POSTMODERN OBSCURANTISM AND ‘THE MUSLIM QUESTION’

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‘…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**

Let me start by stating 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 things concerning political Islamism on which minds have been universally concentrated since September 11, 2001: the existence of movements that pursue relentlessly the quest for an unattainable absolute, regarded by them as a divinely-commanded Shangri-La. In other words, it refers to treating a particular inflection of political Islamism, which might be compared to the Anabaptists and other radical Protestant groups in their relation to mainstream Lutheranism, or the Russian Raskolniki in the

* It appeared to him as if, somewhere amidst this contentious incongruity, between chattering humanism and illiterate barbarity, should lie what might express the human or the humane.

** As for me, I wanted the French to be preoccupied with glory, … to lead them to truth with lies.
seventeenth century relative to Orthodoxy, as characteristic of not just political Islamism generally, but of Islam tout court. This is of course a standard mechanism of stereotyping, in which an ethnological fragment is seen 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 US person a cowboy or noble Indian. In order to understand this ‘Muslim Question’, then, it must be made to stand on its feet rather than on its head, as it does in the common imagination at present, and for this to be done the name ‘Islam’ must be taken apart, and what it refers to reconstituted.

But how can one conceivably disassociate the constituent elements of an entity which has for years now been reiterating its ubiquity, its exotic vastness, its singularity of pride and prejudice, its massive presence? A presence constantly displaying an elemental force, claiming an authentic atavism, enforcing this claim with a spectacular display of sheer energy and senseless violence – all the while asserting its inevitability as the post-colonial destiny (albeit also the ‘original’ condition) of an entire host of nations, of territories, almost of entire continents, termed Islamic?

Let me first of all dispose quickly of the easiest of relevant issues, that of the ‘war of civilizations’, the common cant expressed in Dr. Strangelove 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 much of his constituency: quite simply because civilizations 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 civilizations; civilizations 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 now no more than a bookish memory, no matter how much its spectral presence might inflame the political imagination of interested parties, partisan (revivalists of all hues: nationalist, populist, subalternist) and hostile alike, in ways some of which will become clear in the following paragraphs.

We have to curb our fascination with the imposing visibility of things Islamic and the political stakes associated with them. Fascination is none other than beholding an object as if it were a marvel, and the spectacle of marvels suspends the normal operation of human understanding. It is precisely this suspension of the understanding for which Paul Valéry was the spokesman: he relished the intoxicating Orient of the mind, this reverie of ‘least exact knowledge’, this ‘disorder of names and imaginable things’, in which neither logic nor chronology kept the elements from falling together into ‘their natural combinations’. But history, and recent memory, will tell us that the imposing visibility and
amplitude of political and social Islamism is a new phenomenon, which dates back a mere thirty or so years, however beguiling it may be to its detractors, its adherents, and its admirers alike. Yet the all-too-human proclivity to short-sightedness colludes with the political perspectives of the moment to project a fragmentary image of the present as the essence of eternity, and to postulate ‘Islam’ as the trans-historical protoplasm of the life of all Muslims.

A vast culture, and indeed a vast industry of misrecognition, has been put in place, all the more firmly since September 11, as much by advocates of Islamism as by western opinion, expert and inexpert, purporting to find, 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, a repository of ‘meaning’. This, it is maintained, informs all significant thoughts and actions of real or putative Muslims at all times and places (any contrary evidence being treated as an anomaly). Thus these super-Islamized beings are supposed to create Islamic economies unlike all economies; Islamic political systems with bizarre and irrational principles; Islamic forms of knowledge whose anachronism makes them either charming or repellant, according to taste; Islamic sensibilities of a pronounced distemper; Islamic dress and coiffure; Islamic law as clear, univocal, and barbarous as it is Levitically strict⁴ – 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: entirely sui generis, and in need of recognition on its own terms and in need, too, of empowerment. This Islam becomes impenetrable by anything but its own unreason, utterly exotic, thoroughly exceptional, fully outside, frightfully different – or, alternatively, it becomes an affective subject with prodigious internal coherence. In this construction, the religion of Islam becomes something that at once fully describes and adequately explains peoples, histories and countries.

