

Political Theology in the Post-Modern Age

Susan Buck-Morss

The term “political theology” describes the appeal of the political sovereign to transcendent power for legitimization. It was developed by Carl Schmitt, a conservative German professor of jurisprudence, who achieved international fame in the 1920s for his theories of sovereignty and his critique of parliamentary legality, and who later collaborated for several years with the Nazi Party. There has been a strong resurgence of interest globally in Schmitt’s texts of political theory, which might seem surprising, given the post-modern intellectual climate. Very much like Marxism that preceded it, post-modernist theories have tended to view the state as an epiphenomenon, focusing instead on imperial culture (orientalism), power and the body (bio-power), or social ontology and the text (deconstruction), ignoring the more traditional political issues of national sovereignty, legitimacy, the enemy, and war that were Carl Schmitt’s main concerns. Social scientists, too, have tended to neglect these concepts in recent years, in order consider, as the central question, the degree to which the nation-state has been superceded by the global economy, and whether

international institutions like the World Bank, IMF, and European Union have made the issues of nation-state sovereignty obsolete.

Symptomatic of the bypassing of state sovereignty is the worldwide academic bestseller by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. It is a call for a revolutionary, global transformation accomplished by the “multitude” through direct action, whereby the state, rather than slowly withering away as Marx imagined, is perceived as already superceded, the salutary effect of the global economy that makes old-style revolutions no longer necessary. Their book was published in 2001, just before the spectacular attack on the United States by a non-state, non-military, small cell of Al-Qaeda activists whose action challenged the hegemonic conception of geopolitics. That conception was itself under attack, and the old issues of political sovereignty were again center-stage.

If militant Islam does not operate within established political categories, it does appeal for its legitimization to transcendent power, God, as the *only* sovereign demanding human obedience. Islam—like Christianity and like Judaism—is inherently antinomial and revolutionary, insofar as it rejects any claim to supreme command by an earthy sovereign that contradicts the will of God. But Islam—like Christianity and like Judaism—by claiming that its own actions are legitimated in God’s name and with God’s blessing, is capable of the most indefensible forms of political violence. The rediscovery of theological legitimacy by po-

litical factions within all three of these monotheistic religions is fundamental to the present international crisis. Sharing the same God, they face each other as mortal enemies. This is the context for the renaissance of Carl Schmitt's term. Here is his claim from the 1922 text:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which [in the west] they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure... The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.¹

The theologically inflected issue of sovereignty, which, Schmitt claims, survives in so-called secular modernity, is central to both the existing hegemonic world order and the non-state violence that opposes it. However, for the vast majority of the world's Christians, Muslims and Jews, this theological-sovereign standoff is highly unstable and insecure. The temptation is to retreat to protective boundaries. Given the realities of globalization, however, defending such boundaries has equally distressing implications. If nationalism is the alternative, the likely victims are ethnic minorities, including the immigrant laborers on which every country within the global economy depends. If state rulers feel compelled to choose sides, becoming the protected clients of regional or hegemonic powers, their own sovereignty and the possibilities for democratic participation by their citizens are compromised.

There is a further complication. As political actors, we citizens now perform on a global stage. The justness of our performance cannot be determined by domestic effects alone. If we commit ourselves to act on moral rather than purely self-interested ground, we are faced with the dilemma that political theology poses: how can we remain obedient to existing sovereigns if they do not represent the global good, and how can we refuse obedience without falling into a warring state of nature, where we defend the good by defining a new enemy in its name?

It would be a simple affair if we could easily reason with each other in a Habermasian, global, public sphere. But we do not have a common political language. Nor, when we speak the same language, do we agree within it as to the reasons that matter. How are we to keep political imagination free to refuse the present scenarios? How can we rip our own, locally shared values out of past traditions of sovereign legitimization that thrive on the construction of enemy outsiders? How can we truly reinvent political life, and do this together on a global scale? For those of us already accustomed to the groundlessness of the post-modern world, the unanswerability of these questions is not paralyzing. But if post-modern theory is to be useful today (this is equally true of Islamic political theory), it must show the world by its actions and perform rather than preach its politics, outside of its own comfort zone of cultural familiarity, without the safety net of pre-approval.

