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ISLAM, DEMOCRACY & THE USA: THE AUDACITY OF A COMMON GROUND?



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CULTURES IN DIALOGUE



The Crisis of (Post) Modernity The De-Sacralisation of the Social, the Death of Democracy, and the Reclamation of Islamic Tradition

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IN early 2007, then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, described the 'War on Terror' as a continuation of "the age-old battle between progress and reaction, between those who embrace the modern world and those who reject its existence... In the era of globalisation, the outcome of this clash between extremism and progress will determine our future... We can no more opt out of this struggle than we can opt out of the climate changing around us... This is, ultimately, a battle about modernity... That is what this battle is about, within Islam and outside of it; it is a battle of values and progress; and therefore it is one we must win."¹

From this perspective, Islamist extremism – exemplified in al-Qaeda's brand of violent puritanism – represents a rejection of modernity and thus, opposition to the Western model of civilisation based on technological progress, liberal democracy and scientific reason. Yet this understanding of the 'War on Terror' as a defence of modernity against reactionary extremists who would fundamentally challenge its legitimate achievements is deeply problematic, raising probing questions about our contemporary predicament as a global civilisation. Is Islamist extremism really a virulent strain of violent anti-modernism? Is a violent defence of modernity the right answer? And, while we may easily reject the legitimacy of anti-modernism, should we accept the superiority and desirability of modernity as a given?

Modernity radically transformed the world of the Middle Ages, a feudal society built upon the stilts of a Christian worldview.

ORIGINS OF MODERNITY

Modernity radically transformed the world of the Middle Ages, a feudal society built upon the stilts of a Christian worldview. The birth of agrarian capitalism, and later joined by industrial capitalism in England in the eighteenth century, coincided with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, precipitating a drastic re-structuring of social relations. Industrial capitalism generated a new dynamic for accumulation of wealth by technological innovation, requiring increasing inputs of natural resources and raw materials, introducing divisions of labour centred on machines, and markets for the sale of new goods and commodities. This increasingly drove pressures to rationalise humanity's conquest of nature through perpetual scientific progress to underpin an unlimited wealth generation.²

In England, the democratisation of Parliament was a key lever by which increasingly powerful capitalist land-owners undermined the hold of both Crown and Church on government. They pushed toward new legislation by effectively protecting capitalist interests against the old social forces, creating a private-property regime that would both stipulate the rights of capitalist landlords and regulate the new-found freedoms of former peasants dispossessed from the land, now potential wage workers in capitalist metropolises.³

The rise of the secular, democratic sovereign-state was thus uniquely enabled by the consolidation of industrial capitalism. Unlike pre-capitalist tributary societies, capitalism depended for its reproduction not on the direct use of force to extract peasants' surplus, but from the dispossession of peasants from their natural means of subsistence, compelling them to sell their labour to survive. The exercise of political violence in

the public sphere was not necessary to sustain private enterprises, receding instead to the role of policing the regulatory framework of private property rights and civil liberties required for capitalism to function. Thus, arose modernity's formal differentiation of public and private, Church and State, imperial military force and democratic civil society.⁴

Culturally, modernity posited scientific reason, as against revelation or tradition, as the sole basis of knowledge about life and nature; growing materialism as the normative criterion of well-being; technological breakthroughs for wealth generation; individual material freedom as an end in itself; and the dereliction of religion from the governance of social life.

Thus, industrialisation, rationalisation, urbanisation, bureaucracy, individualism, secularism, and democratisation were intimately, if not fundamentally, interwoven into the fabric modernity. The new competitive dynamic converted English society into the 'workshop of the world', quickly forcing its European rivals to catch up. This triggered uneven transformations of social relations across the Western hemisphere, culminating in the emergence of an Anglo-centric "Lockean heartland", at the centre of the emerging global political economy.⁵

'CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS' OR A 'CRISIS OF CIVILISATION'?

Yet the promise of modernity has been contradictory, while being immensely creative and highly destructive, in its impact on the evolution of global civilisation. No clearer evidence of this can be found than in climate change, which as Blair's quote claimed earlier, compares to the 'War on Terror' in that we cannot "opt out" of it. Tony Blair in effect normalised the military violence of Western states in predominantly Muslim peripheries, as well as the largely Western environmental violence that is eroding the earth's ecological balance. Both, he suggests, are an integral function of modernity's legitimate self-defence against the reactionary external forces, exemplified in Muslim extremism, that threaten its demise. Yet the truth is that

the force rushing toward modernity's demise is not from Islamism, but rather within modernity's own internal socio-political, ethical, and ideological structures.

