

Political Islam and Historical Materialism - An Exchange [series↓]

Comments on Tariq Amin-Khan's text

Samir Amin (March 21, 2009)

more on Imperialism, Marxism & Socialism

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I am not surprised by our Pakistani friend Tariq Amin-Khan's critique. I was expecting it. Therefore, I would like to offer some comments on his criticisms of me, which mainly result from ignorance of what I have written on the questions he raises.

The purpose of my article was quite simply to defend a political strategy that bets on simultaneously defeating Washington's project (and behind it, the collective imperialism of the triad) for military control of the planet and the project of political Islam ("moderate" or "radical"). Moreover, the title of the paper as published in French is explicit: "Defeating the US Project for Military Control of the Planet and Defeating Political Islam are Two Indissociable Objectives". It appears that Tariq Amin-Khan shares this point of view and, like me, recognizes that the objectives of middle class political Islam (so-called "moderate") and the objectives of the "radical" Islamist militants (recruited from the poor classes) are identical. The disagreements concern our proposals for effective strategies to defeat political Islam and, behind that obviously, concern several fundamental theoretical concepts concerning modernity, Eurocentrism, and the formation of the political cultures of various peoples.

I have proposed an analysis of "modernity" and its emergence that is closely connected with an analysis of historical capitalism/imperialism that is anything but "Eurocentric" since it is specifically based on a radical critique of Eurocentrism. Tariq seems unfamiliar with my Eurocentrism, published by Monthly Review Press in 1989. He could supplement his reading later with the 2nd edition, which appeared in French in 2008 and is being published soon by Monthly Review Press. My critique of Eurocentrism is radical, in the sense that it is not limited to exhibiting its expressions (as Edward Said did), but seeks to explain it in terms of the emergence of "modernity," which is itself inseparable from the imperialist expansion of historical capitalism. "Modernity" is thus flawed, contradictory and limited from the beginning, and still is today, because it is "capitalist/imperialist modernity". What Tariq calls the two modernities ("technologistic," on the one hand, and one of "liberty, equality, fraternity," on the other) is exactly what I have written on the subject.

I am surprised that Tariq could believe that I know nothing about the miserable objective conditions of people in the peripheries (including Muslim countries) caused by capitalism, which are the reasons for the success of contemporary political Islam. I have not only written entire books devoted to the polarization inherent in the world expansion of actually existing capitalism (which, consequently, I associate with imperialism at every stage of its development), but have even quite explicitly related the responses of political Islam (and many other contemporary mass movements) to the destructive effects of capitalism on entire peoples.

For that very reason, I have never assimilated the political Islam of the modern world with “traditional,” “pre-colonial, pre-modern” Islam. I have even quite explicitly noted the difference. Specifically in Eurocentrism, I proposed an interpretation of history prior to capitalist modernity which emphasized the similarities in forms of power, which I called “tributary,” that existed in Medieval Christian Europe, the Arab-Muslim Orient, and Confucian China. See in particular my arguments concerning the metaphysical systems that attempt to reconcile Faith and Reason and their similarities beyond the “specificities” of their expression, which I, consequently, contextualized. I quite explicitly said that the methods for managing modern societies—capitalism in its imperialist centers and dominated peripheries—have nothing in common with those from earlier times and long ago categorically rejected “modernization” theories that propose attacking “traditional vestiges”. I even said that there were no longer such “vestiges” so much as forms traditional in appearance that were remodeled to serve capitalist expansion.

Political Islam is a modern phenomenon. Tariq does not see that this was my thesis. All of the ideological, political and social movements of the “modern” world (i.e., of actually existing capitalism, which is both globalized and polarizing, thus imperialist by nature) are modern, because they are inseparable from capitalism. Bourgeois democratic liberalism, whether conservative or reformist, socialisms (social democracy, historical communisms), fascisms, ethnocentrisms (or para-ethnic movements), the nationalisms of the imperialist powers, the nationalisms through which dominated peoples express their resistance, movements of “religious renaissance” in all their forms, be it liberation theology, apparently “fundamentalist” revivals, both Christian and others, and new sects, all these movements are “modern”.