Living and working in the United States during this political crisis, I am troubled by the inadequacy of American

intellectual response. As a consequence of a misguided notion of expertise that exonerates intellectuals from taking scholarly risks in unfamiliar territory, the university culture remains incredibly provincial. The kind of courage that has inspired the founding and flourishing of the Académie de la Latinité is rare anywhere today. I am grateful to be a part of it, and for the exploration and dialogue that it affords. As a non-Latin, my credential for membership in the Académie has been my writing. The work most relevant to this conference is a short book published in 2003 by Verso Press, London, entitled: *Thinking Past Terror: Critical Theory and Islamism on the Left*. It was conceived in New York City in September 2001. I began to read everything I could find in translation on and by contemporary Islamic political theorists. What made it impossible to continue work as usual, unaffected by political events, was the fact that as a US citizen, I was now engaged in an unlimited war that placed civilian populations at unlimited risk in a part of the world and from a political culture about which I had only a vague, stereotypical understanding. That situation suddenly seemed inexcusable.

While my book has been largely ignored in the US market, it has been translated by left-wing presses in Israel, Greece and Japan. For the publication of a paperback edition next fall, I was asked to write a new preface, not an easy task. When a book is written in response to a historical event, precisely the history in it quickly recedes. The September 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon, that were

the impetus for its writing, have led to a measure of global violence that could not then have been imagined. The attacks themselves are several wars away. A preface to the paperback edition needs to ask: When history recedes, what is left standing? What is the value of the book for readers today?

A central proposal of the book is that Islamism as a political discourse can be considered together with Critical Theory as critiques of modernity in its western-developed form. It asks readers to suspend existing political identities and reconfigure the parameters of their discourse to recognize overlapping concerns. It does this performatively, analyzing the present through the work of contemporary Islamic rather than western theorists. Its touchstones are not Agamben, Zizek, Derrida, or Habermas but, rather, Taha, Gannouchi, Shariati, and Qutb. Three years later, these names of Muslim political theorists are scarcely more familiar to western theorists than before. Despite post-colonial sensibilities to the errors of orientalist discourse, despite all the sensitivity to constructions of the Other, with few exceptions (already existing and acknowledged in the book), western critical theorists act as if all that is necessary is to draw on their own, existing models and traditions to define any new state of the world.

If religion has been allowed back on the theoretical agenda, it is St. Paul who monopolizes the discussion. For a number of important western theorists, Pauline Christianity has suddenly become fashionable. But it is an idealized and

sanitized Paul, stripped of the anti-Semitism that was a consequence of Christianity's separation from its Jewish origins, with the first Jewish anti-imperialist revolt of 66-70 CE, and forgetful of Christianity's own imperial legacy inherited from the Emperor Constantine, that culminated with the papal-led, medieval crusades against the Muslim world.

Western philosophical traditions of the European enlightenment, American democracy, and post-Nietzschean skepticism become conservative in a global context *malgré lui-même* insofar as they bolster and protect the presumption that Euro-American thinking is in advance of the rest of the world, hence historically and intellectually superior. It is one thing to champion multiculturalism in the spirit of Christian love, or Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, or democratic inclusion, or post-modern anti-essentialism; it is quite another to accept, when judged in global terms, the minority position of one's own intellectual culture, the present dominance of which cannot be explained solely on the basis of its intrinsic worth. My book is not a call for western theorists to convert or be still. Rather, it implies the need to argue for our beliefs on truly foreign, and in many ways unpalatable, discursive terrains—just as colonized people are routinely required to do *vis-à-vis* the invading culture, just as Muslim intellectuals have done since the Napoleonic invasions several centuries ago.

The sub-title of my book, *Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, was meant as a challenge, and a question: to rediscover one's own political commitments in a foreign political

language, and to ask not only what is lost in translation but also what might be gained. How does Islam, that defines progress in terms of social cohesion rather than individual competition, and evaluates society in civil rather than personal terms, provide a corrective for the morally indifferent world of global markets, where social responsibility is an optional appendage to political life? How does the transnational strength of Islam as a highly contemporary phenomenon expose the fact that Western norms are not natural, not inevitable, but contingent and subject to change? In the reception of the book, it is not the descriptive term Left that has proved problematic. Muslim critical theorists have been grateful for the acknowledgement that the progressive policies they espouse are fully compatible with this positioning on the political spectrum, whereas the sort of Islamic politics that appeals to transnational Muslim elites is fully compatible with the self-enriching goals of economic globalization, not to speak of the right-wing agendas of extremists on issues of military violence and sexual control (which they share with right-wing supporters of G.W. Bush). Being on the Left is an orientation, not a dogma. The word makes sense wherever progressive politics requires independent judgment (*itjihad*) rather than unquestioned obedience in thought and deed. Muslim feminists are a critical part of this Left, refusing on theological, social and legal grounds to equate Islam with the patriarchal society in which it has too long been embedded. Far more controversial has been my use of the word Islamism. It was at a meeting of l'Académie de la Latinité in Alexandria

that Dr. Ahmad Jalali rightly questioned this choice, as it implies ideological conformity rather than a discursive terrain that encourages dissent and is open for creativity and change.

