an Islamic referent are functionalised and instrumentalised in a variety of competing and contiguous Islamist discourses. The position of these discourses in the ideological formation and their role in sustaining or transforming relations of domination cannot be determined a priori. Rather, discourses must be analysed in terms of their effects of meaning, and the subject positions they make available.

In a number of works, the analysis of Islamism as an expression of class interests develops against the backdrop of the idea of the crisis of the state in the Arab world. The crisis of the state is explained in terms of social, economic and national failures which are perceived by opponents as evidence of the bankruptcy of secular ideologies. Islamism thus develops as a counter-ideology appealing to disadvantaged social groups and allowing an expression of political and economic demands. This line of argument is elaborated by Nazih Ayubi in his book *Political Islam*. Simply put, modernising states have failed to deliver on their promises of prosperity. Financially exhausted, they are unable to meet social needs in areas of housing and employment. Comparing the Egyptian case with the Iranian experience, Ayubi argues that 'the same paradigm of frustrated expectations that explains the Iranian revolution would also explain, albeit on a smaller scale, the recruitment into militant organisations of political Islam.'[28]

Political economy analysis has, thus, placed an emphasis on certain economic and political conditions as representing the environment favouring the rise of Islamist groups. Lisa Anderson

situates the growth in support for Islamist groups in North Africa at the juncture of two developments: state retreat from welfare and redistributive policies and political liberalisation initiatives. Anderson highlights the fiscal crisis of the state, pointing to the rearrangement of the relations between rulers and ruled.[29] She sees the opening up of the political field as a strategy of the elite aimed not at wider popular participation but at a broadening of its base of power and a widening of the reach of state taxation.[30] However, an unintended consequence of this was that disenfranchised sectors became the constituents of Islamist organisations. In a context of state retreat, Islamists proved better and more efficient providers of social services.[31] The idiom of political Islam was used in a context that banished discussion of everyday problems and economic discontent.[32] For Anderson, the Islamists are by-products of the environment created by their governments.

The change in the state's redistributive policies and capacities is important for understanding other structural transformations in the economic and political spheres, but does not, on its own, account for the development and workings of Islamist movements. Political economy and statist approaches highlight the macro transformations in economy and society that are part of the wider setting in which Islamist movements operate. However, they ignore symbolic and cultural issues and local specificities. The focus on the macro level comes at the expense of the micro level where the everyday-life communities wrestle with the effects of macro changes, initiate new forms of action, and struggle for and contribute to a reconfiguring of the political scene. The abstraction of Islamism as the idiom of disenchanted youth and the blocked and disenfranchised middle classes fails to take account of the various modes of insertion of local actors into the national and international economies. In view of this, the link between macro and micro changes should be elucidated. For instance, macro changes in the labour market that accompanied economic liberalisation and privatisation policies are tied to the expansion of informal economies. These are in turn connected to the development of community autonomy and practices of self-help. The analysis of these practices reveals the emergence of new forms of activism that recall practices of solidarity from earlier periods.

The political economy approach to Islamist movements is often presented as an alternative to culturalist interpretations. It emphasises structural and institutional conditions over cultural factors. It is in opposing essentialism that it presents a critique of works that attribute primacy to culture, conceived as unchanging views, attitudes and norms. However, cultural practices and cultural production should not be cast aside in the interests of structural analysis. The analytical alternatives are not limited to a choice between structure and culture. The materiality of culture and the mobilisation of cultural capital in all domains of life, including the economic, are important determinants that interact with the political-economy determinants. That the idiom of 'Islam' came to express the grievances and claims of oppositional groups could not simply be a matter of displacement or convenience. Rather, structural transformations in the areas of cultural and educational production made it possible to transfer and instrumentalise the language of religion in the public space.[33] The links between changes in cultural production and economic transformation are demonstrated in both the formal and informal spheres. Peter Gran shows how, in eighteenth-century Egypt, change in cultural production was tied to early capitalist transformation.[34] In the late twentieth century, the commodification of religious books and the aesthetic appeal of artefacts with religious inscription must be understood in relation to the circulation, in mass markets, of cultural symbols recycled and reinvented as part of a wider process of the commodification of identity and the consumption of religious referents.[35] Much like the field of morality, the investment of the economic field with referents drawn from religion constitutes the other facet of this development. The instrumentalisation of these referents involves both dominant and dominated strata. In other words, cultural production enters into the constitution of power relations – a dynamic process shaping the positions of the various actors.

