Democracy: an unfinished project

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That modernity was still an "unfinished project" was argued by Jürgen Habermas in modernity's defense.[1] In a much-cited speech of 1980, the Frankfurt philosopher protested against the dominance of instrumental rationality, because it separated the practices of science and politics from the life-worlds of morality and aesthetics that needed to be integrated into the logics of public life. Habermas was speaking of and for Europe, and yet his very conception of the modern project implied the universality of his philosophical claims. He failed to consider the fact that

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1 Jürgen Habermas, "*Das unvollendete Projekt der Moderne,*" speech delivered in September 1980, on receipt of the Theodor W. Adorno prize awarded by the city of Frankfurt; translated as "Modernity versus postmodernity," in *New German Critique*, n. 22, Winter, 1981.

modernity's global triumph was revivifying other social worlds. Precisely those non-Western countries where economic and social modernization were relatively successful were discovering alternative paths forward, taking up his challenge outside of the specific modernist paradigm that Habermas described, exposing the fact that, in its presumed universality of content and objectivity of method, the modernist paradigm was culturally specific and, as a consequence, singularly inadequate.

Two figures writing in the early 1990s were exemplary. In Latin America, Enrique Dussel, Argentinian-Mexican philosopher challenged the "myth of modernity" as superior over other cultures of the world, and insisted on grounding ethical norms in the lived experience of the post-colonial periphery and the bodily suffering of the poor, distinctions inaccessible to Habermas's method of discursive reason.[2] In the Middle East, Ahmet Davutoglu, the present Foreign minister of Turkey, argued from within Western philosophical debates and by means of Western conceptual schemata, that if modernity as a project was unfinished, it needed the non-West in order to be fulfilled. Davutoglu's argument is the inspiration for the title of this essay, which acknowledges much of what motivates his claim, but questions the effectiveness of his categories and procedures.

Davutoglu's 1994 text engaged Habermas directly. He did so with an appeal to the Islamic paradigm of thought,

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2 Enrique Dussel, *El encubrimiento del otro: el origin del mito de la Modernidad: conferencias de Frankfurt*, Bogotá, Ediciones Anthropos, 1992.

or world-view (*Weltanschauung*). It was an act of political resistance against military rulers of Turkey's secular-nationalist state to argue, as he did, for the political mobilization of Islam as a means of furthering political democracy and cosmopolitan tolerance.[3] He challenged the goal of Westernization by using the rhetorical tools of the West itself. Here is the critical passage:

> The question of the objectivity and universality of the process of modernisation and secularisation persists. Is modernity a static objective to be reached or an "unfinished project" as it has been described by Jürgen Habermas? If it is an unfinished project, what will be the role of non-Western civilizations, which have been the object of this project, in the next phase? Is secularisation an irreversible part of this universal project or a culture-bound counterpart of one form of modernity specific to a particular civilisation?[4]

Davutoglu borrowed Habermas' conception of "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) to describe the lived experience of the individual, and grounded this world in cultural authenticity. Given the imposition from above of secularist social

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3 The ruling regime that seized power in a military coup in 1980 considered itself the guardian of Kemalist secular-nationalist ideology, and pro-Islamist positions were suspect.

4 Ahmet Davutoglu, "Philosophical and institutional dimensions of secularization: a comparative analysis," in John L. Esposito and Azzam Tamini, eds., *Islam and secularism in the Middle East*, New York, New York University Press, 2000, p. 174. The quotation continues: "Can there be alternative reflections of this project congruent with the authentic traditions of non-Western societies, or is deconstruction of the authenticity of non-Western civilisations a natural and irresistible precondition for the completion of this project? If deconstruction is inevitable, will there remain any historicity to non-Western civilisations in the future? Without historicity what does the rhetoric of pluralism mean?" (p. 174-5).

forms in Turkey that did violence to the Islamic life-world of the nation's majority, his questioning of the necessity of secularization for the modernizing process was appropriate, and indeed, compelling. But I would question Davutoglu's claim that an individual's life-world translates seamlessly into a civilizational "self-perception" (*Selbstverständnis*), as the latter is a collective identification extending far away from his or her uniquely lived experience, across broad expanses of time and space. It is the concept of civilization that needs to be unpacked at this point. For although it clearly connects Davutoglu's discourse with a dominant one in the global public sphere, there is reason to be skeptical as to its analytical (non-ideological) power.