In everyday discourse such notions take the form of the proposition that, in some way, Muslims have in the past three decades been returning to the things that constitute them essentially; that they are reverting to type, rejoining their transhistorical nature; and that fundamentalist Islam is a strident and bloody but adequate expression of this inherent nature. Impenetrable by the normal equipment of the human and social sciences, the phenomena Islamica – ‘the Muslim Question’ since September 11 – thus come to acquire a more than radical exoticism (and I am here using the term ‘exoticism’ in a fairly rigorous etymological sense). This means that to study them we are supposed to make a special effort of distanciation and estrangement, in the name of achieving a sympathetic understanding: a hermeneutical procedure whereby the observer is spiritually translocated and in a sense trans-substantiated into the recesses of this Muslim other; or whereby the two meet at a conversational site (a ‘dialogue of civilizations’), that ethereal in-between so beloved by postmodern anthropologists, and by perplexed politicians and strategists in Non-Governmental Organizations, and
increasingly by office-bearers of many states and international organizations, including the United Nations. This largely accounts for the recent tendency towards a radical relativism regarding the study of matters Islamic, under the banner of respect for ‘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, after all the fertile debates on orientalism in the past two decades, and after history and professional ethnography had seriously – albeit unevenly – contested its conceptual equipment. We need to remember that whereas ethnography carries no necessary classificatory agendas or loyalties, ethnology is above all 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.

The late capitalist, postmodern emphasis on self-referentiality and self-representation, the drift towards conceiving difference as incommensurability, the cognitive nihilism associated with postmodernism, the dissolution of objects of ethnographic study into ‘voices’ – all this, to my mind, leads to rejecting the tools of the historical and social sciences implicitly, even if 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 recognition, and particularly recognition of the collective self. The result is that what mediates being and representation is life as Will, and that social knowledge, represented as ‘culture’, becomes but a moment of Being itself. All this is undertaken in the name of giving voice to marginalized subjects and restoring their histories. Such a sociology of meaning, such valorization of ‘the voice’, degenerates in practice into substituting associative prolixity, self-referentiality, and political posturing for scientific practice. And such advocacy of singularity invariably results in essentializing identity through declaring the irreducibility of difference, and consequently in being limited to uttering inassailable clichés (the recent vogue 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 – however much this is denied. 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 inapplicable to Muslim peoples as either descriptive or explanatory categories.

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

This reading is, of course, summed up in a number of basic propositions ceaselessly repeated and formulaically reiterated: that the history of Muslims is constituted essentially by religion; that the past two centuries are a story of usurpation and denaturing by ‘westernizing elites’, unrepresentative of ‘civil society’; that the future must be a restoration, with minor adjustments, of a prelapsarian condition of cultural innocence which modernity has not altered, but only held, somewhat ravaged, in abeyance.

But if the ‘Muslim Question’, if phenomena termed Islamic, or laying claim to this or that interpretation of Islamism, are really to be understood, the first step must be critically to decompose the notion of Islam, and to look 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 to perform its phantasmatic role of calling things into being simply by naming them. Once this decomposition has been performed, however, once the reality of history has been disengaged from wanton fancy, we may be able properly to understand what is meant by Islam and by the appeal to this name.

It is useful to begin by considering the timing of the extraordinary visibility of what today appears as the ‘Muslim Question’. The conjunctural element is crucially important, and the trope of a ‘return’ to a pristine past cannot be understood without it. I will confine my comments largely to the Arab World. There, Muslim political 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 movements were nurtured and provided with extraordinary financial largesse, mainly 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 these means they built cultural, educational, and organizational structures, international as well as local, animated by hostility to Arab nationalism and a conception of Muslim extra-territorialism that corresponded to conditions in countries with sub-national, communal and pre-civic political structures such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This took place, initially, in the context of an international climate dominated by the Truman Doctrine. The policy of containing Communism had a spectacular career, and in the Arab World developed into a policy of countering secular Arab nationalist, socialist and arguably pro-Soviet regimes. Anyone who reads 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 see that the main cultural and ideological theme of the Cold War in the Arab World (and also in Indonesia and Malaysia) was the encouragement of social conservatism and 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, initiating the danse macabre of the months following September 11.