But it is not sufficient to understand them simply as modern. Even more, it is necessary to choose between them and identify those which move society forwards and, on the basis of a critique of capitalist modernity, participate in inventing socialist modernity.

I am a Marxist and defender of the creative potential of Marxism. I think that the tools of historical materialism, and they alone, allow us to understand the true challenges confronting workers and other victims of capitalism and its modernity. Other forms of thought, no less significant (they are even dominant so long as capitalism exists), defend the existing order in the name of bourgeois “liberal democracy” (à la Habermas) or some religious (or para-religious) or ethnic (or para-ethnic) interpretation that includes “respect for property” in its conception of fundamental rights. Some of these formulations have been clearly reactionary; fascism bears witness to that. The fact that the movements inspired by such formulations have recruited their rank and file from the most disadvantaged classes does not change the reactionary utopian character of these formulations. I include political Islam (even political Islams, in the plural), but also political Hinduism, political Buddhism, North American Christian fundamentalism, new sects and others, in this large family of illusions, apparently attached to the past (but in fact modern) and able to mobilize the “poor” in certain circumstances. Their success, like at the present moment, is the result of the failure of the relevant (socialist) lefts to oppose capital’s offensive, which has seized the historic opportunity provided by the erosion and then collapse of the progressive forces that had formed the world after the Second World War.

History does not always put two clear-thinking groups of forces on stage, some conservative, others progressive. The stage is sometimes occupied by forces that, lacking clear-headedness, trap societies

in tragic impasses. I say that political Islam, and others too, are of this nature. I have even written that a goodly number of the “movements” involved in the Social Forums are trapped in such impasses and proposed, beyond analyzing them as such, some principles that could, perhaps, open the way to surpassing them.

I wrote an early critique of the advances that occurred in Asian and African societies during the Bandung era. Beginning in 1963, I analyzed the contradictions and limits of the Nasserist experience and expressed the fear that it would lead Egypt to what became the *infitah* (the comprador opening) and political Islam. This work (Hassan Riad, *L’Egypte nassérienne* [Nasserist Egypt]) circulated clandestinely in Arabic, but was never translated into English. Later developments have not contradicted my fears.

The nature of the impasses to which I have referred cannot be analyzed by “post-modernist” methods. In my opinion, so-called “post-colonial” studies currently fashionable in universities in the United States are themselves nothing more than naive expressions of the impasses in question, an opinion that Tariq does not appear to share.

I still reject with the same stubbornness any form of “culturalism,” which I have defined as the affirmation of “(para)cultural invariants”. This rejection is at the heart of my critique of Eurocentrism, but also of “inverted Eurocentrism” (to use Khaled el-Azm’s expression), such as Islamist and other contemporary culturalisms.

Rejecting the culturalist hypothesis, I dared to assert, quite early (see Samir Amin and André Gunder Frank, *L’accumulation dépendante* [Dependent Accumulation], published in 1978), that “modernity” (and capitalism) had been developing across a large part of the pre-capitalist world and not only in Europe. I continued to explore this question through historical research that led me to point to the early invention of modernity initiated in China three to five centuries before Europe. I also dared to advance the argument that this beginning, visible in the Arab-Muslim world from the first centuries after the *hegira*, had ultimately been aborted and resulted in a long “decadence”. Within this context, I placed the reasons why the Arab-Islamic *Nahda* of the 19th century did not herald an exit from the impasse, but, on the contrary, more firmly trapped the societies concerned. These writings, published with more detailed arguments in Arabic than in their abridged French (and sometimes English) versions, brought me, of course, many critiques coming from those who seek to become reconciled with political Islam (like Burhan Ghalioun).

Given the triumph of historical capitalism in Europe, it is that version of modernity that has been imposed on everyone else, thereby relegating to historical oblivion other possible paths to modernity.

I have never been insensitive to Islamophobia, as Tariq suggests. But Islamophobia is not the only fear that the dominant authorities promote in Western opinion. What about the Sinophobia fueled by the disgraceful defense of the Dalai Lama’s slave-owning theocracy?