158 The term civilization places Davutoglu's work in proximity to Samuel Huntington's thesis, first formulated in 1992 and extended as a best-selling book in 1996, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order.*[5] In the context of the Bosnian War that had broken out several months before, Huntington took seriously the populist rhetoric of the combatants that engendered ethno-religious hatred between Catholic Croatians, Muslim Bosnians, and Christian Orthodox Slavs. He saw it as a manifestation of conflicting civilizational identities, and claimed these ha-

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5 Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington first presented his thesis as a lecture in the fall of 1992 (civil war in Yugoslavia began in April of that year) to the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute. The lecture appeared in *Foreign Affairs* the following year with a question mark ("The clash of civilizations?"). It was published in book form with the title *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of the world order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

treds were anticipatory of events to come: "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations [of which the Bosnian conflict was one] will be the battle lines of the future."[6]

Davutoglu's use of the term Islamic civilization had very different political implications.[7] His fault line was within Turkey Itself. At a time when secular-nationalist military rule made Islamic life styles illegal, and women in the university donned the hijab in defiance of the law, his affirmation of the Islamic lifeworld was a democratic act of inclusion of Turkey's religious populations against the forced modernization of the Kemalist state. Davutoglu favored modernization by means of Islam rather than against it. His was a discourse of universality, arguing for the contribution of Muslim civilizational values of cosmopolitan tolerance to a civilizationally shared, global project.[8] Given the fact that, as late as 1997, prime minister Erdogen, then mayor of Istanbul, was arrested for reading a poem

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6 http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.

7 He refers directly to both Fukuyama and Huntington in this context (Davutoglu, "Philosophical and institutional dimensions of secularisation: a comparative analysis," Azzam Tamimi and John L. Esposito, eds., *Islam and secularism in the Middle East*, New York, New York University Press, 2000, p. 175.

8 Perceiving that a new global civilization is emerging, he is desirous that Islam play a "meaningful and legitimate role in this transformational process" (S. Parvez Manzoor's review of Ahmet Davutoglu, *Civilizational transformations and the Muslim world*, Mahir Publications, Kuala Lumpur, Quill, 1994: "The sovereignty of the political," http://www.algonet.se/~pmanzoor/CarlSchmitt.htm).

that referenced Islamic cultural symbols (even though that poem was fully allowed and promoted in the early years of the Turkish republic), Davutoglu's appeal to the cultural authenticity of Islam was not only counter-hegemonic, but courageous.

Intellectually, it is not the Islamic thematics that concerns me in Davutoglu's approach. Rather, it is his reliance on certain Western methodologies, specifically twentieth-century German phenomenology in which both he and I are schooled. From Dilthey he takes the concept of *Weltanschauung*; from Husserl he borrows aspects of phenomenological reduction; from Heidegger he accepts a philosophical ontology grounded on the concept of authenticity. My own study of this tradition was mediated by the critical theory of Theodor Adorno, through whose reception I acquired a suspicion of all ontological claims, whether constituted *by* epistemology or constitutive *of* it.[9] (I am referring to Davutoglu's striking distinction between the Western philosophical tradition as based on an "epistemologically determined ontology" and the Islamic tradition as based on an "ontologically determined epistemology."[10])

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9 Hence, for example, I would question whether "occidental man" or "Islamic man," used by Davutoglu in a Weberian, sociological sense, has validity as a philosophical category. To be true to Weber's method, the positing of an ideal type forecloses the validity of the term as an ontological category. In short, the methods of Max Weber (a neo-Kantian) and Martin Heidegger (an existential ontologist) are incompatible.

10 "The principal difference between Islamic and Western *Weltanshauungs* is related to the contrast between the 'ontologically

But to elaborate fully on this point would take us too far into philosophical detail. And although I will comment on its significance again below, for present purposes, my general criticism can be stated quite plainly: to presume any civilizational authenticity, Islamic or Western, we would have to establish that such phenomena as authentic civilizations exist, and that they provide analytic categories stable enough to do the work of differentiating the life-worlds of individuals and groups that inhabit them.[11]

II

I must confess, that from the U.S. side of the Atlantic, Europe's recent soul-searching concerning the question, what is European Civilization? seems perplexing. When one considers the fact that the lack of European unity had as its consequence two World Wars in the twentieth century, this belated search for commonality bears a mythic aroma. Shared history? Shared culture? Shared religion? None of these have ever produced a united Europe. The EU of the 1990s was an economic fabrication, and as recent events indicate, economic unity has failed to pro-

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determined epistemology' of Islam and the 'epistemologically determined ontology' of the Western philosophical traditions. This difference is especially significant in understanding the axiological basis of political legitimacy and the process of justification" (Ahmet Davutoglu, *Alternative paradigms: the impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on political theory*, New York, University Press of America, 1994, p. 5).

11 That this is not possible (and in fact never has been) is my argument in "CIVILIZATION," *Political concepts: a critical lexicon*" (http://www.politicalconcepts.org/civilization-susan-buck-morss/).

vide civilizational (or even civilized) glue. The widespread willingness to watch Greece and other southern European societies flounder in poverty and unemployment while right-wing, indeed, fascist parties reap the political benefits, is far from Habermas' imagined future of a post-Cold War European order. But Davutoglu's alternative modernity, based on an Islamic World View, is also in deep crisis, as Egypt, Tunis, Lybia, Syria, and Palestine struggle to realize viable governmental forms.