Yet these movements had little initial success, especially in the Arab World (though more in South East Asia), 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 was the continuing trend towards minimizing state action in the economy and society, under the impact of new international structural conditions, characterized by deregulation and the ascendancy of finance and 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 defined themselves as Muslim. And attendant upon these trends was the growing incidence of cult phenomena, with bizarre cosmic beliefs. At the same time, the unremitting structural disorientation and various forms of deracination caused by globalization in some Muslim areas led to a virulent xenophobia as an antidote to anomie and national frustration, and produced nihilistic political phenomena such as the so-called ‘Arab Afghans’ who, with the support of certain Islamist political forces, pursued an apocalyptic ‘war of civilizations’, waged against a spectral enemy. And please note here that although I am 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 from very specific circumstances. Networks that go determinedly about waging a war of civilizations are marked by meta-political rather than 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 global conditions, including ‘structural adjustment’, have been exacting a very heavy social price, and a breakdown of both the will and the capacity to carry out policies of development. States have been increasingly reduced to pure administration and merely policing the effects of global deregulation. With economic deregulation came also social and cultural deregulation, exemplified by the communalist, anti-state paternalism adopted by 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 in the South also led 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 the Revisionist Zionism so powerful in Israel today – followed the rhythm of modern world history. They emerged at the same time as Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s under al-Banna, Golwalkar and Jabotinsky, and revived at the time of the retreat of modernism and the spurning and denigration of the Enlightenment in the 1970s and 1980s, and the accompanying revival in the west of conservative ideologies, religious and secular. Political Islam and the RSS both had benign as well as malignant forms, xenophilic as well as xenophobic; both were premised on a culturalist differentialism which has recently become hegemonic, and both speak of that ‘cultural specificity’ which, towards the end of the twentieth century, came to perform the same conceptual functions as ‘race’ had performed earlier. Racial, national and religious ‘profiling’, as practised since September 11, most hysterically in the United States, would be unthinkable without this differentialism.

So much for the singular rhythm of political Islam. But let me add this, before I widen my purview: the Islam of militant Islamism repudiates the lived Islam of its milieu, in its attempt to ‘return’ to the utopian Islam presumed to have been out there before the Fall, and imagined to be still seething below the surface 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 (along with an aggressive posture of subalternity such movements become, somehow, adorably postmodern). These moulds and motifs use vitalist and fiercely social-Darwinist conceptions 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 and 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 started his highly distinguished medical career in New York, where he developed highly elaborate social-eugenic theories that were crowned with a Nobel Prize, and then went on to become the cultural and scientific oracle of 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, broad, or sophisticated as those of German thinkers such as Nordau, Klages, Nietzsche and Jünger. But the point is that this notion of degeneration and decadence, sometimes hankering after a precapitalist arcadia, has generic ideological and conceptual affinities with the Islamist critique of contemporary society: both are 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*, un-Islamity pure and simple, or ‘Occidentosis’ or ‘Westtoxification’, according to the English translators of the Iranian Magus of authenticity, Jalal Al-i Ahmad.

I might add that all the European figures I have 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 optimistic collective amnesia organized on the part of liberal regimes after the Second World War. The postmodernist adulation of ‘difference’ is not often enough aware of its own ideological and conceptual provenance.

And to round out the picture I must also add that between Islamists and representatives of European political irrationalism there is also a far more than subliminally elective affinity, regarding the mystique of death and sacrifice as the morbid edges of life, and as antidotes to a vision of decay; and a glorification of blood and fire and steel as direct forms of political action. One might mention here by way of example the similarities between Ernst Jünger’s memoir of the First World War, and the notion of *jihad* according to radical Muslims. 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 Cathexism; more generally the metaphysical rather than immediately functional status given to the insurrectionary act of terror, the cult of self-sacrifice including death, regardless of by whose hand it might come; the ‘absolute present’ (Karl Mannheim’s term) which sees insurrection as but an immediately present instance of an indistinct eternity. I am not suggesting that Mr. Bin Laden may have heard of Mikhailovsky or Morozov or have read Carl Schmitt, but rather that all of these
and many others were possessed by an apocalyptic language of ultimate war and death as the ultimate affirmation of life, and that all of them belong to a modern world in which the distinctiveness of political violence, unlike the Middle Ages, is correlated with the emergence of a notion of ‘the people’ who might be made to rise up by acts of exemplary violence, in order to precipitate a predetermined outcome. They all belong equally to a modern world, in which it was possible to think of war in vitalist terms as the ultimate manifestation of collective energy, an antidote to decadence and degeneration, and to believe that the world will again rise from the ashes of the Götzendämmerung they intend to precipitate. All this is believed and thought with an amor fati, in a spirit of Dionysian nihilism, the 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 that I believe energized the perpetrators of the acts of September 11 (who also clearly possessed a keen sense of the postmodern mediatic aesthetic of the Absolute Event in real time).

