

"Re-Presenting the Present: the Danish Cartoons, Islam and You"
public panel discussion hosted by the Muslim Student Association
School of the Art Institute of Chicago, March 16, 2006

<http://www.artic.edu/webspaces/cartoons>

The following was posted to the SAIC *F news magazine* web site:
"Lower Layer: testing the depths, a blog on world news and politics"

<http://www.fnewsmagazine.com/politics>

Initial postings:

fnewsmagazine wrote this mid-morning: [March 17th, 2006]

"Panel follow-up"

Yesterday's panel discussion did a wonderful job of adding dimension to this issue. The Muslim reaction was examined from a political, philosophical and academic perspective. The panel identified some of the dominant frames the media employed while covering this controversy. Also explored were notions of interpretation, political "neutrality" and rights to free speech. All of which gave historical context and a deeper understanding of the nature of Muslims' fear and anger over the cartoons. Far from being the simple result of a single issue concerning the Prophet Mohammed, the riots were a result of a complex combination of history and current Western and European policies aimed at categorizing and controlling the Middle East.

fnewsmagazine wrote this just before lunchtime: [March 19th, 2006]

"The Whole World's Watching"

There have been two protests in the last week in downtown Chicago. On March 10th, tens of thousands of immigrants wound their way around the loop. The rally came as the U.S. Senate considers a bill to stiffen border enforcement. Last night people filled the streets once again, this time to protest the beginning of the United States' fourth year in Iraq.

Yesterday, after watching the movie *V for Vendetta*, my friends and I were discussing the nature of political dissent. During the conversation someone said, "Really, though, I don't think the sixties did very much." I couldn't agree. Besides the obvious impact it had on African American and women's rights, it seems our current view on demonstration was very much influenced by the past.

Are times really so different that we cannot use the same methods of resistance? What place does protest have in our current landscape, where overt art is deemed reactionary -- where having passion in any direction is seen as a liability.

hahmed says: [March 19th, 2006 at 2:05 PM]

In examining this event as a whole, the cartoons themselves as they exist, the reactions to those cartoons, and the way they have both been framed within the popular discussion, have allowed the possibility of grasping the underlying workings of our society today.

More urgently, it has also given us sight of our current social trajectory: In the discussion Raja Halwani stated that if this situation is to be thought of in terms of an operating polemic composed of the West and Islam, then there will be a "clash of civilizations." This means that this "clash" is entirely projected and need not be the terms in which the world relates to itself.

However, these are the terms that are increasingly being applied to deal with many situations. These are the same terms that allow war to rage in Afghanistan, Iraq and possibly Iran in the near future.

When applied and adopted these terms really proclaim the existence of two different forms of subjectivity on this planet. It seems that these forms can supposedly be distinguished by applying the criteria of freedom -- as one form actualizes and realizes it while the other form's development has been characterized by a lack of it.

This is what allows us to justify not taking a body count of the citizens of Iraq or Afghanistan during the war. They are less than human, or in the process of becoming human and in effect not yet individuals that can be tallied.

As Dr. Keshk stated in his presentation, the study of Orientalism is built on the assumption that the Other is incapable of representing himself and therefore must be represented by whoever is willing to take on the task.

With this thought an aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict comes to mind. The Israelis have continued to charge the PLO with not preventing and in turn supporting terrorist attacks against Israel all the while destroying Palestinian security outposts and police stations which would give them the ability to do so.

This situation is even more complex it seems, as there aren't even distinct sides here, as the regimes in many Muslim countries are authoritarian and oppressive.

In all cases there is the prevention of actual rational order in the face of an abstract rational order (e.g. the clash of civilizations).

-- hahmed

ccutrone [Chris Cutrone] says: [March 20th, 2006 at 7:46AM]

I think that several issues are being conflated here, which will contribute to obscuring rather than clarifying the problems and how to overcome them.

First, about the "body count" in Iraq and Afghanistan: It is not because the Iraqis and Afghanis are deemed "less than human" or are really considered different kinds of human subjects that the U.S. doesn't keep or publish official body counts of casualties of the invasions and occupations there. Rather the reasons for suppressing such information are political: in order not to scandalize and undermine the unfolding political process that is occurring under the occupation. This is a crass estimation and strategy, but there isn't anything more sinister to it.