Historical, Historicising and Critical Anthropological Approaches

How, then, may we treat cultural traditions without falling into essentialism and how may we remain attuned to the specificity of the various socio-historical contexts while integrating the cultural sphere

as a constitutive dimension? Culturalist approaches are often criticised as ahistorical. Political economy perspectives, on the other hand, tend to neglect cultural processes and to focus their analysis at the level of macro processes, neglecting the details of everyday life that are determinant of action. In what follows, I draw on critical comparative-historical and anthropological perspectives on the social, cultural and political role of Islam in Muslim societies in order to elucidate the terms of a historicising approach to Islamist movements and politics.

The critical perspective has subjected the arguments of culturalist approaches to considerable scrutiny beginning with the construction of Islam as an analytical category. As Sami Zubaida has succinctly put it, the main problem with this construction is that it is based on an idea of Islam as a coherent sociological and political entity.[36] Zubaida argues that there are many Muslim societies whose historical variation cannot be unified in terms of common cultural items. Cultural themes referring to religious and historical traditions are assigned different meanings in the different socio-political contexts.[37] In Zubaida's view, '... cultural patterns are not fixed, but reproduced at every generation in relation to different situations and conjunctures.'[38] It follows that these cultural themes should not be treated as sociological or political constants. From this perspective, the contemporary Islamist movements, much like other political developments, are not the expression of continuity and of persistent themes of Islamic history. Rather, they are constituted as political forces shaped by the socio-economic and political contexts in which they operate.

If a homogeneous view of Islam, and the notion of 'Muslim society,' are found unacceptable from an analytical standpoint, how do we approach the diversity of Muslim societies, or, as Talal Asad puts it, how do we organise this diversity in terms of an adequate concept? Asad's insightful suggestion is to treat Islam as a discursive tradition.[39] The concept of a discursive tradition as articulated by Asad offers us the means of grasping the historicity of Islamic discourses. Key to this understanding is the idea that Muslim discourses and the actors who articulate them are historically situated. Meanings and action are determined in relation to material conditions such as institutional relations and the actors' positions of power. Just as actors are historically situated so too are discourses and frames of reference. The scripture should not be used to attribute homogeneity to Muslim societies since its interpretation is subject to contestation. The variation of interpretations and their insertion into particular contexts with varied meaning/power effects present us with a multitude of discourses that must be accounted for with reference to the power positions at stake.[40] It is the merit of Asad's conception of Islam as a discursive tradition that it underscores the dynamic processes of power and resistance involved in the production of practices and ideas authorised as Islamic. Claims to orthodoxy embody the power to authorise practices and ideas as Islamic. The processes and techniques through which this power is exercised, as well as the conditions which sustain it, are dimensions of the historicity of orthodoxy.[41]

Building on the concepts of discursive tradition and orthodoxy as a relation of power, it is possible to broaden our understanding of Islamist movements to incorporate both the strategies pursued by actors at the micro-social level, and the norms guiding action; the norms being articulated and defined in context and involving relations of power and struggles for hegemony. In other words, it is suggested here that the deployment of religious symbols and signs and the use of frames of reference derived from religious traditions belong to a power-laden field of action and practices. An important premise is that there are no inherent meanings to the text. Thus, to share or make use of the same frames of reference does not result in agreement on substantive meaning or positive content.[42] A clear case of the invocation of particular repertoires without agreement on content is the call for the application of the Shari'a.[43] In Egypt, advocates of the application of the Shari'a include both those who believe that it is not in place and those who assert that it is already applied. In substantive terms, there is no agreement on what the Shari'a and its application mean. For the Islamists, it has come to mean more than the implementation of personal status laws and the codification of the penal code to incorporate the *hudud* (religious ordinances). For them, the scope of the Shari'a covers the regulation of all aspects of life.[44] This view may be problematic in light of the fact that