It is however crucial to resist the habit of looking at these acts as being entirely inspired by the promise of a tumescent Paradise, for what we have here 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 re-socialization. It may be recalled that Goebbels declared that war was the most elementary form of love for life, an attitude which to my mind also provides the fundamental affective element in Carl Schmitt’s theory of the state. Bin Laden’s warning to what he termed Jews and Crusaders that he and his people loved death more than their enemies loved life, belongs to the same trope of militaristic nihilism, and we may try to render this apparently nonsensical fact intelligible in terms of anthropological theories of sacrifice and the feast.

Such analogies as I am drawing may appear to some people 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 that were not available before the era of modernity; or, to put it better, both emerge 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 vitalist romantics everywhere, for all atavism harbours a primitivist aesthetic which appeals to a concrete image of a prelapsarian, arcadian nature that must be restored. This was evident in the Balkans recently, among other places. The penultimate televi- sual appearance of Mr. Bin Laden took place before a cave, recalling the Cave of Harra, where Muhammad first received his divine inspiration. All this is not too dissimilar to certain colourful fringe phenomena in the Vienna of Hitler’s youth, such as 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 is particularly reminiscent of the ‘folkishness’ of Georg Schönerer. Likewise Bin Laden and his associates adopted a medievalizing coiffure and manners of dress and holy relics, as well as ways of private behaviour and affected turns of phrase not very unlike the lurid and exhibitionistic culture of bad taste of 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 also combined a political mysticism of the kind adopted by the secular Zionist Right with a mild form of the doctrine of divine election, such as that propounded by Jewish fundamentalism.

It is important to note that the rhetoric of authenticity and the trope of return in religio-political revivalism are not the unmediated voice of the natural history of a culture or of a race, but a rather recherché self-representation of a particular social force seeking 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, not an indicative category; it presents, as described by Adorno in another context, a für-Andere masquerading as an an-sich. This is true of the wholesale invention of vestimentary and intellectual traditions by Islamist movements, and the simultaneous assertion that these correspond to social practice; it is also true of the deification of the Buddha in the atheistic religion of Buddhism, and of 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 a more or less Disneyfied self-parody. One may most appropriately be reminded here of a great anthropologist, little read today, 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’. In this way tangible tokens or icons of authenticity are produced, such as a particular manner of dress or of punishment, and thus also are ‘virtual’ collective memories exhumed from old books and made into elements of populist rhetoric, by asserting them to be actual memories. Through these virtual memories a historical romance is constructed which is then put forward as a utopian social programme, whose purpose is to construct a finalist and definitive Shangri-La where everyone and everything will be authentic, be this called an Islamic state, a thousand-year Reich, life in the Ramrajya according to the Sanskritik dharma, or indeed the arrival of the Messianic age once the perfect red heifer has been genetically engineered by Jewish Ayatollahs in the occupied territories: the perfect red heifer whose presence presages the coming of the millennium, and as a consequences renders legitimate, indeed imperative, the construction of a Jewish temple on the site of the al-Aqsa mosque. Under such conditions, life most often degenerates...
into performance, the performance of a socially and politically disembodied psychodrama, which may 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 actual past and its iconographic monumentalization, or bloody memorialization.

I might add that although 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 a perpetual psychodramatic performance, determined by the tropes of extraterritoriality and exile made possible by the social and physical topographies of provincial parts of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, from where many members of al-Qaeda came, and Afghanistan, to which they moved; or indeed by the self-alienation that can be experienced in a country like the United States, or by the multicultural placelessness experienced by people living in the ethnic cantons of various European countries, 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.