As regards to Blair's own example, human-induced CO₂ emissions are accelerating global warming toward increasingly dangerous, abrupt climate change. According to the UN Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change, the worst case scenario is that by the end of this century global average temperature could rise by six degrees, making the planet literally uninhabitable. Since then, a torrent of new data suggests this is most likely a conservative prediction, and that actual rates of emissions are higher than even the IPCC's worst-case scenario.⁶

In 2007, the Energy Watch Group, an international network of Parliamentarians and scientists based in Berlin, published a detailed report concluding world oil production had already peaked in 2006, and will decline by half by 2030.⁷ A further report to the Department of Trade & Industry by the UK Industry Taskforce on Peak Oil and Energy, a network of eight leading companies, warned that peak oil would create an oil supply crunch by 2013.⁸ Even with urgent mitigating actions, which has thus far been lacking, this would have a drastic impact on the ability of modern societies to function, leading to the breakdown of transport infrastructure, international agriculture, national electricity grids, and industrial production.

The 2008 global banking crisis and subsequent recession has further brought home the failures of neo-liberalism, with its enforcement of financial deregulation and liberalisation, and particularly the creation of profit through the systemisation of debt. From 2000–2008, leading economists and financial institutions issued warnings of an impending global financial crisis that would begin with the collapse of housing markets. Governments not only ignored these warnings, they encouraged speculators' predatory and risk-accumulating strategies. The spate of defaults that became known as the sub-prime mortgage crisis triggered the bubble burst of bad debt which once was the engine of economic growth. The neo-liberal Washington Consensus proved not only

powerless to prevent the crisis, but was in fact a principal cause of the risk-generation and debt-proliferation behind the crisis.⁹

Apart from the recession, the structure of the global political economy is additionally built on the inexorable generation of massive North-South global inequality, prosperity for the few at the expense of the majority. Such were the devastating conclusions of an authoritative study published by the UN Department of Economics & Social Affairs, finding that the very golden age of neo-liberal capitalism over the last quarter century has witnessed “a sharp decline in the rate of growth for the vast majority of low and middle-income countries. Accompanying this decline has been reduced progress for almost all the social indicators that are available to measure health and educational outcomes.”¹⁰

While international terrorism is not exempt, like climate change and peak oil, the globalisation of Islamist terrorism is a direct consequence of Western states’ industrial over-dependence on petroleum. Al-Qaeda terrorist cells have been, and continue to be, covertly sponsored by several key states in the Middle East and Central Asia, such as Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states, Pakistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, among others. Yet these regimes, which thus constitute the locus of al-Qaeda’s operational capabilities, are financially and militarily sponsored by the West, largely due to their function as major energy-exporters.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states for example, with the world’s largest oil and gas reserves, are pivotal client-states of the US, UK, Western Europe and Japan. The US and UK have failed to shut down the financial arteries of international terrorism in the Gulf states primarily due to their central geo-strategic significance with respect to Western energy security. Thus, to ensure the free-flow of ‘black gold’ to the North, our governments turn a blind eye as Gulf-sponsored al-Qaeda terrorist networks continue to proliferate across the globe. In this sense, international terrorism is a consequence of a specific structural feature of the global political economy, its over-dependence on hydrocarbon resources, and the resultant

financial and geo-strategic entanglement of Western interests and investments with client-regimes in the Middle East and Central Asia.¹¹

Western state responses to this convergence of global crises remain premised on protecting the unequal structures of the global political economy. Abroad, the pattern of the ‘War on Terror’ has projected Anglo-American power into the world’s most strategic energy reserves across Muslim-majority areas of the South. At the same time, it has brought pervasive regimes of comprehensive state-surveillance into the domestic arena, legitimising massive discriminatory policing of Muslim and minority communities within the West. The result is an increasingly draconian and interventionist security paradigm concerned overwhelmingly with the task of domestic and foreign population control, empowering right-wing politics, and permanently eroding democratic checks and balances.¹²

Each of these crises, on its own terms, fundamentally threatens the survival of the global political economy, millions of lives, and the continuity of modern civilization. Together, their cumulative impact over the coming decades would be unimaginably catastrophic. Indeed, these are not separate crises, rather a single Crisis of Civilisation with many faces. Yet so far, there has been little or no meaningful and effective collective action, particularly by the metropolitan centres of modern progress, to prevent or even mitigate this crisis.

THE CRISIS OF (POST) MODERNITY

Global ecological, economic and energy crises expose a core contradiction at the heart of modernity – that the material progress delivered by scientific reason in the service of unlimited economic growth – is destroying the very social and environmental conditions of modernity’s very existence. Put bluntly, progress, as currently conceived, is its own worst enemy. Growth and destruction are two sides of the same coin of modernity, at the centre of which is a deep-seated irrationality, incapable of reconciling the pressure for continual material growth with the destruction of the very basis of our

material existence on Earth.