The brute facts are that the number of casualties (civilian and military/"insurgent") in Iraq is far lower than during the first Gulf War 1990-91, which only lasted a few months; the rate of death currently might indeed be lower than during the 12 years of the "sanctions regime" (during which time over a million Iraqis died as a result: Iraq was bombed by the U.S. and Britain on a daily basis, and many ill, elderly and very young Iraqis died due to lack of food and medical supplies); also the number of casualties is far lower after 3 years of war than those caused when Saddam Hussein had put down the "Shi'i insurgency" after the first Gulf War. (Need I mention the rate of death and destruction during the Iran-Iraq war, with over a million deaths in 8 years.) Also, at this time, the number of Iraqis killed by the insurgency has outnumbered those killed by U.S. and "coalition" military action. So the numbers of deaths themselves do not help provide any insight into the motivations for what is going on today.

So, while being politically opposed to U.S. imperialism, I must also insist on being clear about what is and is not imperialist about the role of the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The U.S. did not launch these wars and is not conducting these military operations with the purpose of killing people (Muslims). The U.S. considers all civilian and even many of the military/combatant deaths unfortunate and regrettable. I think it is important for us to accept this regret as sincere without thereby excusing the U.S. actions or role there.

The U.S. is trying to impose its political will, both as an individual state and, more importantly, as the global hegemonic power (the "cop of the world"), and the only means it has for doing so (in this instance) is military, which is a very blunt instrument, but one which they have tried to use as "precisely" as possible (they are not indiscriminately bombing or gunning down people, which is what the insurgency is doing!).

At the same time, it is clear that large majorities of Iraqis and Afghanis support the official political process as it has been unfolding in both countries, despite the obvious brutalities that result from having a foreign military force occupying one's country. The occupation is seen by most as a "necessary evil." (-- But this is not to say that therefore we should accept it as such!)

So, why is the U.S. asserting itself in these ways, through invasion and occupation? I don't think it is to impose (intentionally) its "cultural values" on Iraq and Afghanistan, or to fight "Islam." The new constitutions in both countries are far more religiously oriented (enshrining Islam as a state religion) than could ever be the case in the U.S. or Europe.

Not only is the U.S. not fighting Islam, but the resistance to the U.S. cannot be understood properly as an authentic "Muslim" response.

The direct opposition to the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq must be addressed specifically. These are not "popular uprisings" against imperialist oppression (which have been very rare in history, anyway) but specific political movements that have an interest in polarizing their societies and geopolitics in particular ways. The U.S. may not be on the side of "freedom," but the insurgency certainly isn't!

One can be opposed to imperialist occupation while also being opposed to the form of "resistance" against it, especially in light of the politics of that resistance and what kind of social-political changes would result if the U.S. were actually to be "defeated," and the "insurgency" were to "win" in Iraq. (We know what would happen if the Taliban regains power in Afghanistan, because they have been in power in the past, with horrific consequences for the people living under them.)

I fear that focusing in under-specified ways on U.S. "imperialism" can be distracting from the real issues and can make it impossible to recognize the true nature of the politics and actions of the insurgency, which I don't think can be endorsed in any way from the perspective of emancipation.

There are 2 articles I would recommend concerning the U.S. occupation of Iraq from the perspective of the Iraqi Left:

An article on emerging working-class politics in Iraq:

http://www.progressive.org/mag_bacon1005 -or- <http://progressive.org/node/2459/print>

A statement by the Iraqi Communist Party on the occupation and the political process unfolding under it:

<http://www.iraqcp.org/members3/0060125icpr.htm>

Now, about the Iran nuclear issue: First, we need to recognize that, no matter what, the U.S. will not allow Iran to develop nuclear technology that could be weaponized (nor will the other global powers allow this development). The Iranian regime is clearly pressing the issue in order to garner as much room for maneuver, both geopolitically and in terms of its own domestic political calculations, but one has to question the nature of the politics involved on the Iranian side and hence deplore how much the regime is willing to risk Iranian lives in furtherance of its political goals.

(The U.S. will be even less accepting of such a chain of events in Iran than it has been in North Korea, for example, which the U.S. has come very close to attacking several times in the past decade -- under Clinton especially -- and was only held back from doing so by the conventional North Korean military threat to Seoul, which, as an important center of capitalist production, could not be risked.)

-- Chris

ccutrone [Chris Cutrone] says: [March 20th, 2006 at 9:59AM]

P.S. On the issue of the abstract vs. an actually rational world order, I think it is important to recognize that global capitalism as it has developed over the past several centuries is indeed a substantially rational order, at least in important ways we would not wish to lose.