But not, of course, the suicide bombers active in Palestine in past months. There we witness acts within a very specific political situation, with discernible and specific antagonists, acts perpetrated in a situation of almost absolute national disempowerment. The embryonic structures of Palestinian self determination were being systematically destroyed by acts that go radically counter to all norms except those of a primitive tribalism – the confiscation of land, the destruction of civil service records, of educational and cultural institutions (much as in Sarajevo), of security forces, of medical and health infrastructures, of water and power resources, of houses and entire residential quarters, of businesses and banks; and the physical liquidation of children and the bulk of political cadres. All this according to a savage political doctrine, echoing some of those we have discussed earlier, and eloquently expressed 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 ‘better a live Judeo-Nazi than a dead saint’.17

In the same interview Sharon stated: ‘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 psychopathological condition underlying the need to be feared rather than admired, this unfinished ‘dirty work of Zionism’ takes on the aspect of a sub-political, biological, vitalist predation (comparable to the notion of Lebensraum). The unspeakably savage (the word is used deliberately, to convey the sub-political and sub-civil character of this political genocide) reduction of politics to war, and of contestation to annihilation, provokes responses in kind, themselves equally captive to the impotence of
language and 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 have been rendered bereft of politics and transformed into Darwinist predation, a vitalist counterpoint appears eminently purposive. This is particularly reinforced by the ambience of complicity and indifference surrounding the Israeli invasion: the robotic surrealism of US statements, betokening complicit malevolence and diplomatic cover, the aimless and ineffectual pirouetting of Arab countries, and the hesitations of the European Union, politically and morally adrift.

In these circumstances martyrdom becomes not an apocalyptic cult, as with al-Qaeda, but a nationalist act of resistance, 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 (and has become blended with) a more decidedly, and sometimes very distinctive, Palestinian nationalism, not only on the part of suicide bombers belonging to the secular al-Aqsa Brigades (al-Aqsa mosque being a national symbol), but also of bombers belonging to Hamas. This pattern is not too dissimilar to that of the suicide bombers in South Lebanon in the 1990s who belonged to the Communist Party and the Syrian Nationalist Party, and whose actions had more consequential effects.

Having identified and highlighted 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 fundamentalism, beyond the specific ways in which the tissue of each of its different times and places is given by its various 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 in the repertoire of universally available political ideas, no matter how much the rhetoric of ‘identity’ and of authenticity may deny this; they are crafted out of a social material which requires for its understanding not an ethnology of pre-colonial Arcadia but a sociology of structural marginality and of elite competition, a social psychology of middle- and upper-class youthful radicals in situations of normative schizophrenia and structural closure, and last but not least, a sociology of subcultures and cults. In short the understanding of Islamic political phenomena requires the normal equipment of the social and human sciences, not their denial.18 And let us not forget a new feature that has supervened in the international legal order since the collapse of the Socialist Bloc and forms an extremely important part of this context: the fact that the indeterminate fluidity typical of extra-legal and extra-territorial regimes has given rise to a novel legal norm, the ‘power of exception’,19 celebrated in the US and its affiliated states and international organizations as a conjunction of virtue and limitless muscularity, and overdetermined by hegemonic military capacity – rendering previous modes of legality, including notions
of national sovereignty, virtually irrelevant. The best examples of this are the embargo against Iraq, and Israeli state-terroristic deprivations in the Occupied Territories. In such a situation of normative legal fluidity it is hardly surprising that lawlessness is seen as legitimate: a lawlessness both in international relations and in economies structurally beset by illegal transactions. This requires precise analysis and cannot be understood through moral condemnation.

And contemporary Muslim revivalism is not generically specific. Construing the desired utopia 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 too. In the Christian religious tradition it is called ‘typology’: putative origins and the present are understood as ‘type’ and re-enactment, as beginning and manifestation, original and figure, and Reformation as simple 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) found in every monotheistic religion. That it also occurs in Islam is entirely unremarkable, and is a matter to be investigated in the context, not of an unreconstructed ethnology of 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.

It may perhaps surprise some readers to be told that Islamism is an offspring of modernity rather than of tradition. But we need to remind ourselves that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards the Arab world, like all parts of the globe, was variously and unevenly incorporated 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. These ideas were then produced and reproduced locally, becoming rooted in the cultural, legal and educational apparatus of Bonapartist states – that is, states that made it their business to become hegemonic in the cultural and legal spheres. These states were spread throughout the world from the early nineteenth century onwards: by Napoleon himself in Spain, Italy, and Poland; and by others following Napoleon’s example, such as the states created in Latin America by Simon Bolívar and his imitators; and 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 – Comte himself was quite aware of this, and his delight was evident in the open letter to Reshid Pasha that he included at the beginning of the first volume of his Système de politique positive. We could even 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 seventeenth century – including the absorption of irrationalist ideological motifs and concepts.