“Crisis of modernity” is ultimately an extension of a deeper epistemological crisis in our perception and interpretation of the social world.

Post-modernism, in this context, represents both a theoretical diagnosis and social symptom, of what is not simply a Crisis of Civilisation, but simultaneously a “crisis of modernity.” For some post-modernist social theorists, the “crisis of modernity” is ultimately an extension of a deeper epistemological crisis in our perception and interpretation of the social world. The Enlightenment is questioned as merely one “language game” among others, while the meta-narrative in general – a comprehensive theory or philosophy of the world ordering historical experience and knowledge¹³ – is associated with “myriad [of] stories and fables.”¹⁴ The dominant meta-narrative of modernity is the story of progress through universal human reason, the triumph of the Logos over Mythos. By declaring the deaths of the meta-narrative, post-modernists posit instead that there is no universal or absolute truth; or at least that even if there is, human knowledge can only ever approximate it. The upshot is an unmitigated celebration of diversity and relativism. Society and social analysis “dissolve into multiple realities, diverse forms of life, private language games – separate discourses – each with their own ontology, epistemology and methodology.”¹⁵

Yet most post-modernist social theorists are inclined to ignore the concrete historical, socio-political and economic conditions of which the post-modern condition itself is constituted. Of most significance is the post-Fordist shift from manufacturing industry to ‘financialisation’, leading to the outsourcing of industrial production to the South, and the emergence of ‘post-industrial’ service sector economies in the North. This has generated massive changes in class, gender and status patterns, leaning toward an increased

emphasis on individualised consumption.¹⁶

Indeed, for Frederic Jameson, post-modernism is merely a euphemism for an increasingly commodity culture of late capitalism. Culture itself – images, styles, representations, information – has become integrated into commodity production, propelling the eclectic proliferation of incommensurate liberal individualist ideologies in Western democracies. As corporate lobbies push for increasingly flexible systems of regulation compliant with the requirements of trans-national capital, there is intensifying pressure to unravel the post-war welfare state, deregulating society, and ripping open markets to the speculation exploits of private finance.¹⁷

To some extent, the post-modern critique of modernity is vindicated by the Crisis of Civilisation, proving beyond doubt that humanity is at a loss to understand itself, the world, and consequently its place in the world.

Yet post-modernism itself is merely a reactionary extreme self-generated by modernity’s own internal contradictions – a nihilistic, binary and self-referentially incoherent counter-narrative. While challenging the universality of reason and the totality of meta-narratives, post-modernism self-negatingly mobilises reason to prove the meta-narrative that there are no meta-narratives, and to demonstrate the absolute truth that truth is relative. Post-modernism, then, itself constitutes the maelstrom at the heart of the “crisis of modernity,” the culmination of modernity’s intensifying dislocation of humanity from itself, and from nature.¹⁸ Rather than diagnosing the crisis of modernity, post-modernism constitutes modernity’s response to its own incoherence, and thus exacerbates the effects of this crisis by inadvertently legitimising relativism and hence, all forms of extremism and identity politics. Indeed it is here that post-modernism implicitly legitimises Islamist extremism as merely another localised “language game” among others, which, having already dismembered the totalising ethical and philosophical discourses of modernity, can no longer be critiqued or questioned without an overarching framework of moral reference.¹⁹

Both modernity and post-modernism project humanity as an unaccountable overlord uprooted from nature – either through rationalist narratives of progress by technological domination over nature; or through anti-rational localised narratives of pluralist nihilism presuming the personalised social construction of reality. In either case, the individual is placed at the centre of a reality which s/he at once dominates, and yet ultimately cannot control, generating an inexorable dialectic between progress and destruction.

ISLAM AND CIVILISATION

The empirical evidence of the Crisis of Civilisation proves that this dialectic is fundamentally out of harmony with life and nature. This suggests that part of the solution lies in an axiomatic re-orientation of humanity's conceptualisation of itself, the world, and its place in the world, through a rational re-sacralisation of the social viewed as the nexus of our relationship with nature. This should be based on the recognition that the values of love, compassion and justice respected by both modern societies and the universal core of all religious traditions are in fact far more in tune with life and nature than the doctrine of unlimited, individualistic material avarice – a conclusion thoroughly vindicated by the disharmonious consequences of this doctrine in terms of the potentially all-encompassing destruction of life and nature.

Although widely misperceived as a primary cause of our contemporary predicament, Islam may well contain the seeds of a new, inclusive vision of civilisation which can overcome the self-destructive binary complex of (post)modernity. If explored in dialogue with other cultural, philosophical and spiritual traditions, this may facilitate the dramatic shift in consciousness required to avert the Crisis of Civilisation.