Capitalism is a form of social order that exists not only at an abstract level, but at concrete levels as well (not least in forms of science and technology), and is in fact reproduced or regenerated at a concrete, "ground" level all the time, and not merely enforced from the "top-down" by capitalist corporations or imperialist states and geopolitical systems. Moreover, forms of social life identified historically with the emergence and existence of capitalism and which cannot be entirely separated from it (such as liberal freedoms and mass movements for suffrage and social equality) are regarded as being emancipatory for people in an on-going way, and this is not limited to those living in "Western" culture (however such a culture might be defined -- is Japan a part of the "West"?).

Now this is not to say that this global capitalist order is not oppressive and very destructive of actual human beings. But, more importantly, capitalism generates possibilities for a more substantially rational order that it itself represses or undermines. I fear that if, e.g., ostensibly "Muslim culture" is posited as an alternative, more "concrete" rationality to the extant order of global capitalism, then too much is obscured or concealed and not nearly enough is revealed about the nature of present global civilization and its actual possibilities for a more emancipated future.

The actual U.S. role in this global civilization (and hence any supposed opposition to it) is quite complicated, and cannot be taken at face value (e.g., I would ask: Do al-Qaeda, et al. really represent forces for struggling against the injustices in the world or for the possibility of overcoming the worst effects of capitalism? I must say: No!).

It must be recognized that the U.S. acts, at great cost to itself, in the interest of this global capitalist order as its sole "superpower" (and with the active consent of the extant international legal and security bodies and nearly all other nation states -- would a U.S. intervention in, e.g., Darfur, be an "imperialist" act? Is the U.S. occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan today motivated by "humanitarian" concerns and obligations? Yes, and no!).

I would encourage anyone who is interested in this problem of falsely "concrete" politics and the issue of "resistance" and emancipation to read an excellent article by Moishe Postone, titled "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism" (in the journal *Public Culture* 18.1, Winter 2006).

Postone's article can be accessed in PDF format at:

<http://publicculture.dukejournals.org/cgi/reprint/18/1/93>

-- Chris

lee says: [March 24th, 2006 at 12:17AM]

Having read the recommended Postone article, with point taken (I hope), I wonder what this implies about the potential sincerity of Islamic reform movements. This phrase is possibly problematic because it implies ideologically based political movement, qualified dogmatically, and with the political, social and economic reality that it would operate within, this would seem to immediately refer to what Postone was describing as characterizing the likes of Sayyid Qutb, for example. In other words, it seems to place Islamic reform movement, which must necessarily respond to its political, present history, capable of nothing more than the dualism of hegemony and reaction. This would be attributed to the specifically ideological basis from which such a movement would be operating.

Islam in form is an operative concept for many populations however. From my understanding, legal thought (that is, jurisprudence, not the catch-phrased "Shariah," invoking Muslim government as a noun, though not a verbal one) would theoretically have the potential to anticipate the context within which it forms, and then perhaps provide a more orderly basis for "dealing with" something such as a grave cartoon fiasco. This begs of the Muslims (including those from minority Muslim states) a self-awareness fit for such a task, though. Islamic Modernists, as well as Fundamentalists with whom they share a methodological thread (although categorized in extremely different ways), also speak of the same distinctly social organizational properties of Islam as a religion that seem to point to the notion of a struggle with the self as it is capable of operating within the whole. Isn't there then a potentially practical element to this approach? All I'm asking I suppose is, given an understanding of the overarching social goals of Islam and the methodologically-inclined nature of Islamic law, does Islamic/ideological credence (even considering that some of those with its fidelity believe in an inherently terrestrial, social orientation of this ideology) invariably mean that reform will always come in the form of mere reaction to the riding perception of imperialism? And, if Islamic thought is not capable of retaining its own consistency and tension in this case (for there is precisely something internal which is at stake, even though it is treated as though it were external), how do Muslims from all over maintain this distinct mode of expression over events that offend that identity?

ccutrone [Chris Cutrone] says: [March 24th, 2006 at 9:30AM]

I think there is a problem with insisting on the role of Islam per se. It's not a matter of sincerity but rather of the nature of the object in question: Are people to be regarded as "Muslim" above all other considerations/categories? If so, in what sense?

Why should movements have to be qualified dogmatically (in the sense of being justified according to dogma)? What are the "social goals" of Islam? And how do they relate to other, new forms of social being to which people today are subject? Is Islam appropriate to new social realities, and, if so, in what ways? Mustn't Islam change accordingly? How do fundamentalists and modernists share a "methodological thread," and towards what end(s)? (The preservation of Islam?) How is the "consistency" and/or "tension" in Islam to be defined, and what would it mean to "maintain" Muslim identity as a "distinct mode of expression"? (-- Is this because offense is taken by one as a Muslim? But what other kinds of interests and possibilities are being expressed?)