Among the new cultural forms were the journalistic article, the pamphlet, and evolving forms of the novel, all of which utilized a new form of Arabic, generated in the mid-nineteenth century, which incorporated some syntactic developments, and substantial lexical and stylistic ones. Among the ideas one might cite those of the nation, the economy – which was in any case born as a determinate conceptual field only in the eighteenth century – and of society itself, which in the early nineteenth century superseded the notion of estates: the ‘body-social’ as an assembly of individuals, that we get most particularly from English philosophy, and the related idea of an abstract assembly of rights that we find in natural right theories. Likewise ideas of progress, of popular will, no less than romantic notions of the organic continuity of history and the homogeneity of society, and many others.

All of these ideas belong to the universal regime of modernity, which in one of its aspects constituted an exclusive repertoire of the conceptual apparatus by means of which peoples world-wide thought and wrote on public affairs – what an influential book on nationalism calls ‘modules’. None of them has a precedent in Muslim traditions. And what I wish to insist upon is that what constitutes the specificity of Islamist groups – their appeal to a particular historical experience and its symbols, construed as a foundational myth – is not some explosion of ethnological force long repressed, but a very recherché primitivism, deliberately crafted out of these universal modules of modern ideologies; and that 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, however – feelings of ‘identity’ – are not immediately translatable into politics. They must first be sensualized in emblematic or iconographic forms, which act as ‘nodes’ of ideological interpellation and can then be translated into ideological propositions. 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. The education system marginalized the public role of the Muslim priestly establishment (and I am not here speaking of the peculiar conditions of Saudi Arabia), and was analogous in its purpose and some of its effects to the role played by the lycée system in France and the Gymnasium system in Germany. A new class of intellectuals arose, analogous to that which some German scholars, with reference to their own history, refer to (with some dread) as the Bildungsbürgertum – or rather, in the case of the Arab world, Bildungskleinbürgertum – the stratum of intellectuals fulfilling the historic role of a bourgeoisie, so important in refashioning culture and society alike. It is this same intelligentsia that sustained secular ideologies, in concert with the state. But it was 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, it was seculariza-
tion that led to the defining of religion separately from the social realities in which it had previously been embedded, and giving it the internal homogeneity, coherence and consistency of a total social and political programme.23

None of the things I have highlighted is particularly mysterious. The socio-economic conditions, the birth of Islamism in 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 other social groups – 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 post-modern mood, can help us clarify the ‘Muslim Question’. 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 about orientalism, nor to dwell in the fetid alleyways of collective European memories of historical antagonisms, clearly but not always articulately evident in Bosnia, Iraq, and Palestine in the last few years. Nor do I wish to mention, except 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 political interests, including those 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 attribution of exceptionalism to Muslim peoples, which places them outside historical and sociological understanding and relegates them to ethno-logical folklore; in short, to consider why it is that I – like many others – have to waste so much of everyone’s time on matters that ought to be taken for granted.

To a considerable extent this has to do with the social and political organization of knowledge about Islam in western countries, the production and circulation of this knowledge, its criteria of public validation, and the status of rigorous research as distinct from what is publicly claimed as expertise. It is manifestly the case that expert knowledge on these matters – institutionally known as orientalism and area studies – 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 a seraphic blessing). This largely explains not only the manifest conceptual backwardness of this field, and its vulnerability to common cant, but also 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 too: for example, the fact that
the substantial though scattered advances in the study of Muslim societies in the past two decades have failed to get into general circulation; that the excellent products of contemporary research published in Arabic are not read, for lack of linguistic competence on the part of western experts as much as because of their contempt for Arabic scholarship; and above all that public primacy is generally given to forms of expression and of discourse that are more essentially ideological, and have wider appeal, than orientalist or area expertise. (This is not new, of course. Perhaps most glaringly, the public authority on matters Islamic in nineteenth century Germany, for instance, was no other than Otto von Ranke. 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 orientalist scholarship or 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 out of dishonesty, but rather because of conceptual vulnerability and disorientation, rendered all the more acute by the constraints of the televisual media. This general situation applies also to books in general public circulation which enjoy a public credibility far exceeding that of more careful research. I would cite as an example here the work of the late Ernest Gellner, which theorizes 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 and concluded that the bird’s-eye view from these panoptical heights revealed an apparition, indeed an epiphany, of Islam, in its full integrality as history, society and culture – a view which at once exemplifies it and sums it up. In this totalizing vision the general and the particular correspond absolutely, in the same way that concrete and abstract classifiers are mutually convertible in myth. Thus Islam is fully representative of Muslims, and can indeed be substituted for them.