The thesis that I have developed in this area is that aging (to the point of becoming obsolete) capitalism/imperialism henceforth needs to commit the collective imperialism of the triad to an ongoing war against the South. The militarization of its globalization is the only means to guarantee access to all the planet’s resources for the exclusive benefit of the countries of the North. This

obsolete capitalism is preparing what I have called “apartheid on a world scale,” which implies collective consent and approval of racist conceptions. Tariq observes this among his students in Toronto, but does not pursue the analysis further.

I do not believe that the hasty identification of the Islam of European and American communities with the political Islam of the Muslim countries is correct (I am not accusing Tariq of this all too frequent confusion).

Islam in these communities (but also negritude and other phenomena of the same kind) is the obvious result of the social discrimination of which poor immigrants are the victims (before being “cultural”). The “communitarianisms” created by the (reactionary) governments of dominant capital, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, as a way of managing this so-called “diversity” reinforce the impact of the illusory “Islamist” (and other) responses and hinder the involvement of the classes concerned in social struggles for their rights and equality. There is nothing the (socialist) left can expect from (illusory) alliances with the communitarianisms of victims. Its responsibility lies elsewhere. The left should be expected to commit itself to working with the communities concerned in struggling for their rights in the prospect of a socialist renewal.

It is always risky to examine political Islam in general, without taking adequate account of concrete situations, which differ from one Muslim country to another. I try to avoid this dangerous amalgamation. However, I am not relinquishing the distinction I have proposed between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, on the one side, and the “other Muslim countries” (themselves diverse), on the other.

Concerning Saudi Arabia, I wrote that Wahhabi Islam is extremely rudimentary, a product of the archaic nomadic society of the Arabian Peninsula. This form has become, thanks to the ocean of petroleum upon which Saudi Arabia floats, an ideology of a state that is itself a subaltern ally of US imperialism; in fact, its unwavering servant. I believe that Tariq shares my viewpoint. The fact remains that, thanks to petro-dollars, Wahhabism is dominant in “Sunni” political Islams, with visibly devastating effects: ultra-reactionary social behaviors, empty ritualistic formalism, criminal confessional excesses (hate of the Shia). One must take these realities into account.

Tariq disagrees with me concerning Pakistan. I do not have the presumptuousness to “refute” him in this area. Tariq knows Pakistan from the inside, I from the outside. I would like to believe that what he says about the potential of his society is correct. I hope it is true.

But I remain unconvinced, despite my lack of knowledge about his country. I dared to write that, for me, the very creation of Pakistan was an aberration and that it condemned the country from the very beginning to plunge into an impasse from which I see no escape, even now. Founded on the refusal to see itself as the Muslim provinces of India, Pakistan can only exist on the basis of the continual assertion of its “Islamic” character. The ruling class, even if it wants to distinguish itself from the political Islams of the middle and working classes, can only adhere to the same founding myth. Thus it is not by chance that Pakistan was Washington’s client state from the beginning, that it was enlisted—with Saudi Arabia, again not by chance—by the United States to form a counterweight to Bandung by creating an “Islamic Conference”. Delhi’s diplomacy understood this quite well and hence chose to move closer to Moscow and even Kabul (at that time called “Communist”). But today

both India and Pakistan are Washington's "friends," forced to manage the conflict between them as well as they can.

Islam's, and political Islam's, situation in the other Muslim countries is quite different. There is generally no confusion here between "national identity" and religious identity. During the Bandung era, and even earlier for some countries, the Arab countries were primarily positive about their Arab nationality (in the singular or plural) and this opened the way to secular advances that were extremely tentative, just like the advances towards democracy. Political Islam here is not a post-colonial phenomenon, as numerous North American academics believe, but a much more recent phenomenon, post-Bandung.