It is remarkable how many of the predictions made twenty years ago have failed to materialize, and how unprepared for the new realities the self-declared experts seem to be. A certain anarchist sentiment among the younger generation is baffling even to the most progressive of political analysts. *Los Indignados*, the Occupy movements and other social activists appear too naïve, too idealistic, and too vague in their demands to meet the conventional criteria for political success. But there may be knowledge, even wisdom taking root in these recent social movements that escapes traditional political topographies of thought. The very success of identity politics has, as Hegel would say, gone to ground (*zu Grunde gehen*). Multiculturalism is nowhere now an adequate response. Today's political networks are transcultural. The very idea of democracy has become unmoored from the national context that was its earlier home.

In the 1980s, the slogan "we are all interconnected" was used to describe the findings of biologists, chemists, astrophysicists and ecologists—with a warning that no

single segment of human life can separate itself from the health and safety whole. It is difficult to trace the exact lineage of this phrase, or by what means it migrated to the political realm. But migrate it did, for example, in the massive street demonstrations that followed the murder of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who was shot by an ultranationalist teenager in 2007. The demonstrators embraced the slogan: We are all Armenians. We are all Hrant Dink. As a form of solidarity, as a democratic action in the globally visible public sphere, thousands of citizens gathered on the streets of Istanbul to protest against nationalist ethnic exclusions, setting a standard for other political actors around the world. It is within this self-consciously global topology that the events of the Arab Spring emerged: We are all Mohamed Bouazizi. We are all Khalid Said.

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Tunisian President, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, left power quickly, but in Egypt, Hosni Mubarek held on. And the longer he stayed, the stronger the people's resistance became. The courage of their nonviolent occupation of Tahrir Square captivated a world of electronic spectators, granting to the Egyptians global solidarity and enormous respect. Their massive citizen action challenged the credibility of an entire hegemonic discourse, with its claims that the Middle East was not ready for democracy, that the people needed authoritarian government, or, preposterously, that democracy needed to be imposed on the Muslim world from the outside, by force of arms.

These democratic successes happened without paternal leaders, without foreign teachers, without invading armies. It was not a case of Egyptians or Tunisians catching up with the West. Rather, they were showing the rest of the world the way. They inspired citizens elsewhere—in Libya, Yemen, Spain, Greece, the United States, Russia, China, Syria, Bahrain—to take up the banner of democracy. It is easy to forget the promise of this moment, given the multiple cases of violence and state repression that have since occurred. But the transnational responses to the Arab Spring initiated a global movement unlike any that we have seen before, and it is important to try to capture that moment in words. If we were to speak in Hegelian terms about a world spirit, it indeed appears to be universal, not the end of history, but the end of a particular kind of history, and the beginning of something truly new, because it cannot be contained within the existing world order. It connects to the idea of the *ummah*, in that it spills out over the boundaries of Nation-States. It continues the spirit of *horizontalidad* launched during Argentina's protests during the economic crisis of 2001-2002. It continues the work of the World Social Forum in its call for an alternative globalization. It continues the empowerment of the Iranian people's protests during the elections of 2009 that called on the name of Allah and democracy, both at once. Merging these spatially separated actions into a genealogy-in-common, and breaking away from the fractiousness of identity politics in the process, it brings these initiatives into synchrony across so-called civilizational divides. The global

movements now happening in the name of democracy bear witness to the fact that democracy is an unfinished project not because it has yet to spread sufficiently in the world. Rather, democracy as conceived within Western modernity has been insufficient (indeed, deficient) from the start.

III

The American Constitution excluded non-property owning males from the vote until the late 19th century, women until 1920, and black Americans, *de facto*, until the 1960s. When the West talks today of championing women's rights in Islamic countries, it needs to be remembered that Switzerland did not allow women to vote until 1971, thirty-five years after women's suffrage in Turkey, and feminist movements were significant in the twentieth century throughout the Muslim world. The Declaration of Independence of the American colonies that proclaimed all men equal omitted from that definition the unfree labor force of African slaves. The French Revolution only temporarily tolerated the liberation of their African slaves before attempting (unsuccessfully) to destroy the Haitian Revolution by force.[12] But even when the institution of slavery was abolished, wage-slavery continued. Lisa Lowe reveals the close connections between the gradual abolishment of the African slave labor in the colonies and a project for the massive exporting of "free" Chinese wage laborers to the Caribbean, Australia, and the

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12 Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and universal history*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press, 2009.

Americas, to take their place.[13] In postcolonial societies, democracies were built on the organizations of civil society that represented the interests of economic and state elites, who discounted the colonial subaltern as pre-political, yet it is these subaltern classes that are making democratic, political claims today.[14] The struggle against economic injustice became a leitmotif of modern society, one that political democracy has still not been able to resolve. Marx was absolutely clear in his criticism of bourgeois democracy as not only incomplete, but incapable of being completed, so long as economic exploitation was intrinsic to the production process. He argued that attempts to legislate equality on the political level were an open admission of the non-existence of equality on the level of society. Whereas Marx was wrong to dismiss political democracy *tout court*, he rightly demarcated the structural limits of democracy in its modern, capitalist form.

