

A Severe Case of Dichotomic Thinking

Bassam Tibi on Islamic Fundamentalism

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POLARIZED WORLD views not only provide instant understanding but also the deep satisfaction of strolling down well-trodden paths, such as rationality versus religion, the West versus the Orient, now recycled as modernity versus fundamentalism. If in the context of the postmodern we question modernity, using an unreflected concept such as ‘fundamentalism’ enables us to slip back into the comfortable framework of obscurantism versus modernity.

Besides, there is the further ramification of ‘fundamentalist Islam’ as the most popular candidate for a new enemy image. Very much *à la mode*, as in the politics of the Fundamentalism Project of the Chicago University, which Tibi duly cites. We are familiar with the current shopping and fishing for a new enemy image given the ideology gap after the passing of the Cold War and we are familiar with this kind of drivel in *New York Times* opeds and august platforms such as *The National Interest*, we had just not had the opportunity to peer into this window of opportunity in *TCS*. Samuel Huntington (‘Clash of Civilizations’, 1993) revisited as social theory.

The present conjuncture, according to Tibi, is one of ‘a global confrontation between secular cultural modernity and religious culture’, in particular Islamic fundamentalism. What else is new? We are presented with a rather severe case of dichotomic thinking, in the process caricaturing both the West and Islam.

‘The West’, in this view, is equated with ‘modernity’, which in turn is neatly lined up with Cartesianism: ‘Cartesian discourse is the basis of the rational modern view’. Thus we are back on the familiar trail of science, rationalization, disenchantment of the world – Weber plus. Or, more precisely, Weber minus – charisma and tradition as sources of authority. Or, would one

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want to maintain that 'the West' is *only* driven by rationality/modern science? Whatever happened to the dialectic of Enlightenment or for that matter the 're-enchantment of the world'? Tibi's account manages to gloss over a hundred years or so of literature, from 19th-century cultural pessimism, via critical theory to post-structuralism and reflexive modernity. Besides, if post-modernism must be discussed in connection with Islam, then why not also in connection with the West, as reflexive modernity, post-Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Gulag? The polarizing world view, however, is not keen on the dark side of modernity. Remember, obscurantism and 'flat earthism' are over there.

Just as 'the West' is equated with 'modernity', Islam is homogenized under the heading of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. We are informed that this 'is the currently pervasive view of the world shared by the majority of Muslims' (Tibi, 1995: 7). I had thought that 'fundamentalism' is a questionable Western category and that what passes for this in Islam is a highly contested range of perspectives. In Egypt – Tibi's primary reference – these are adhered to by a minority (note that Al-Ahzar University represents mainstream Islam). Also for the Arab world and the Maghreb it cannot be maintained that the majority of Muslims are 'fundamentalists', and this is even less true of the wider Islamic world – for instance Indonesia, the country with the largest Islamic population. Hence this representation ignores mainstream Islam (which in most countries is moderate) as well as reform and liberal Islamic currents (prominent in Southeast and Central Asia, India, Tunisia, Turkey, Bosnia and among sections of the Islamic diaspora).

Most 'fundamentalist' writings in Arabic, according to Tibi, present the enmity between the West and Islam in terms of the incompatibility of rival conceptions of knowledge. That may well be, but so does Orientalism. Witness, for instance, Montgomery Watt's quote that opens Tibi's paper and its dichotomization of Muslims and Westerners. It is precisely the likes of Montgomery Watt and Bernard Lewis in the West who are the counterparts of Islamic ideologues: they share the same dichotomizing world view. Islamism *responds* to Orientalism by mirroring it, and Tibi replays this reciprocal dichotomization without analysing, without even understanding it.

'Islamic fundamentalism' is presented as an instance of 'global fundamentalism'. 'Fundamentalism' is a lumping category based on erroneous transcultural translation. Significant in this context is that what is overlooked are the *modern* features of 'fundamentalism', which are so pervasive that, of course, a contradiction between modernity and fundamentalism cannot be maintained.

Ahmed's superficial case for Islamic postmodernism (1992) is given a superficial treatment in this paper. For Ahmed, 'fundamentalism is the attempt to resolve to live in a world of radical doubt' (that is, a postmodern world). Tibi's blunt interpretation, however, is: 'Fundamentalism is the response to Cartesianism' (1995: 10). Since Tibi does not differentiate between modernity and postmodernity, does not even perceive different dimensions of modernity, whichever question he looks at, all he can come up with is rationality versus obscurantism. Voltaire revisited.