During the colonial period itself, Islam was far from having been at the center of resistance. On this subject, the Islamists have invented a history that is distant from what an examination of reality suggests. The colonial powers understood perfectly well that the exercise of religious authority (here Islam, but elsewhere Hinduism or Buddhism) could be of use to them. The Algerian case is striking in this context: the French never "combated Islam" in their colony. On the contrary, they allowed obscurantist cadis to force complete respect for the "sharia". It was the Algerian Republic that was hesitantly committed to secular reforms. What the Islamists today call for is nothing other than a return to the practices of colonial times!

Nevertheless, I was—and remain—critical of the "advances" of the Bandung era for their tentativeness in all areas, from the autonomy of economic development to the refusal to democratize the management of society and their determination to support Islam as a counterweight to the "Communist threat". The popular nationalist regimes thus prepared the way for the comprador/Islamist (the two terms being indissociable) take over. I wrote, concerning Egypt, that the three forces that occupy center stage—political Islam (the Muslim Brotherhood and others), the "regime" and the Americanophile so-called "democrats"—are in reality representatives of one and the same ruling class, comprador and "Islamist".

But, Tariq tells us, one cannot ignore the fact that political Islam is at war with the United States.

The Washington Administration says so. It needs to do so because it is the only way to legitimize in the eyes of public opinion in the United States and in its subaltern NATO allies the implementation of its plan for military control of the planet, under the pretext of a "war on terrorism". However, the wars in question deserve a closer look.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban indeed attack occupation troops. But they are quite ready to rule Afghanistan in complete friendship with Washington on condition that foreign armed forces leave the country. The United States is here actually trapped because it cannot withdraw from the country because that would destroy the force of their ultimate argument, i.e., the "war on terrorism". Al Qaida is useful, necessary and should not be eradicated.

In Iraq, the attacks of the Islamists are not aimed exclusively against the occupation troops. Should not the CIA's success in creating a civil war between Sunni Islamists and the Shia be taken into consideration? Undoubtedly, Washington has failed politically, since the regime it protects has no credibility. Yet, on the other side, the Iraqi resistance movements are quite far from being able to defeat the occupying military. In comparison, the Vietnamese succeeded in driving out the occupier

without invoking any religious legitimacy whatsoever and without “terrorist” excesses. Does the ideology of political Islam have no responsibility for this Iraqi failure?

In Lebanon, Hezbollah actually inflicted a military defeat on the Israeli attackers. All the same, before them, the Lebanese Communists had proven their ability to do as much in South Lebanon. Hezbollah was established by joint support from Iran, Syria and the Western powers which, despite their differences, feared the Communists more than the Islamists. Hezbollah is, in turn, a political impasse for Lebanon because its political and social project is unacceptable for non-Shia and is probably not even spontaneously accepted with enthusiasm by the Shia, as the Ayatollahs and the Washington Administration want to make us believe it is.

In Palestine, Hamas hardly appears to be any “more effective” in organizing a response to the occupation and Israeli incursions than the “secularists” of other Palestinian organizations were. The latter were eliminated by policies systematically developed by Israel, the United States and Europe.

I have spoken in much more detail on all of these wars than Tariq suspects.

I have difficulty understanding the vehemence of Tariq’s remarks on my position about this subject. For my part, I have no difficulty in understanding why European youth enthusiastically marched behind portraits of Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara and Palestinian flags, but not behind banners of the Ayatollahs and Bin Laden. This should also be understood in Muslim countries.

Yes, I am in favor of adopting the absolute principle of secularism, of separating politics and religion.

Radical secularism is the condition for implementing a creative democracy, one which does not justify its progress by an interpretation from the past, religious or otherwise, which always acts as a conservative obstacle. Radical secularism is inseparable from the aspiration to liberate human beings and society. That is why radical secularism was proclaimed by all the great revolutions of modern times (the French, Russian and Chinese), which led to the best moments of democratic and social progress. Nevertheless, the progress of secularism was slow, governed by the rhythms of the advances of bourgeois modernity, the beginnings of socialist-inclined advances, which opened the way to go beyond this bourgeois modernity, and also by later setbacks that struck the societies concerned.

Bourgeois modernity itself is a diverse phenomenon. The first hesitant steps towards secularism were taken in Europe in order to put an end to the religious wars and substitute the principle of tolerance for confessional fanaticism.