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13 Lisa Lowe, "The intimacies of four continents," in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by empire: geographies of intimacy in North American* history, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006.

14 In *Lineages of political society: studies in postcolonial democracy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011, Partha Chatterjee argued that the future fight may be between modernity (civil society) and democracy ("political society"). Chen writes of Chatterjee's position: "These are provocative theses. Challenging and inspiring, they help us locate the driving forces underlying democratic transformation in the third world" (Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as method: toward deimperialization*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 230).

First paradox: between free markets and free societies

Today more than ever in neoliberal democracies money rules. Finance capitalism integrates a global oligarchy that includes economic actors of every ethnicity and every religion. This system has resulted in grotesque disparities of wealth, both between nations and within them. Capitalist social relations are based on the extraction of value from labor and from nature, in order for the system to thrive. The privatization and enclosure of any productive force from which profit can be obtained is encouraged. The social costs of the production process, so-called externalities, are left unpaid. Human misery is discounted. Risks to citizen health are measured in terms of the trade-off between benefits and costs. The trivialization of life for profit is a common occurrence. Deregulation rewards capitalists even when they fail. Banks survive, and citizens—entire national populations—are forced by authorities to pay the price. One does not have to accept Marx's theory of class warfare to conclude that, given extreme disparities of wealth, democracy as an expression of the general will becomes untenable.

Political Islam owes much to the Marxist critique of capital, which was widely discussed in the Muslim world during the Cold War era. Sayyid Qutb, in *Social justice in Islam*, referred disparagingly to the "bloated capitalists."[15]

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15 Under "Legislating matters related to the public interest and the blocking of means," Qutb lists as first priority: "The taking of excessive wealth out of the hands of bloated capitalists" (Sayyid

The present leader of Tunisia, Rashid al-Gannouchi, who has long been a strong defender of democracy, rejects the myth that free markets (unregulated capitalism) mean free, that is, democratic societies.[16] This theme is part of the global discourse of protest from Egypt to Wisconsin, to Greece. We have an anomalous situation today in which Marx's critique of the capitalist system is globally acknowledged, but Marx's revolutionary politics is globally rejected, as is indeed understandable, given the history of communism in its actually existing forms. Marx's theory of universal historical stages has been discredited along with other Eurocentric notions of civilizational progress. Whether based on a Hegelian dialectic of history as class struggle, or on the structural inevitability capital's collapse, Marx's description of a necessary historical path for all nations from feudalism, to bourgeois industrialism

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Qutb, *Social justice in Islam*, trans. John B. Hardie, rev and intro., Hamid Algar, Oneonta, N.Y., Islamic Publications International, 1953, p. 307).

16 Rachid Al-Gannouchi. "Secularism in the Arab Maghreb," *Islam and secularism in the Middle East*, eds. John L. Esposito and Azzam Tamimi, New York, New York University Press, 2000. On democracy: "A democratic secular system of government is less evil than a despotic system of government that claims to be Islamic" (p. 123). On economics and ethics: "While the right to private ownership is sanctified, exploitation, monopoly and the acquisition of wealth other than through lawful means are forbidden. Wealth is assigned a social mission (...)" (p. 113). Al-Gannouchi's supporter in the Ennahda Party, Said Ferjani, told *New York Times* reporter Anthony Shadid that having earlier rejected the Left, he now embraces Karl Marx's critique of capitalism (*New York Times*, February 18, 2012).

to socialism, is based, as J. M. Blaut argues, on the European colonizer's model of the world, which claims historical forces emanate from the center and move to the periphery that, inevitably, lags behind.[17]

One important direction of recent historical research has been to show that capitalist systems existed before the rise of Western modernity, notably in the Indian Ocean, and that these early forms, while including sophisticated instruments of credit, banking, partnerships, and trade, were held in check by the moral mandates of Islam, most strikingly by means of Muslim merchant law. In recent work, I have been developing the argument that the reason why the West succeeded in launching that new form of capitalism which scholars in the tradition of Max Weber recognize as definitive, and which differed from earlier capitalist systems because of the unprecedented violence of colonial trade, is that the European merchants, quite literally, *broke the law.*

One can certainly agree with Ahmet Davutoglu when he places economics as necessarily subordinate to social morality. Adam Smith himself would not disagree, which is why he intended his book, *The theory of moral sentiments*, to be read alongside the later, better-known volumes, *The wealth of nations*. But it does not follow that Islamic banking provides the answer, criticized in its existing form as merely a marketing technique, or that the Islamic institu-

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17 J. M. Blaut, *The colonizer's model of the world: geographical diffusionism and eurocentric history*, New York, The Guilford Press, 1993.

tion of *zakat* is a sufficient cure for the enormous dispari-
ties of wealth that make truly democratic societies impos-
sible today. To argue directly from a religious tenet to prac-
tical life is not justified in this case, any more than to pre-
sume that the pacifist message of Christianity, with its gen-
tle symbol of the Lamb of God, provides an adequate basis
for ensuring global peace.