I think that the problems are not best understood in terms of hegemony and/or imperialism. There is a problem with the idea of "cultural imperialism," for cultures change and never really exist in isolation (either presently or historically) from what might be termed "other" cultures.

To get to the more emphatically political matters: Is it the global system that is hegemonic or the U.S.? In a sense, both are, but in different senses and at different levels. Most anti-capitalism is very one-sided in its conception of capitalism. So it is very important how capitalism is defined and what one is trying to overcome about it.

This is why I said in the panel discussion (and maintain) that Bush et al. are not fighting Islam: they are fighting to preserve a global order (in which most Muslims have concrete stakes).

So, the question, then, is, what role does Islam have in the struggle to overcome a specifically pernicious form of global society/civilization (capitalism)? We must at least entertain the idea that perhaps Islam per se has no role in such emancipation, or, if it does, then only tangentially so (cf. the role of Catholicism/Christianity and strands of Catholic/Christian "liberation theology" in Latin American social struggles for emancipation).

Why must one insist on some kind of intrinsic/essential relationship/role between/of Islam as such and/in emancipation? Does one mean by "Islam" the religion/"ideology" or the "culture"? (Are these separable, how so?) How much is one conceding to supposedly intractable ways of thinking/life? Is it Islam itself that demands emancipation (from capitalism) or (Muslim) people? (Is the "opposition" to capitalism conceived in terms of its obstacles to the practices of religious values?)

In other words, it all boils down to whether one is involved primarily in a conservative or progressive/emancipatory approach to the problems of modern society. -- It's not that one is to be preferred over the other dogmatically, but about being clear to oneself about what one is doing. Marx, for one, regarded capitalism as an inexorable social and historical reality, and considered that the only way out of it was through it. As far as Qutb et al. are concerned, I defend the present social reality of capitalism on its right

flank against such (and other right-wing/reactionary ideologies/movements) because I see emancipatory possibilities in capitalism that are (further) repressed/suppressed by such "conservative" (really transformative) social visions.

To get back to an earlier point [from the March 19th posting]: This is not about some people having subjectivity defined by emancipation/freedom and others by the lack of it; rather, everyone is in essentially the same boat as far as the problem of freedom and emancipation is concerned. Freedom is an aspiration and a task, and capitalism (as the present form of social organization/civilization) is the greatest obstacle to realizing freedom today. -- Capitalism is a global phenomenon impacting the possibilities for greater freedom for all human beings today. When Bush et al. say "freedom" it is ideological to the extent that this articulates a position of unfreedom as regards capitalism, treating conditions of capitalism as already providing for the highest possible form of social organization for freedom. But it is no less ideological when "freedom" from the ill effects of modern society or "Western imperialism" ("cultural" or otherwise) is understood as a "return" to religious values. Those who are "opposed" to modern social conditions of capitalist "freedom" (e.g., religious fundamentalists) risk/entertain bringing about conditions that are even worse to the extent that their social visions -- even if they were ostensibly "opposed" to capitalism, but they are not! -- are impossible to truly realize anyway, but are only rationalizations for further/increased suffering!

To address an emerging controversy: When Afghani government officials say that it is impossible to go from "Taliban rule" to "freedom" "overnight," hence justifying the proposed execution of a convert to Christianity, when they try to justify manifest disparities between social possibilities for individuals in Afghanistan vs. (for instance) in the U.S. and Europe, they are not only rationalizing an atrocity but selling Afghani (Muslim) people very short in terms of their own social possibilities, and are therefore guilty of (further) repressing those possibilities!

-- Chris

Marco says: [March 26th, 2006 at 11:59PM]

In Chris's last post he asks what the purpose of the preservation of Islam might be. When this is asked exclusively in the framework of emancipatory politics, it appears to be that the place it would have would be similar to liberation theology in Latin America. Its strength would lie not in its religious/philosophical content, but in its capability as a center around which to organize and strengthen communities to emancipate themselves. Is it possible though, taking into account the dynamic of potential emancipation that constitutes capitalism, to see Islam, or for that matter, any other religion, not as a means but as an end in itself? If the Afghani convert's right to self-determine his belief should be defended as a basic freedom, couldn't religion be seen as part of a thrust towards liberation from capitalism, in that its worldview potentially negates its ideological tropes? Would this only be possible in bad faith?