The United States, formed by dissident sects that had migrated from Europe, established this principle of tolerance but never went further than that in its limited concept of secularism. In Europe, secularism itself was conceptualized in a radical fashion only in close association with the great revolutions, particularly during the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution. Elsewhere, in England, Germany and Italy, bourgeois modernity was able to pave the way for itself only by compromising with the ruling classes of the Ancien Régimes, supported by the Churches. Consequently, secularism in these societies remains limited. I am not afraid of being accused of “Francophilia” here by my stand in favor of the radical secularism invented by the French revolutionaries. I am in good company, with Marx.

Secularism, then, has experienced moments of advance and retreat in connection with the requirements of the political strategies of the dominant blocs on which capitalist reproduction is based. I don't hesitate to point out that, on this level as on all other levels of social reality, contemporary Europe is going through a phase of declining secularism in connection with the decline of democracy and the assertion of the exclusive power of the oligopolies. The "European constitution" and all the talk about the "Christian" (or "Judeo-Christian") origins of European civilization testify to that.

Progress towards secularism was even more limited and slower in the dominated peripheries of the world system for obvious reasons connected with the tentativeness and weakness of the leading political and social forces in the social blocs of the national liberation movements. What was achieved in this area never went beyond the stage of "secularizing advances," even in Kemalist Turkey, just like advances on other levels were hardly more than "democratizing".

Pointing out these facts should not lead to the conclusion that radical secularism would be "useless" here and that "moderate" approaches, by reducing the scope of secularism, would be "better," "more respectful of cultural diversity". The long transition to socialism, democracy, emancipation and secularism is the only way to move forward. Undoubtedly, progress on this path will be slow, made up of moments of (limited) advances and (possible) retreats. Secularism, as such, and radical secularism do not concern only "European and Christian" peoples, as the Islamists, Hinduists, Buddhist fundamentalists and ideologues of post-colonialism claim. It concerns everyone: no social democratic progress is possible without the abolition of the slave-owning theocracies of political Buddhism, without the abolition of the sacralization of castes by Hinduism, without abandoning the plan for an Islamic state. Strong advances towards liberation from imperialist domination will not happen without progress towards secularism and creative democracy.

Our moment is one of retreat in all these areas, in the Muslim countries and in other countries, South and North alike. Analyzing the reasons for this retreat and considering political strategies that would make it possible to get out of the tunnel are essential for everyone, South and North.

The question of religious reality, its place in history and in constructing the future, cannot be reduced to the issue of secularism.

I am not one of those who believe that beliefs in the supernatural (thus also their religious forms) will disappear one day "of themselves". I have written that the human being is a "metaphysical animal" who needs to overcome the anxieties of life (even beyond capitalism) by recourse to an always reinvented supernatural. Again, I am in good company: such is my interpretation of "religion as opium of the people" (according to Marx's expression). The opium is necessary, it is the only way to alleviate the pain. But it also carries the risk of sleeping, of forgetting the causes of the pain and abandoning the struggle against them.

I have suggested an interpretation of the history of religions (Christianity and Islam, in particular) that emphasizes the internal transformations through which they have survived social changes, thereby allowing them to become compatible with the requirements of capitalist modernity. I salute contemporary attempts to interpret religious beliefs in such a way that they offer support for the struggle for a future socialism, in particular the efforts of Christian "liberation theology". The Muslim world needs to move in this direction. The 19th century Nahda did not do this, I have argued. Political

Islam is opposed to doing this. I am forced to note here that the only attempt to move in this direction, by Mahmud Taha, was nipped in the bud by the Islamists. To my knowledge, Taha's hanging roused the protests of only two "non-believing" Egyptians (Ismail Abdallah and me). No Islamists, not even so-called "revolutionary" ones, found his execution for "attacking the sacred character of dogmas" appalling. Ali Shariati's attempt to move in this direction in the Iranian Shia world had no repercussions.