throughout its historical development, the Shari'a has covered a limited scope of social life. Objectors may point to the fact that the Qur'an and the Tradition do not address many of the questions arising in contemporary society. However, the key issue here is the practice of assigning an Islamic referent to the various forms of ordering and arranging society. This may involve the production of competing and multiple 'Islam' positions on disparate dimensions of the social order (as, for example, the 'Islam' position on nuclear proliferation, artificial insemination and space exploration). What would be the criteria for deciding the 'true' Islam position on these matters? How could the *ijtihad* (personal effort in interpretation) carried out be referred back to the scripture or the body of tradition? The invocation of these referents represents a discursive strategy, perhaps a rhetorical device. The 'Islam' position on any of these questions is more likely to be constructed outside the referent.[45]

If there are no inherent meanings, how do we account for religiosity and norms anchored in religious traditions? The situatedness and context-bound effects of all systems of meanings apply to norms articulated in reference to Islamic traditions. Examples of the socially constructed norms placed by actors within religious frames support this contention. The ambiguity involved in judging conformity and transgression in relation to everyday-life experiences demonstrates the contested nature of orthodoxy. This ambiguity is illustrated in the following cases of conformity with and transgression against socially and religiously sanctioned norms in Egypt and Morocco.

The first case features an Egyptian woman involved in an extramarital affair. She consults the Lajnat al-Fatwa (committee of religious rulings in al-Azhar) on how to deal with a neighbour's threat to publicly expose the affair.[46] The threat is accompanied by an offer to keep silent in exchange for the woman's sexual favours. The woman refuses to succumb to the neighbour's blackmail, but fears public exposure. The *fatwa* of the Lajnat advises that she end the illicit affair and not succumb to threats of publicity. In another case of adultery, a married couple in Egypt consults a Shaykh in Sayyida Zaynab.[47] The wife has confessed to an adulterous affair with the landlord of the house in which the couple lives. The shaykh advises that the husband forgive his wife and accept her repentance and that the marriage

continue. The Lajnat's response in the first case, and the shaykh's advice in the second, both depart from the established norm of condemning adultery and seeking punishment following the transgressor's confession. Should the *fatwa* and the shaykh's opinion/advice be placed outside the realm of orthodoxy? In a case from Morocco, a Muslim woman helps an unmarried female friend get an abortion.[48] In undertaking this action, she viewed her support as private and not subject to societal rulings of morality. Instead, she considered herself to be answerable to God alone and the matter to be a strictly private affair.

In the adultery cases, we may note that the Lajnat and the shaykh drew on alternative traditions that discourage publicising transgressions and recommend clemency rather than punishment. In the case from Morocco, the exercise of individual morality superseded any notion of transcendental morality. Cases such as these abound and demonstrate the limited benefit of relying on scripture for apprehending societal norms even when they make explicit reference to religion, whether involving ordinary practising Muslims or individuals in positions of religious authority. The examples also confirm the idea that norms are constituted within alternative frames developed in reference to social situations and existing in public and semi-public spaces. Moreover, they may compete with dominant representations in the public sphere that are sustained by power relations. In the adultery cases, people sought to resolve their moral dilemma through the mediation of religion, by referral to the Lajnat and the shaykh. The resolution was framed in the language of religion. Yet, this did not amount simply to the following of the 'Rule.'[49] Nor was the resolution conditioned purely by religion. In the abortion case, the woman's mode of reasoning did not exclude the divine, but nor did it conform to religion as a set of rules. What is pertinent in these examples is that competing frames and situational logic shape the everyday-life experience of the interaction between religion and the social.