Not all of the essays in my book deal directly with political Islam, but all reflect the challenge of this engagement. Acknowledging the unavoidably global resonances of any theoretical claim today, they call generally for an epistemological rather than ontological approach to theory, because existentially we are *not* in the same position, whereas critical judgments can be shared. Implied is a questioning of the presumption that ethnic culture is the determining factor in the construction of political subjectivities. Physical torture, bodily mutilation, civilian casualties, public humiliation, arbitrary imprisonment, and the construction of dividing walls —these are the physical realities of war as a human initiative, the terrors of which do not depend on cultural mediation for their meaning. The task of an artistic avant-garde in this context is defined less by achieving global recognition within the proliferating artworlds, than by its self-positioning below the global radar as a subaltern, globally-connected underground, that speaks not for the warring factions but for those civilian multitudes who are caught in the crossfire. It is a mark of our time that the most radical, most difficult political position to sustain is independence from both violent sides.

A certain strand of Muslim thought has indeed become more accessible to western readers. Liberal Islam is promoted as the responsible core of contemporary Islamic

thought. Muslim reasonableness, tolerance and fairness are reassuringly presented to European and US audiences as the non-dangerous, de-politicized center. But the alternative to both terrorisms, non-state and state, is not some safe, middle position of political quietism. Progressive does not mean: “like the west.” In a too-eager attempt at reconciliation we lose the space for radical, critical distance from both sides in this war. For the past several years, I have taught the political theory of contemporary Islam. What happens in my seminar is not quite what the title advertises. A sustained engagement with Islamic political thinkers inevitably ends up destabilizing the students’ own political identity. In discussing whether politicized Islam is compatible with democracy, their presumption of democracy in America begins to unravel. Confronting the prejudice of western discourses of orientalism is only the beginning of this process. It is by reading the debates *among* Muslims that the students’ world-orientation is most unsettled. Muslim political debates today engage divergent Islamic approaches to issues of sovereignty, national identity, legal traditions, and social justice that leave the tired category of the West out of the discussion altogether. That is far harder for US university students to bear.

What three years ago seemed implausible is now commonplace: the US population has demonstrated its support in free elections for preemptive war, government lies, media control, dictatorial executive powers, suspension of human rights, and violation of international and domestic laws. In

the US government's identification of its own national interest with maintaining global hegemony, democracy is not the uncontroversial bedrock of political life, but merely one, expendable option in the policy toolbox. We are witnessing a test case of how far the US democracy will go in agreeing to its own destruction—not the first time this has happened in the history of democratic states. The situation calls for a very different theoretical discussion than the one that has dominated in western critical circles until now. As Muslims struggle with the issue of the legitimacy of sovereign power and its relation to religion, ethnicity and the nation-state, western publics are doing the same. Debates about *vilayat-i-faqi* parallel those over the “state of exception” in western democracies—if not in the substance of the arguments or the specific populations targeted by state repression, then surely in the dangers of unchecked executive power over governing and justice alike. Interpretation of *shari'a*, like constitutional judicial review, negotiates change through continuity. Both are challenged by the moral claims of global majorities who, while outside of their proper jurisdiction, are no less worthy of moral recognition. Revolutionary violence may be expressed in terms of the Mahdi, or the Messiah, or Marx, but all such legitimations of force are limited by human fallibility and historical unpredictability, and all are subject to moral scrutiny by non-adherents within the newly globalized public sphere.

It seems light-years since the euphoria experienced by millions who participated in the spontaneously organized, global manifestation of February 15, 2003 against the

planned invasion of Iraq. That was the dream-form of a global Left. Against it, the historical realities of public responses are stubbornly intrusive: the second-term election of George W. Bush; riots in the Muslim suburbs of France; the London metro bombing; anti-immigrant xenophobia in many countries, violent demonstrations from Pakistan to Nigeria against the Danish cartoons. These incidents, encoded within local political rhetoric, easily reinforce existing power while diverting it to the right, and that is precisely the problem. When the standoff between competing political powers becomes increasingly hostile and yet still claims to represent the mainstream, then the *global* center appears in these partial and polarized contexts as a radical, leftist fringe.