Political Islam is not a movement for religious renewal, but only a political movement that mobilizes religious membership in its emptiest, most ritualistic, conformist and reactionary form. Its success does not do away with these characteristics. In these conditions, political Islam could only deviate in the direction of fanatical confessional declarations, leading Sunni and Shia to mutual hatred.

What to do? How do we reconstruct authentically progressive thought and action?

I have categorically rejected the proposals of "so-called democratic political liberalism" in which "democracy (in the Muslim countries) should adapt itself to accepting a strong social presence of Islam". Tariq simply commits an error in interpretation when he attributes to me any support for such a proposal. I denounced this proposal and its corollary, the renunciation of secularism.

The progressive left cannot give up ideological combat. In the Muslim countries, it has the duty to make it understood that political Islam is not the solution, but an illusion that hides a capitulation before the real challenges. It must do so on all levels, from the analysis of its founding texts (to which I contributed by my early critique of Sayed Qotb) to analysis of the political strategies of self-described Islamist organizations.

This necessary struggle is nevertheless not sufficient. The major fight, the one that defines the very nature of a progressive (and socialist, obviously) left, unfolds on the terrain of social struggles for the rights of workers (wages, working conditions, union rights, right to strike), peasants (access to land), women (radical reforms in personal status laws) and citizens (access to education, health and housing). Fighting in these areas is not "to substitute these struggles for the struggle against imperialism". On the contrary, the anti-imperialist fight, which should not be reduced to rhetoric, becomes real and effective only insofar as it is led by the working classes strengthened by the conquest of their rights.

On this plane, the current regimes and the Islamist movements are fundamentally opponents of these social struggles. There is no need to recall the violence of the repressive means they use—together—with the approbation (or silence) of imperialist diplomacy.

There are, however, some signs that indicate the possibility of an escape from the tunnel, in Egypt and Algeria, among other places. The worker strikes in Egypt and Algeria have created the conditions for the emergence of authentic unions. The struggles of Egyptian peasants against the former landowners authorized to recover lands lost during the Agrarian Reform are mobilizing hundreds of thousands of rural inhabitants. All the movements claiming to represent Islam, including those who claim to be the most radical, not only were completely absent in these struggles, but straight away took the official position against them, denouncing the "atheist communists," the "enemies of sacrosanct property," etc., who were, according to them, behind it all!

It is upon the development of these struggles, and these alone, with the support of the progressive and socialist left, that the escape from the tunnel, the success of social and democratic advances, the decline of “Islamist” illusions and the necessary progress towards secularism will depend.

Readings

I shall restrict the list to my writings directly concerned with the matter of this paper, preferably English writings, but mentioning also at least the dates of the French originals. I shall not mention Arabic writings, of little use probably for foreign readers.

Books in English

Eurocentrism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989 (French 1988)).

Delinking (London: Zed 1990 (French 1985)).

Maldevelopment (London: Zed (French 1989)).

Obsolescent Capitalism (London: Zed 2003 (French 2002)).

The Liberal Virus (New York: Monthly Review Press 2004 (French 2003)).

Beyond US Hegemony (London: Zed, 2006 (French 2005)).

The World We Wish to See (New York: Monthly Review Press 2008 (French 2006)).

Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank, Let's not Wait for 1984 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981 (French 1978)).

Books in French

Du capitalisme à la civilisation, Syllepse 2008. (English translation coming soon, Tulika Publ. India)

Modernité, Religion, Démocratie (Lyon: Parangon 2008 (expanded edition of Eurocentrism, English translation, Monthly Review Press, coming soon)).

L'hégémonisme des Etats Unies et l'effondrement du projet européen (Paris: L'Harmattan 2000). (partial English edition in: Nils Anderson (ed), International Justice and Impunity: The Case of the US (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2008).

Samir Amin and André Gunder Frank, L'Accumulation dépendante (Paris: Anthropos, 1988).

Articles in English

“Imperialism and Culturalism Complement Each Other”, Monthly Review, June 1996.

“The Theocratic Temptation: Judaism, Christianity, Islam”, Dialectic, Cosmos and Society, N° 12, 1999

“Confronting the Empire”, Monthly Review, August 2003.