Those who argue for cultural autonomy and delinking from Western models in the Arabic and Islamic worlds belong to a variety of streams, but here they are all stereotyped as ‘fundamentalists’. Ziauddin Sardar is cast as a fundamentalist for advocating an ‘Islamic epistemology’. This approach is so crude that one is led to wonder: whom does discourse serve? This is rhetoric, not analysis: a rhetorical category is used as a polemical device to demonize those whom one disagrees with.

The opening sentence presents globalization, by implication, as originating in the West and in one breath Islam is portrayed according to the Sleeping Beauty syndrome. The sentence could be turned around: ‘As the globalization process touched on the civilizational area called Europe . . . Europeans started to develop curiosity about the invading powers’, and then on to the Crusades (for a historical discussion see Nederveen Pieterse, 1990: Ch. 5). In parentheses, the ‘rise of the West’ is attributed to the military revolution between 1500 and 1800 – surely an important aspect, but also a caricature of a complex multidimensional process (see, for example, North and Thomas, 1973).

The reason why this is on the agenda in *TCS* is, presumably, because of the question of indigenization of knowledge, a concern raised by the dialectics of globalization/localization. It is obvious, however, that Tibi’s account is not a basis on which to conduct a serious discussion.

What then would be meaningful directions along which to take this argument further? This is hardly the occasion to stage a new discussion, but a few minimal points may at least set forth a direction. One, it would be appropriate to conduct the discussion in terms of Islamism, not fundamentalism, and to differentiate between mainstream Islam and different currents of Islamism, for instance moderate (Muslim Brothers in Egypt, part of Hamas in Palestine) and radical tendencies. Two, the indigenization of knowledge should be discussed in a framework as free as possible of stereotyping and polarization. The general premise of indigenization of knowledge is to reconnect with one’s cultural resources, that is, a mode of cultural decolonization. (A related but different category is indigenous knowledge, which is an important current in alternative development thinking.) Surely this beats being mesmerized by overseas corporate dream machines. At the same time, as a project of cultural delinking, or an extension of dependency thinking to culture, in the era of accelerated globalization it befalls the same fate as economic delinking – the shortest way to the Albania effect. Besides, as *part* of globalization, indigenization on another level pays reverse homage to global standards (just as hypocrisy is a compliment to virtue).

Perhaps we can unfold the situation in two basic options. First, delinking for the sake of delinking. This is not likely to be a fertile option. Globalization interacts with the world of Islam in many ways – economics, technology, media, migration, education. The only way, then, in which this option could be sustained is through compartmentalization and schizophrenia – as in Saudi Arabia, importer of US direct investments, high-tech armaments, *Dallas*, Disney and graduate education; exporter of Islamism. Second,

delinking for relinking, that is, a reorientation towards one's own cultural and intellectual resources, to reconnect with wider (Western and non-Western) cultural resources, in order to forge a new synthesis, as part of an open-ended process. Presently both options are in operation in an uneven, and often unreflected, *mélange*. In other words, what is at issue is not indigenization *per se* but the wider orientation of which it forms part: whether it is inward looking only, or adopts a double gaze, inward and outward looking at the same time. The former yields provincialism, the latter creativity.

Cartesianism versus fundamentalism? This is irrelevant to the point of absurdity. The most important causes of Islamism are political. What would be called for is a Gramscian analysis of Islamism as a counter-hegemony. Under Arab governments, with the media and universities controlled and co-opted, the mosque has been the only platform left open in civil society. With Arab rulers parading as princes of the faithful, the mosque has been magnanimously sponsored by the state as the surest way to control civil society. As a consequence the vocabulary of Islam became the only remaining cultural capital and vernacular of politics. With the failure of both statist nationalism and Arabism to deliver together with the promotion of Islam by governments as a means of hegemonizing civil society and sheltering it from political radicalism and Western influences, Islamism emerges as part of the harvest of undemocratic regimes, against the inhospitable backdrop of Western pressure and double standards. The remedy is democratization while the medium term shows societies going through a fire of their own making. Moderate governments that have been following a more or less balanced combination of secularism and Islam, as in Tunisia, have not seen radical Islamism and political stalemate as in Algeria. Whether it concerns the politics of knowledge or the politics of politics, conversation is a better option than polarization.

Note

This is a comment on Bassam Tibi (1995). The argument on 'fundamentalism' is developed further in Nederveen Pieterse (1994).

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