For Islam, justice is precisely the primary purpose of religious tradition: "We sent aforetime Our Messengers with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of Right and Wrong), that men may stand forth in Justice." (Qur'an 57:25) This pivotal function of social justice manifests

consistently in a variety of principles across areas of governance, community cohesion, civil defence, economic development, among many other areas.

For instance, Islam proposes unique complimentary economic principles, one concerning public ownership of community resources, and another a labour-oriented theory of private ownership. Natural resources like running water, lakes, oil, sources of minerals, sources of raw materials, forests, or similar resources, cannot be monopolised by any individual, nor even owned by the State. Rather, all citizens are entitled to derive equal benefit from these primary sources of wealth, thus requiring mutual consultation and representation.²⁰ Conversely, Islam proposes that one cannot lay claim to land unless one cultivates it oneself, de-legitimising private ownership of land which is not self-cultivated. By emphasising ownership itself as a function of labour, Islam envisages a dynamic role for the worker as an entrepreneur who not only uses his tools of production to earn wages, but who may also innovative in how tools and technologies are used and developed, being entitled to a share in the profits resulting there from. Simultaneously, it is the financier, not the entrepreneur, who is responsible for covering any losses, justifying the financier's return in the form of a share in any profits the commercial venture generates. Thus, the relationship between labour and finance is more equalised and made interdependent, facilitating the distributed decentralisation of production.²¹

Caliph Ali emphasised that political rule should never be top-heavy, but required continual consultation (shura) with the public, particularly the most disenfranchised classes

Other relevant principles can be derived from the famous treatise on government

drawn up by the fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib, in the form of written instructions to the newly-appointed Governor of Egypt. Caliph Ali emphasised that political rule should never be top-heavy, but required continual consultation (*shura*) with the public, particularly the most disenfranchised classes, for the purpose of addressing their needs: “Meet the oppressed and the lowly periodically in an open conference and, conscious of the Divine presence there, have a heart-to-heart talk with them, and let none from your armed guard or civil officers or members of the police or the Intelligence Department be by your side, so that the representatives of the poor might state their grievances fearlessly and without reserve... Whatever you can give to them, give it ungrudgingly.”²²

Ali’s rule also clarified the axiomatic significance of political freedom, that is, freedom of speech and association, even if dissenting against the government. During his caliphate, a notorious dissident group known as the Kharijites, religious puritans who interpreted scripture literally, were completely free to express their opposition to Ali’s government. They would heckle the Caliph, disrupt his public addresses, repeatedly accuse him of corruption and, worst of all from the Islamic perspective, openly describe him as a *kafir*,²³ to which Ali not only never stopped them from doing so, but on the contrary engaged with them in open debates during which he publicly refuted their arguments. Only when the Kharijites began using violence to terrorise citizens did Ali counter with force.²⁴

Indeed, another common misconception is the concept of *jihad*. Sufficient for our purposes here is to recognise that Islam is not only compatible with modern laws of war such as the Geneva Conventions in the limiting of the use of force to self-defence, but further that Islamic laws of just war delegitimise *all* indiscriminate killing of civilian populations. The *Qur’an* is absolutely clear that if the other party genuinely seeks a peaceful resolution, then force is proscribed: “If they seek peace, then you seek peace. And trust in God for He is the One that hears and knows all things.” (8:61) “If they withdraw

from you and fight you not, but (instead) send you (guarantees of) peace, then God alloweth no way for you (to war against them).” (4:90)

Furthermore, numerous Prophetic injunctions clarify that civilians and civilian infrastructure are never legitimate targets of war: “Do not kill any old person, any child, or any woman”; “Do not kill the monks in monasteries; do not kill the people who are sitting in places of worship”; “Do not attack a wounded person. No prisoner should be put to the sword”; “Do not destroy the villages and towns, do not spoil the cultivated fields and gardens, and do not slaughter the cattle.” These traditions implicitly prohibit most of the practices of modern industrialised warfare, including the use of all weapons of mass destruction.²⁵

Reason and tradition need not be seen as mutually incompatible, but rather as potentially mutually reinforcing.

The conclusion of this all too brief survey is that reason and tradition need not be seen as mutually incompatible, but rather as potentially mutually reinforcing, in a way that can motivate us to reconceptualise ourselves not as separate units in a meaningless physical world, but as interconnected beings embedded in a natural order in which the ‘balance’ of justice is integral. A starting point for addressing the secular erosion of democracy that is part of the contemporary Crisis of Civilisation is a rational re-engagement with the very force – Islam – so often misrepresented as a post-modern antithesis to civilisation. Islamic traditions, with their preoccupation with social justice and ethical politics, may well provide the cultural, spiritual and philosophical resources to help revitalise and transfigure our perceptions of the role of the social as a sphere of ethical collective action, by which to harmonise our relationship with one another, and nature.

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