The cases serve as good entry points to the exploration of the relation between religiosity and Islamism. A number of studies assume implicitly that religiosity feeds into political engagement. Others present this link as a central hypothesis of inquiry. In her analysis of

the conditions favouring the rise of what she terms the 'new religious politics' (NRP), of which Islamism is one example, Nikki Keddie contends the following:

> ... significant NRP movements thus far tend to occur *only* where in *recent decades* (whatever the distant past) religions with a supernatural and theistic content are believed in, or strongly identified with, by a large proportion of the population. In addition, either or both of the following must also be true in recent times: a high percentage of the population identifies with the basic tenets of its religious tradition regarding its god or gods, its scriptural text, and so forth. The only single word for this phenomenon is a term, normally used differently but recognizable – religiosity. Or else, or in addition, at least two strong communities exist.[50]

It should be pointed out that, for Keddie, religio-politics are determined by global trends but more centrally by 'religiosity,' understood as the belief in the basic tenets of a given religious tradition regarding its god, scripture and so on. But if we consider actual practices of conformity and transgression, as exemplified by the cases presented above, it becomes clear that a global world of religiosity totalising the practices of the believers does not exist.[51] As such, it may not be helpful to treat religiosity as a predisposition to religio-politics as does Keddie.[52] Nonetheless, it remains imperative to explore the nature of the relation between religiosity on one hand, and, on the other, an engagement in political activity that is justified using frames of reference drawn from religious traditions. As will be shown below, Jean-Noël Ferrié's work on practices associated with religiosity is instructive in this regard.

In exploring the relation between the social and religion, Ferrié demonstrates how the passage from one domain to the other is mediated by rituals that only acquire a substantive content through the individual's self-conception. It should be stressed that this self-conception is a social production involving processes of constituting meaning and producing norms. In his study of solicitation prayers, Ferrié shows that the practice of calling on God with specific demands is driven by a particular mode of life.[53] What the supplicant asks of the divine is conditioned by the social setting. In other words, reference to God does not equal transhistoricity of the referent.[54] Further, invoking the divine is not the same as submitting to the rule.[55] In its

relation to the social dynamic, religion ceases to be religion and becomes one dimension of social relations and interaction. Thus, if religiosity is socially conditioned, we need to explore the links between particular expressions of religiosity and the advocacy of Islamist politics. Two questions can be posed here:[56] (i) in what way do the multiple inscriptions of religious reference in everyday life serve to facilitate the acquiescence to Islamism? (ii) to what extent is the reference to motifs and themes from religion undertaken with regard to activities without necessarily conforming to the religion as a set of rules?

The link between religiosity and Islamism is also explored with reference to the discursive practices of Islamist movements. There is no doubt that repertoires and frames of reference reconstructed from Islamic traditions are at work in the contemporary political scene in a number of Muslim societies. As argued by Beaudoin Dupret and Jean-Noël Ferrié, the invocation of these frames represents a strategy of action and a mode of insertion into the political scene.[57] This is true of groups belonging to different social strata and occupying varying positions in the social formation. The analysis of the strategies of action pursued by the Islamists in the cultural sphere in Egypt reveals the simultaneous process of redefining old norms while framing the present in terms of those norms.

The deployment of frames and repertoires from Islamic traditions in new forms is seen by some as a dilution of the Islamic referent.[58] A correlate of this is the assessment that Islamism has failed and that what we witness today is the advent of post-Islamism.[59] Thus, the hybridity of symbols in the public sphere, noted above, is constructed as a breakdown in the coherence of the Islamist alternative. Examples of this incoherence are the mixed attire of women (i.e. combining the veil with jeans or tights), social solidarity with a Western philanthropic flair, or engagement in community organisation that betrays patronage and clientelism rather than Islamic equality.[60] (This argument is subject to close scrutiny in chapter six). Based on the premise of dilution, the registry of various Islamist manifestations and forms of re-Islamisation attests to the ideological bankruptcy of Islamism. However, this approach ignores the hegemonic practices that are at the core of the production of orthodoxy. The deployment and

mobilisation of certain repertoires articulate relations to power. The structuring of the political field in terms of cultural invasion, authenticity and the licit and illicit is linked to power struggles, modes of domination and social control. This is demonstrated in my analysis of conservative Islamist discourse in chapter two and the Islamist strategies in the cultural sphere in chapter three.