In short, public discourse on matters Islamic at present is characterized by what we might call neo-Renanism – referring 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 – i.e. a discourse based on taxonomic antitheses. We thus have a political neo-Renanism which speaks, among other things, of the essential inappropriateness of democracy for countries characterized as Muslim because democracy goes against the grain of Muslims as Muslims (alternatively we have the proposition propounded in many circles that democracy for such countries would be best achieved if they were to be ruled by groups which most correspond to the authentic nature of these societies, which is Islam). We also have a neo-Renanist pseudo-sociology, which takes the populist declamations of authenticity as accurate descriptions of social reality and which denies the secular realities of Arab life and holds that Arabs are congeni-
tally incapable of secular life, and calls for a ‘revival’ through a ‘return’ to the past. This discourse has as its leitmotif a culturalist ethnology which supposes ‘cultural meaning’, including the trope of return, to be determinant both of action and 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 were 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, such as skin colour, a certain mode of dress, or certain propositions concerning the organization of gender relations, and then proceeding to give these the status of iconic markers or stigmata of otherness – or of inwardness – as nodes of ideological interpellation, as I indicated earlier. These are finally served up as totalizing criteria of ethnological classification, constituting Muslims by analogy with ethnotypes, or what older American anthropology referred to as ‘patterns of culture’. This is like regarding Lederhosen and skinheads as the iconic markers of Germanity, or cowboys and mobsters as markers of the North American identity, corresponding to the inner nature and constituting the cultural genetic capital of these societies, and then proceeding to construct an ethnic type based on the associations of these images.

Clearly, this procedure has all the characteristics of polemical rather than scientific discourse, notwithstanding copious footnotes. It would be highly instructive to compare the 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 forms of propaganda based on antagonism. One might well compare, for example, in terms of structure, imagery, and argumentation, Muslim history conceived in this fashion with left-wing histories of the Society of Jesus written in nineteenth-century France, in which the record of Jesuit history was read as a symptomatology of the Jesuit spirit, and in which links between events were seen as having mythical rather than causal significance. All polemical discourse, like religious discourse, is typological: a history of beginnings and re-enactments, in which change is illusory and where every particular is a mere illustration of the dark general, and in which the primacy of mythical signification is undisputed.

Yet in the recent past all this has been expressed in terms of a disarming condition of innocence, often represented as a postmodern concern for diversity, individuality, the empowerment of the marginal, and a whole host of other propositions on which there is a convergence between xenophobes and liberals, third world communalists and fundamentalists, all of whom adopt the rhetoric of diversity, of difference, of particularity – a rhetoric which conflates the banal realities of diversity and particularity with analytic categories of culturist 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 also by various other native informants, some of them professional, who play to an eager gallery – although this is not often noticed by anthropologists, journalists, and other experts.
This postmodernist delight in the premodernity of others is all the rage; what really underlies it is a vigorous and triumphant postmodernism, premised 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 – which is, to repeat, a standard component of European irrationalism and political romanticism.

It is therefore particularly disturbing to me that Gellner – and I refer to him specifically because he captured with particular eloquence and limpidity, and in an increasingly firm demotic mood, things that others prefer to state more guardedly, and carried them with authority, and considerable ideological fervour, beyond the field of area studies into general circulation – it disturbs me particularly that Gellner, the anti-relativist par excellence, should state that ‘in Islam, it is all different’ (which once again reminds me of an anti-Jesuit polemic of 1880, by a forgotten novelist, Jules Durantin, who wrote: ‘[e]verything progresses, except the Company of Jesus’). 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 restate 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, his notorious ‘pendulum-swing’ theory of Islam postulates two forms of religiosity, the enthusiastic-rural and the puritanical-urban, in a primordial conflict and cyclical alternation which fundamentally constitutes Muslim history – so fundamentally, indeed, that the present condition of the Muslims can be conceived in no other terms, and can have no other outcome than the triumph of urban puritanism. Correlative with this religious characterization of a history reduced to religious culture is the proposition that for Muslims modernism is inconceivable in any terms but those of the puritanical version of Muslim doctrine and its corollaries.