I think it is important to speak of cultural imperialism, not because cultures should be autonomous or have ever been (they haven't), but what is seen as imperialism or American hegemony is really an expression of the consolidation and uncontrolled expansion of the means of producing ideology. With the increasing speed of the development of communications technology, is it possible that the culture industry might become so ubiquitous as to become invisible and undermine the emancipatory dynamic of capitalistic social relations.

If this is so, wouldn't religion have the possibility of being a space in negation of capitalistic logic? If something like Islam is seen as a mere practical means towards a negation of capitalism, it would have to follow either the dangerous, fundamentalist or the positive, "liberation theology" route. But is it impossible for it, in its most enlightened configurations, to form part, as its own end, of the possibilities for non-reified thought offered by the world as it is today? As an atheist I have no experience of this, but I could sympathize with a framework that resists ideology.

ccutrone [Chris Cutrone] says: [March 27th, 2006 at 6:19AM]

I myself am ambivalent about liberation theology, which I do not see as the most efficacious form for recognizing emancipatory possibilities. The point in defending an individual's freedom of religion is in order to defend other kinds of freedom: freedom of thought, etc. While I am certainly not enthusiastic about an Afghani convert to Christianity, I do recognize how horrific it would be to execute someone for his religious beliefs!

I don't think one should be so quick to concede that, "as an atheist," one has no experience of how religious thought and feeling might point beyond reified thinking. "Religious" consciousness, even (or perhaps especially) as an "end in itself," can be a form of reification, as it is in fact for almost all of its believers most of the time. (The matter of reification is itself complex and double-sided: reification also has an emancipatory side.) I don't think that religious thought or feeling is different per se. Rather, religious ideas are means of expressing universal aspects of humanity as they have developed and continue to change. This was my point about religion (Islam) changing. It is not that religious thoughts and feelings are in bad faith in themselves, rather it is bad faith to believe that one is truly participating in or returning to an actual structure of feeling and thought as it had existed for others a hundred years or several centuries ago. Islam and other religions have already changed. When people think that they relate to the story of Jesus directly, that it is not a metaphor or symbol subject to interpretive transformation in the present, but seems to present itself as being literally true, generating desires for a return to a more basic and less compromised form of human existence and community, then this is in bad faith, for it reflects more a will to believe than authentic consciousness. So, it is the conservative/fundamentalist self-understanding of religious ideology, its apparent self-evidence, that is in bad faith.

But ideology itself is double-sided. Strictly speaking, there is no sharp dividing line between ideology and authentic consciousness, for we experience the world through socially constituted structures of feeling and thought, all of which might be regarded as ideology. (Kant, for one, points out that we experience ourselves as irreducible to nature; Hegel refers to this irreducible humanity of the human being as Geist/Mind/Spirit.) Ideology is social in nature and therefore inseparable from humanity. But, usually, what we mean by ideology is in the pejorative sense of reified thinking or thinking (or feeling! -- for forms of feeling are also subject to critique!) by formula or rote, which involves flinching from really thinking things through and relying instead upon given formulas (dogmas). But ideology, in an unfolding historical sense, is best understood as a necessary form of appearance (in the critical senses articulated by Marx, Nietzsche, Lukács, Benjamin, Adorno, et al.), which must be pushed further to the degree that we recognize the limitations of extant forms of social being and consciousness and how they might point beyond themselves. The ideology of our parents just won't do. So, to get back to it, I understand, e.g., liberation theology as an interpretation of given religious ideology (Catholicism/Christianity) that points to social-emancipatory transformation -- but an ideology that does not leave its (ostensible) religious basis untransformed.

Insisting that one is being traditional or conservative in one's beliefs, one's feelings and thoughts, can be a rationalization and repression of one's actual thoughts and feelings to the extent that one's consciousness is motivated by fear. When one suddenly realizes that

one is experiencing something for which one doesn't know how one is feeling/thinking or should feel/think, this realization of freedom from established patterns of thought and feeling can be quite frightening, if also liberating. (Such transformative experience is also indicative, importantly, of the experience of modern art and how it distinguishes itself historically from other forms of aesthetic-cultural practice.) But this points to the transformation of oneself, which is not always a welcome experience, but is nevertheless necessary, for it represents the social impact on consciousness.

Society transforms in ways subject to (alienated) structures of capital. This transformational dynamic impacts consciousness indirectly: it is not identical to it for it is not determined by consciousness (but consciousness in its limitations might allow for it). Capitalism is the (alienated) context for transformations of forms of social being and consciousness.