Towards an Integrated Approach: A Comparative-Historical and Interpretative Understanding of Contemporary Islamist Movements

As pointed out by Edmund Burke III, the study of movements in their historical contexts emphasises their patterns and connections to structures of social action.[61] This kind of analysis looks at the institutions that organise social and political life, and the local economic and social structures that shape social movements. Of central importance is the linkage between changing social structures and patterns of action. Attention to context bridges the macro and micro levels of analysis to highlight the relationship between macro changes and micro everyday-life forms of social and political organisation. Infrastructures of action cannot be identified a priori – on the assumption that social actors necessarily react in particular ways to certain macro social and economic transformations. Rather, the formation of societal groupings during periods of change must be studied in relation to practices and strategies of action at the local level. Community organisation, cultural practices, spatial forms and other determinants of local-level action must be seen as part of a dynamic, ongoing interplay between the various levels of the social and the political.

In my examination of prevailing approaches to Islamist movements, I have noted the tendency to generalise about socio-historical conditions. These conditions, as found in the Middle East where most of the movements are active, are characterised in these approaches either by decline and decay or as expressing a national crisis in which the state fails to meet rising expectations. As a result, Islamist opposition emerges as the expression of social discontent. These features may be present in Islamist movements, but they do not equate to structures of action and change. It may be helpful to uphold the distinction between general socio-economic processes and specific historical conditions.[62] For the countries of the Middle East, the general socio-economic processes are those associated with the insertion of national economies/markets into the capitalist world economy. This took different forms during colonial and post-colonial times. In a number of Arab countries during the post-colonial period, the articulation of the national economies with the international economic system took the form of state capitalism sustained by corporatist structures and a degree of welfarism and populism. By the 1970s, the rentier economic activity that was predominant in the oil-producing states became a feature of most of the other Arab states. The structural changes accompanying the shift from state capitalism to rentier market economies, along with the socio-political processes that spanned both economic conjunctures (in particular, the crystallisation of the spheres of relative societal autonomy) constituted the background against which Islamist politics took shape. In what follows, I outline the contours of the development of these processes as they shaped the formation of Islamist movements in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia.[63]

In Egypt, a dynamic process of constituting multiple social and political forces has occurred. Interaction among these forces, and between them and the state, contributes to further shifts and transformations in the political field. The present configuration of Islamist politics points to the various processes that are at work in the rise of Islamism and that are transformative of state-society relations. There is no need to search for an original first cause or a triggering event behind Islamism. Instead, we should note the transformative processes that reorient the political field. The end of the ideological hegemony of the nationalist discourse in Egypt, in conjunction with the socio-political developments of the 1960s, represents one dimension of changing state-society relations. Another is the expansion of the arena of informal politics. This occurred through processes of community organisation and network formation in the semi-autonomous communities that emerged as distinctive urban spaces in Cairo. Key features of these communities were the presence of the informal economy and informal (unregulated) housing. Islamism, as an oppositional movement, linked up with these new

autonomous urban spaces. Islamist activism in urban neighbourhoods became intermeshed with the societal modes of organisation and with local power struggles. However, opposition to government is not the only form that Islamist politics has taken. Islamist discourses have been articulated within state structures and by dominant social forces tied to the rentier economic activities and non-productive capitalist economy of the 1980s and 90s. What has emerged in Egypt is a multitude of actors who articulate competing Islamist discourses and who structure the political field in particular terms through their interaction.