Political governance cannot be replaced by an ethical
community, and Islam is no exception to this rule. The Ma-
laysian theorist Danial Mohd Yusof comments specifical-
ly on Davutoglu's appeal to Islamic values, noting that be-
cause these are themselves contested, "Islamic society" be-
comes a "floating signifier" for multiple political ends. He
refers to the work of Boo Teik and Kok Wah, who criticized
a similar appeal to "Asian values" that in Islamic Mayla-
sia proved quite compatible with authoritarian ends, "an
ideological and cultural essentialist response to legitimise
authoritarian developmental states against the demands of
liberal democracy and Malaysia's growing discourse of the
individual."[18] So, the unfinished project of democracy will
have to answer the Marxist challenge, its critique of the so-
cially unjust consequences of global capitalism, and it will
have to do this without either the benefit of Marx's theory
of necessary progress through universal, historical stages,
or the guarantee of policy success through the imposition
of religious values by government decree.

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18 Danial Mohd Yusof, "Davutoglu's *paradigm*, Winkel's *epistemé*,
and political science in Malaysia," *Asian Journal of Social Science*,
n. 35, 2007, p. 6-18, p. 1.

Second paradox: between democratic egalitarianism and political elitism

A second contradiction that needs to be considered in regard to the unfinished democratic project is the tension between democracy in its radically egalitarian form and social hierarchies that exclude democratic participation. Davutoglu insists that Islam teaches the absolute equality of human beings.[19] Christianity, following the words of the

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19 On Muslim society as a socio-political unity (*ummah*), Davutoglu writes: "This is an open society for any human being, regardless of his origin, race, or color, who accepts this responsibility which is the basis of the identification and political socialization process of a Muslim in an Islamic socio-political environment. This political identification and integration process in an Islamic society is the main difference in comparison with the state tradition in Western civilization—as nationalist, communist, or liberal-democratic— or class consciousness. The achievement of legitimacy (...) is, therefore, directly related to the question of whether the political authority in the society provides the requirements for the fulfillment of this responsibility" (Davutoglu, *Alternative paradigms*, p. 125). His argument makes a compelling case for the refusal to separate religion from the state, when religion holds the state socially responsible for ensuring equality, regardless of color or ethnicity. But the translation of this principle into political policies has proven problematic, with extreme consequences. When the Sudanese religious thinker Mahmoud Mohamed Taha interpreted the Qu'ran's principle of radical equality to extend to women as well as different races, it was a Muslim ruler (Numeiri) who executed him for apostasy (with the acquiescence, at the time, of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood). This is where the epistemology of critical theory can be effective against the shortcomings of political ontology (see Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking past terror: Islamism and critical theory on the left*, New York, Verso, 2003, p. 47 and 64-5).

apostle Paul, claims the same.[20] And yet, equality as an ontological assertion (here again you see my bias against ontology) has time and again proven historically compatible with political elitism, and this is true of both religious and secular societies.[21]

Such elitism can take many forms. It is in play among sectarians of the Gülen movement which, despite its outspoken adherence to secular pluralism, holds elitist views of ethnicity, nationalism, and Islamic spirituality.[22] It is in play among Tunisian Francophones today, who, having studied in French-speaking, private schools, may be well versed in Rousseau and the Rights of Man, but do not extend their democratic sympathies to the actually existing Muslim majority in Tunisia's post-revolutionary order. Conservative Islamic parties presume that leaders know best; the role of democracy, claimed Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leader Khairat el-Shater shortly before the

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20 Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Zizek all emphasize this radical egalitarianism in their recent discussions of Paul. The problem with Paul's interpretation of Christianity is that it leaves the material world of *in*equality unchanged (see Susan Buck-Morss, "Visual empire," *Diacritics*, v. 37, n. 2-3, Summer-Fall 2007, p. 176).

21 In the history of *both* Islam and Christianity, the contradiction between theology's social values and their earthly implementation, produces the constantly contested space of political life.

22 Gülen followers consider education "the best and direct way to shape fresh minds" (p. 202). They support free markets and secularism; they teach in English, and only secular subjects. At the same time, there is an imposition of moral and cultural uniformity, ethno-nationalist identity, and "blood consciousness" in pan-Turanist and/or Turkish nationalist forms.

2012 election, is limited to the act of voting that provides electoral legitimacy for the party's unquestioned authority. But again, it is not religion that draws the dividing line between autocratic and democratic rule. Al-Gannouchi with reason named the government of Bourguiba "authoritarian secularism."[23] The fate of Kemalism in secularist Turkey under military rule was the same.