Nonetheless, one by one, but cumulatively in massive numbers, people are refusing to accept the traditional ways of framing global politics. Ideologies come later, if at all. Discursive articulations are secondary, as people are motivated above all by material realities. Global media have been progressive in transmitting these realities. Jean Baudrillard, in criticizing the society of the spectacle, opposes to the virtual world of media “the event,” implying that only the latter can motivate a progressive, political response. For Alain Badiou, prototypical of an event are the street demonstrations of 1968. But it needs to be remembered that these were *image-events*, effective because of their entry into media-flows which, although far from unobstructed, repeatedly escape control. Surely the images of US torture at Abu

Ghraib produced such an event, as have citizen demonstrations for democracy in many countries. Global publics continue to be engaged in the production, circulation and reception of image-events as significant political actions. Can it be that we are at last growing up to our global responsibilities? There is a developing conviction that the proper judge for the legitimacy of sovereign foreign policy cannot be sovereign power itself, but rather, an impartial jury that also hears the case of those affected by it. To speak of a global public sphere today means to acknowledge the fact that domestic and global politics bleed into each other. Governments can no longer make a convincing moral case for limiting justice or humane treatment to the minority of humanity whom they happen to recognizes as their own. Democracies are obliged to act democratically on the global stage. Islamic states cannot limit their understanding of *itjihad* in a way that criminalizes dissent or condemns non-believers.

To cite Abdul-Karim Soroush, “Religion is divine, but its interpretation is thoroughly human and this-worldly.”² To mimic or perpetuate western-modern political forms is indeed backward if these forms are revolutionary violence, state terror, or constructions of sovereign power that rely on naming an enemy for their legitimization. The revolutionary goal is a new moral template for earthly rule. Ahmet Davutoglu, speaking specifically to Habermas’ claim that modernity is an “unfinished project,” asks: “who shall complete it? (...) [W]hat will be the role of non-western civilizations,

which have been the object of this project, in the next phase?"³ The question is precisely to the point, but the answer is not yet within our grasp. A theoretical frame of clashing civilizations, proposed by Samuel Huntington, cannot perform the critical, counter-hegemonic task at hand, which is not to replace one dominating civilization by another, but rather, to put an end to the structures of cultural domination.

The recognition of cultural domination as just as important as, and perhaps even the condition of possibility of, political and economic domination is a true advance in our thinking. Moreover, if the Western model does *not* have a monopoly on the future's meaning, then we are obliged to look to the cultural pasts in imagining a future that is not-yet. But—this is crucial—it is to the cultural imaginations of past civilizations that we must look for inspiration, not the power realities. In other words, cultures must be understood as always radical, in the sense that they are always negotiations between the real and the ideal, hence at least potentially in protest against the societies and power structures in which they emerge. The cultures that defenders of tradition look back to with such nostalgia are the dream-form of the societies that gave them birth. Precisely for that reason, in their time they functioned ideologically, covering up the inequities and iniquities of minority rule, patriarchal domination, and class domination—all forms of the violence of power that deserve to be called barbaric.

Culture *and* barbarism—the barbarism of power that at the same time provides the control, the legal order that al-

lows culture to flourish—these are the two sides of the golden age of every civilization, whether it is called the *Pax Romana*, or the *Pax Britannica*, or *Pax Americana*, or the Classical Age of Islam, or the heights of civilization of the Chinese Middle Kingdom. No great civilization has been free of this contradiction. This was the tremendous insight of Walter Benjamin when he insisted:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate (...). There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.⁴

In revering and desiring within changed current conditions to salvage our different cultural traditions (and Marxism is one of them, as is Islam's Golden Age *and* the European Enlightenment) we would be well advised not to confuse the dream of the past with its reality, valuing the former, but continuing to criticize the latter. Such redemption of the past would rip culture out of its ideological role of justifying not only past violence, but new violence committed in its name.

Notes

1. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* [1922], trans. George Schwab, forward Tracy B. Strong, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 36.
2. Abdul-karim Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," lecture at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, April 13, 1995.

3. Ahmet Davutoglu, “Philosophical and Institutional Dimensions of Secularisation: A Comparative Analysis,” John L. Esposito and Azzam Tamimi, eds., *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, p. 174.
4. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 256.