The analysis of the micro contexts of Islamist movements in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia indicates that structural transformations, beginning in the 1970s, have contributed to the development of particular forms of organisation at the local level. In Algeria, much like Egypt, semi-autonomous spheres emerged in the urban setting where the informal economy thrived. The social groupings constituted in the course of these transformations enjoyed a degree of autonomy and occupied oppositional positions. The articulation of this oppositional stance in Islamist terms was not inevitable. Local conditions, as determined by particular social relations and cultural practices, favoured the organisation of this opposition in Islamist terms. Societal disengagement has unfolded gradually at the local level in popular quarters and communities. Its nodal points are the urban neighbourhoods – their mosques, economic enterprises, cultural and sporting associations and the web of social relations traversing them. In this disengagement, the actors, whether entrepreneurs/contractors, small merchants or *trabendistes* (smugglers/traffickers), are socially constituted through the expansion of the informal economy. The engagement of these social forces in Islamist politics, and the strategies they pursue, are shaped by their positioning from the state and their standing in the social hierarchy. For the entrepreneurs, support of Islamist groups (FIS and Nahda for instance) reinforced their position of notability and enhanced their economic and political power. For small merchants and *trabendistes*, their pursuit of Islamist politics represented an affirmation of their autonomy or a protection of gains achieved. Local activism linked up with national struggles involving the various wings of the state, particularly the secularists and the Islamists. At the national level, Islamist politics became imbricated in the historical divisions involving military cliques and state clans. The interaction among the multitude of actors and factions was shaped by the juncture of economic privatisation that took the form of the liquidation of state assets and their transfer into private hands.

Islamist politics develops in relation to existing political fields, building on, extending and modifying patterns of interaction. The political field, as Zubaida points out, does not refer merely to the state and the elites, but includes other actors and societal spheres of action. Politics is not restricted to the circumscribed formal sphere.[64] Even in countries like Tunisia, centralised state structures do not exhaust the political field and are not the only loci of power. Complex processes involving state and non-state actors and different forms of interaction are also productive of the political. A widening of the conception of politics to recognise the relations of power structuring everyday communities allows us to see the terms of Islamist insertion into the political field. In Tunisia, the Islamist intervention in urban neighbourhoods came at moments of loosened state control. The Islamists' ability to mobilise popular support was constrained by the historical structures of state-society incorporation at the local level and by societal forces' instrumentalisation of mediating spaces and agents.

The development of Islamist movements was conditioned by a particular micro-setting and specific processes tied up with changing social conditions. At the same time, these movements linked up with social and cultural practices of everyday life. Practices of societal control covered a wide range of relations and interaction such as gender relations, solidarity, arbitration and sociability. We should react guardedly to views holding that Islamists are ubiquitous or that Islamism is homogeneous and homogenising. Indeed, alternative lifestyles and hybridity stand as evidence that a more nuanced understanding is needed.

Conclusion

In revisiting the literature dealing with contemporary Islamist movements, I have discussed the conceptual difficulties that may be found

in the dominant approaches. Essentialist perspectives are not only limited in terms of their explanatory power, but obscure the multiplicity and diversity characterising Islamist politics and Islamism. I suggest that this diversity can be understood in terms of power struggles, the patterns of insertion of micro-level actors into the political field, and everyday practices of social control. The invocation of repertoires and frames of reference developed in Islamic traditions involves a process of reworking these traditions, redefining norms and reconstructing signs and symbols. Hence, ideas of recurrence and revival, where Islamist movements are concerned, are mistaken and fail to capture the complexity and the dynamic nature of this process. There are no inherent meanings or persistent ideas continuing into the present and guaranteeing the unity of a totality called Islam. Notions of religion and religiosity as external to the setting and as determinant of action forsake comparative-historical and interpretative analysis for the comfort of a priori textual certainties.

Critical comparative-historical and anthropological approaches suggest the terms of analysis needed to break out of the mould of essentialism and the framework of revival and renewal. These approaches emphasise the historical situatedness of Islamist movements. This is not the same as viewing them as a moral reaction to a context of decay or a psychological response to conditions of economic strain. Islamist movements, like other social movements, develop within infrastructures of action and are geared toward particular political fields.