Gellner’s Moroccan village is an ethnological fragment construed in terms of an ethnological theory which he read into the work of, first, David Hume and, second, of Ibn Khaldún (whom he had to read in the poor standard English translation), who in turn based his own theories on a particular reading of the history of North African Muslim dynasties; in fact, Ibn Khaldún is less a guide to the interpretation of North African history than himself a Maghribi phenomenon, in need of historical interpretation. Yet this theoretical genealogy 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 deterministic German social geography of Ratzel, and which is best exemplified in the work of Emile-Félix Gautier and Robert Montagne – the latter is much praised by Gellner overall. And if it were assumed – and this would be a very dubious assumption – that this model was applicable to certain moments of North African
history, the fact remains that it is still utterly foreign to Ottoman history. Gellner seems simply to regard the 500 years of Ottoman statehood over central Muslim lands as having been anomalous and uncharacteristic: he never said so explicitly, but it is inherent in the logic of excision and abridgment he deployed in the various versions and editions 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 norms; a conceptual arbitrariness which allows indiscipline to flourish under the title of exceptionalism. There is an 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 public unaccountability that underlies an article published by Gellner in *The New Republic* which opens with the following statement: ‘[m]uslims 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, not necessarily with his usual irony, about Afro-Americans, for instance, or Jews. But what is of particular salience in this statement is that it was simply a preface to reducing to a unity, in Islamic exceptionalism, 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 goes with a will to a certain form of combat which is bound by no rules. Societies, countries, territories, histories – all are reduced to one 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.

This will to violence (which since September 11 is no longer merely symbolic): this will to conceptual indiscipline, this will to reduce complexity to simplicity, wantonly to ignore reality, to contradict both history and ethnography — what this will leads to in scholarship is precisely what I started out with: the over-islamization of Muslims, endowing them with a superhuman capacity for perpetual piety, reducing their history and their present life to a drama about the recovery of religious motifs, and hence the denial of their actual history and their actual present. It would be wrong to suppose that Gellner’s theories always amount to mere vulgar Islamophobia, or reflect some immediately political position. Yet these theories, such as his last theory about the impossibility of secularization in Muslim lands (the very secularization that is so evident in the fundamental thrust of modern Arab history), are based on an imperious will to deny: a will, at a time in global history when ‘outsiders’ are being barbarized — treated as barbarians, barbarically — to deny their cultural capacity, their capacity for economic, social, political, and cognitive development, and to assert that they are predisposed to violence, factionalism, overpopulation, and even famine.
NOTES

Parts of this paper were delivered in a variety of forms over recent years as lectures in a variety of fora, and have benefited 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).

1 For the term ‘postmodern obscurantism’ I am indebted to a conversation in Beirut with Aijaz Ahmad, to whom this essay is dedicated.


4 We also have now an ‘Islamic archaeology’: Timothy Insoll (The Archaeology of Islam, Oxford: Blackwell, 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.


6 Various facets of the relation between Islamism and universal irrationalism in politics are explored in Al-Azmeh, Islams and Modernities, passim. Let me say parenthetically that it is too early to predict how the postmodern reclamation 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 disorientation, 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, nor anything comparable to Lyotard’s playful characterization of the Second Gulf War as an unreal, virtual happening – although, I must say, feminist descriptions of the events as an act of supreme phallicism have indeed been voiced (see Sascha Lehnarzt, ‘Auch Muslime müssen müssen’, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 23 September 2001; and Christopher Norris, Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War, Amherst: University of
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.


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 to Paradise], Beirut: Dar an-Nahar, 2001.


Bildungs(klein)bürgertum refers to the (petty) bourgeoisie by education, that is to say, by virtue of access to education, specifically Gymnasium and university education, the bedrock of the German bureaucracy and intelligentsia.


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.


5 December 1983, p. 22.

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