Here too, the Marxist experience is instructive, this time as an example of how not to proceed. At least since Lenin, a division was justified between the radical egalitarian goal of a classless society and the dictatorial elitism of Communist Party rule, essentially preventing any truly democratic practice—even when on paper, the 1936 Soviet Constitution, the USSR became the most democratic country in the world. The fate of the French Communist Party hinged on the question of elitism, as intellectuals, through their own brilliance, increased the gap between theoretical understanding of Marxism and its popular embrace, to the point where the leadership could not support popular democratic action. It was against the intellectual elitism of the French Communist philosopher, Louis Althusser, that his former student, Jacques Rancière, supported the mass of street demonstrators in Paris in May 1968 who insisted

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23 Al-Gannouchi, "The origins of Arab secularism," in Tamimi ed., *Islam and secularism in the Middle East*, p. 99. Under this circumstance, society becomes a "field of action" for power of "secular elites," rather than what it should be, the place of popular will as "source of authority" and "source of legitimacy" (p. 99-100). Bourguiba took control of the economy, and seized mosques, trade unions, and political parties.

on taking the practice of democracy seriously. In a striking 1981 essay, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, a parable in historical form, Rancière stated the radical democratic claim in forceful terms: "*all men have equal intelligence.*"[24] This has nothing to do with scoring on IQ (intelligence quotient) tests. It is a political claim based on the premise that all men have equal capacity for democratic participation. It goes without saying—but perhaps still, today, it needs to be said loudly and clearly—"all men" in this case means all women too, especially women, as their role in the new democratic movements has been critical.[25]

The subtitle of Rancière's essay is *Five lessons in intellectual emancipation*. It is the strange tale of a French teacher who manages to teach what he does not know. His Flemish students learn to read a French text without knowing the language, and without the teacher's ability to tell them how. This situation of "mutual teaching" manifests the human capacity "to learn something and to relate it to all the rest," exposing the "pedagogic myth" that the world is divided "into knowing minds and igno-

24 Jacques Rancière, "*Le maître ignorant,*" in English: *The ignorant schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation*, trans. and intro. Kristin Ross, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 18.

25 No issue has received more attention, and less illumination, than that of women's rights. For a corrective critique of George W. Bush's use of women's rights as a "decoy" to deter attention from his administration's illegal, imperialist wars, see Zillah Eisenstein, *Sexual decoys: gender, race and war in imperial democracy*, London, Zed Books, 2007.

rant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid." [26] The relation of teacher and student presumes the latter's ignorance: "To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself"; Rancière asserts, on the contrary: "Whoever teaches without emancipation stultifies."[27] Emancipation, the precondition of democracy, requires "that every common person might conceive his [and her] human dignity, take the measure of his [and her] intellectual capacity, and decide how to use it."[28]

This understanding of democracy as self-emancipation brings to mind Wael Ghonim's description of how Egyptians taught themselves to organize throughout the Arab Spring, how they used social network technologies to spread courage, share dangers, and realize the power of their own number.[29] Ghonim reports the growing sense of solidarity in Tahrir square demonstrations, where you could easily sense "the wisdom of the crowd."[30] One thinks of the Muslim women in Egypt described by the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, who met together without spousal permission, read the Qur'an without an imam, and taught

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26 Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, p. 6, 17-18 (*ital.* Rancière).

27 Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, p. 18.

28 Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, p. 17.

29 See Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: the power of the people is greater than the people in power: a memoir*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

30 www.egyptindependent.com/node/61266.

themselves the practices of piety.[31] Mahmood's point is that agency must be recognized in more ways than as direct political resistance; self-teaching, in collaboration with others, counts as a form of empowerment. Indeed, such practices in autonomy may be the precondition for political agency. Interestingly, in terms of women's self-emancipation, the US feminist book, *Our body, ourselves* (1970) which was translated and adapted globally, was able to cross multiple cultural boundaries (including Egyptian) despite the differences because it did not presume that some women had superior knowledge to impart to those who did not know. "It was the method of knowledge sharing—and not a shared identity as women—that appeared to have global appeal."[32]

Training in democracy comes by enacting democracy, an embodied performance that involves treating others as co-citizens "under the sign of equality."[33] Emancipation as the antithesis of subordination involves trust, writes Rancière, based on "confidence in the intellectual capacity of any human being."[34] Tariq Ramadan expresses a similar sentiment when he writes:

> Equality is a fragile right, and one that must be demanded constantly, at more than one level and in more than one sphere: we must have

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31 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

32 Kathy Davis, "The global localization of feminist knowledge: translating *Our bodies, ourselves*," in Tine Davis and Francien van Driel, eds., *The gender question in globalization: changing perspectives and practices*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, p. 87.

33 Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, p. 11.

34 Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, p. 14.

confidence in ourselves and in our rights, confidence in our abili-
ty to communicate and to be heard, and also confidence in the legit-
imacy of resistance, or even in the constructive nature of opposition
and protest.[35]

There is a struggle within Islamic parties at this mo-
ment, and it has to deal precisely with the issue of elit-
ism, the pedagogic distance between the people and their
leaders. In the Egyptian election debates of 2012, against
Khairat el-Shater's authoritarian leadership, Abdel Mo-
neim Aboul Fotouh insisted that conservatives have no mo-
nopoly on the Brotherhood or the parties of political Islam.
Ramadan was interviewed on this split within the Egypt's
Muslim Brotherhood (founded by his grandfather, Has-
san al-Banna, in 1928): "'Al-sama' wa'l-ta'a,' went the old
Brotherhood ideal, which translates as 'hearing and obey-
ing.' That's over (...). The new generation is saying if it's
going to be this, then we're leaving. You have a new under-
standing and a new energy."[36] In the name of democracy,
let us hope that Ramadan is right.

Third paradox: national democracy and global exclusions

A third inadequacy in the realization of modern de-
mocracy is the fact that it is structured and contained with-
in the limits of Nation-States. There is an almost consti-
tutive intolerance of outsiders. If the formation of a gener-

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35 Tariq Ramadan, *The quest for meaning: developing a philosophy
of pluralism*, London, Allen Lane, 2011, p. 77.

36 Tariq Ramadan interviewed in London by David D. Kirkpatrick,
New York Times, March 14, 2012.

al will within nations makes solidarity across differences a goal, in foreign policy, differences are precisely the point. International relations are unequal relations. National self-interest is the legitimating principle. Violation of the democratic rights of others follows according to the premise of might makes right. Double standards of morality and even blatant hypocrisy in the practice of ethical norms are part of the international system under Western hegemony.[37] Again, the source of the deficiency is an historical one. The ideal of democracy as imagined within the European model in no way extended to foreign affairs, where Westphalian Treaty principles from 1618 (in the context of colonial practices) were taken as binding.[38] Anachronistically, they still are.

37 It is relevant here to note that Islamic legal tradition holds good faith in contractual obligations as paramount: "It follows that when signing international treaties, Muslim States are expected to ensure that all of their contractual obligations are clearly set out because contracts are considered sacred. For example, recent research shows that while Muslim States are less likely to accept the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, they will have the most durable commitments because of strong norms of contractual obligations which are carefully and meticulously crafted" (Nisrine Abiad, *Sharia, Muslim States and international human rights treaty obligations*, London, British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 2008, p. 102-03).

38 This is the classical view, today described as the "dualist" position, and challenged in recent year by the "monists." Monist states incorporate international law into domestic law; dualists hold them separate. Among Muslim nations, the dualist appeal to the superiority of Sharia Law can have opposite effects—either nullifying an international law, or, in the case of a Muslim ruler who violates Sharia law, backing an international law more in accord with Sharia principles. The status in Muslim countries presently varies. "Overall, Morocco, Egypt,

This state of affairs can lead to grotesque distortions, insofar as the practice of democracy *within* a nation can be diametrically opposed to the realization of democratic relations *between* them. The vague presumption that democratic nations are inherently more peaceful—and hence more reliable as possessors of nuclear weapons—is empirically unfounded.[39] There are structural reasons for this. The power to wage war is concentrated in the executive branch, so that rulers go to war with very little democratic oversight. When they do ask for popular support, appeals to the people are made in terms of protecting the homeland, whereas the protection of other civilian populations is not equally valued, and voters do not know or care sufficiently about the fate of those beyond their borders.[40] In the Unit-

Lebanon, Iran and Tunisia automatically incorporate international human rights into domestic law based on their ratification. Bahrain, Turkey and Malaysia require domestic legislation to implement international human rights law after ratification of a treaty" (Abiad, *Sharia, Muslim States and international human rights treaty obligations*, p. 107).

39 See Jessica L. Weeks, "Autocratic audience costs: regime type and signaling resolve," *International Organization*, v. 62, n. 1, Winter 2008, p. 65-101.

40 Symptomatic is the fact that CNN produces different programming on the domestic and international levels, so that domestic audiences do not have access to the same global coverage. Speaking to the inequality that characterizes the global public sphere, even among intellectuals, Aydin writes: "There is a need for the global public sphere to overcome these unequal structures of communication and to turn mutual critiques into constructive dialogue on the legitimacy crisis of international order and the shared problems of global modernity. Despite the image of Muslim intellectuals as Occidentalist and anti-Western, in reality the Muslim part of the

ed States, the country with massive nuclear and technologi-
cally sophisticated weaponry, an individual could conceiv-
ably become President by majority vote who does not know
the basic facts of global politics or the history of twenti-
eth-century world affairs."[41] It is disturbing to contemplate
that if such a candidate were to be democratically elected,
there would be no legal way for the rest of the world to in-
tervene, although regime change might indeed be advis-
able for global security.

But even in the best of circumstances, Nation-States
are not held democratically accountable to the global pop-
ulation. A single member of the UN Security Council can
veto an act, despite a majority General Assembly support.
This is particularly painful when the act being opposed is
precisely the democratic founding of a Nation. In fall 2011

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global public sphere is more prepared for and open to a dialogue,
as Muslims know more about Western intellectual traditions than
vice versa" (Cemil Aydin, "The politics of conceptualizing Islam
and the West," *Ethics and International Affairs*, v. 18, n. 3, 2004,
p. 89-96, p. 96).

41 From the *New York Times* article by J. David Goodman "Turkish
government reprimands Perry" (January 18, 2012): "In Monday
night's Republican debate in South Carolina, Gov. Rick Perry
of Texas described the leaders of Turkey as 'Islamic terrorists,'
an inaccurate characterization that drew a swift rebuke from the
Turkish government. Asked whether Turkey, a predominantly
Muslim democracy of nearly 79 million people and an American
ally in the region, belonged in NATO [which it has since 1952],
Mr. Perry said it did not. 'Obviously,' he said, 'you have a country
that is being ruled by what many would perceive to be Islamic
terrorists,' adding that he would take a step further and cut off all
foreign aid to the country."

the Palestinian bid for statehood was blocked even though it was supported by more than 120 of 193 member nations in the General Assembly. In November 2012, the US-Israeli coalition was unable to prevent the General Assembly from voting, and the resolution passed with overwhelming support (138 nations), but *de jure* membership was still withheld. When only citizens have rights, and Palestinians are denied the statehood that would guarantee them, the contradiction between national democracy and global exclusions becomes extreme.

Increasingly troubling are ecological crises that are indifferent to national borders that make any kind of rational response impossible when the nations with the greatest global power are also the greatest polluters. And that is not all. Again, the negative effects of the economic order become manifest, this time in terms of the distribution of power between sovereign nations and global firms. In 2000, of the world's 100 largest economic entities, 51 were private corporations, and only 49 were Nation States. Because corporations have been declared legal persons, it is they whose rights have been protected by international law, not the individuals harmed by their actions.[42]

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42 "International law is virtually silent with respect to corporate liability for violations of human rights," and "has neither articulated the human rights obligations of corporations nor provided mechanisms to enforce such obligations." This is according to a *Harvard Law Review* article, 2001), cited in Emeka Duruigbo, "Corporate accountability and liability for international human rights abuses: changes and recurring challenges," *Northwestern*

In a global public sphere, defiance of state boundaries is practiced by diverse actors—labor immigrants and computer hackers, political refugees and al-Qaida networks, multi-national corporations and NGOs. National boundaries as the politically salient distinction become questionable, as do many of the excluding binaries of modern politics. When political space is fungible and solidarity is inscribed within complex geopolitical networks, Left and Right lose coherence as a classificatory system. In this shifting terrain, the appeal of moral absolutism, the simplifying discourse of good v. evil, is understandable, yet absolutism and morality cancel themselves out in practice. Ramadan writes that ethical practice needs to be revived "upstream from law," and democracy depends on it.[43] But democracy is not merely an end to be achieved. When the goals are socio-economic justice, human dignity, and global equality of rights and responsibilities, then democratic means to these goals must be respected. Democracy is a contingent, not an ontological quality. It cannot be possessed without its practice. As a descriptive term, it passes to diverse actors who earn the name through their actions that embody the idea and make it perceptible in the world.

Is a return to authentic cultures at this point possible? Times of transition evoke a longing for the security of authenticity, but precisely this is denied us. No collective will

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Journal of International Human Rights, v. 6, n. 2, Spring 2008, http://www.law.northwestern.edu/journals/JIHR/v6/n2/2/.

43 Ramadan, *The quest for meaning*, p. 80.

be able to go back to the way it was in a world that did not have the global awareness and responsibility of ours today. The global public sphere is an actor now, not merely a Kantian spectator. And democracy is its responsibility. We are in an era of experimentation, when ways forward will not be entirely old or entirely new, entirely authentic or entirely imported. Our practical concerns are shared, globally. They are not issues of dogma, or civilization differences. Whenever and wherever the paradoxes of democracy are addressed, we will find political actors who, far from catching up with the West, surpass it. They may be religious. They may be secular. They may be any sex or gender, any skin color or ethnic background. They will be admired for the creativity of their solutions, and their capacity to share these in a democratic way.

To say that revolution is a rupture in history is not the most radical claim that one can make of historical events. Empirically, repressive reactions do occur. The true rupture is in consciousness, how the present and future are imagined. We would be using too weak a form of expression—too idealist, too Platonic—to say that democracy as a pre-existing idea is actualized in the revolutionary event. The connection needs to be reversed. The very fact, the undeniable reality of collective action, gives birth to the idea. Democracy can exist as thought, and can be thought again, because it happened. Yet each time it occurs, the idea expands. Democracy changes its meaning, means more, as the actions of specific collectives bring it to life each time in a particular form.