Technology is a poor way of understanding culture industry. (Again, the concept of "resistance" is indicative of a certain despairing of the possibility of emancipatory transformation within and through modern social forms. There's no reason to consider a child playing his Xbox in the suburbs of Baghdad to be more lost to emancipatory potential or less "free" than a kid in rural Afghanistan who has no access to TV, indeed it might be just the opposite -- unless one is embracing a conservative social vision that is hopeless anyway. For the Xbox represents an inexorable destiny!) Rather, technology is used in certain (limited) ways (and, significantly, not in other ways!). The internet, etc., are only media whose experience and potential significance is really structured by forms of subjectivity. So modern forms of communication and culture are not merely traps for feelings and consciousness, but they can become that in lieu of the potential for emancipatory social transformation that goes unheeded (but this is just as true for forms of hermetic/autonomous or traditional/craft art!). Our subjectivity is constituted through what Adorno would term "culture industry," which is only another term for capitalism, in its cultural guise: there is no outside of "culture industry" any more than there is an outside of capitalism, for it inheres first and foremost, before any exposure to television, etc. in the patterns of feeling and consciousness generated socially that make the meaningful experience of photography, recorded music, etc., possible in the first place. These patterns of feeling and thought that constitute the individual's consciousness are impacted by social forms in the global context of capitalism as it has unfolded and developed over the course of the past several hundred years. Everyone is already in it and hence tasked with changing it in emancipatory ways; it's the idea of (the possibility of) "resisting" it that is in bad faith!

-- Chris

[ccutrone says: \[March 27th, 2006 at 7:25AM\]](#)

P.S. I think it is problematic to imagine "communities" as agents of emancipation. This is romantic anti-capitalism, because it imagines that communities exist in ways separable from capitalism. Emancipation is mediated through individuality, not least because capitalism is an alienated form of society; unproblematic reference to the reality of "community" is in bad faith, for we cannot escape the contradiction between the individual and community/society that is an inexorable reality of modern subjectivity.

hahmed says: [March 27th, 2006 at 3:35PM]

I would like to step back a bit.

First, I would like to ask about the nature of dialectical unfolding of society in the contexts of Islam and Secular societies. I feel I have to give some background about the nature of Islam and Islamic society as well.

In Secular society progress takes the form of arriving at a positive by negation of the reified construction which composes society to that point. As Chris stated in the panel discussion, secular society in its current form as only recently come to be and out of great contention. This form of development requires that all things are open for such a negation. The degree to which they (e.g. art) are open to or contain this criticality in themselves, they facilitate this form of development. The positive that arises -- if it is to provide possibilities to realize emancipation -- cannot be described directly or positively as that attempt would propose a naturalization of that which is being asserted and undermine any social development as it tries for a form of objectivity.

The development of an Islamic society takes the form of a negotiation between the absolute (as it is known through the Quran) and the particular (what is experienced on the ground by a Muslim in his current social position). The Quran states itself to be a guide to man from Allah. It states obligations that all Muslims must abide by (e.g. a belief in God and that Muhammad is his last messenger, fasting, alms-giving, prayer five times a day, and if it is possible, a pilgrimage to Mecca). These obligations give a certain form to the life of a Muslim and in effect to the structure of society. This form is not finite, as much of the life of a Muslim is still determined by mediating aspects of how he relates to himself and to one another -- e.g., Capitalism.

The word Muslim literally means "one who as surrendered." This implies that one has come to know the variety of possibilities of what one can be and has instead chosen to actualize certain possibilities. In order to surrender you must know what it is you are surrendering. The Muslims life is characterized by this struggle -- as one can never surrender entirely, because of the negotiation necessitated by the constant flux of life.

So, the form of development of an Islamic society is to realize a synthesis between the absolute and the particular as guided by the Quran. This does not imply a regression back the 7th century (as that would be in bad faith). However, it means that the development of a Muslim Society is centered around certain principles (and the degree to which they are actualized). This distinction characterizes the difference between the way in which an Islamic society must develop and the way a Secular society must develop: It is not the degree to which it opens up emancipatory possibilities for an individual but the degree to which an individual can actualize definite principles that characterizes the development of Islamic society.

There are similarities between the two forms of development. Islamic society on a scale, has no actual hierarchy among men in the form of a clergy (although countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia now appoint and regulate their Imams), all decisions of law must be made by a process of conference between schools of thought which vary widely. Certain portions of the Quran can be taken to deal directly with capitalism, for instance Sud or interest is forbidden in Islam and recently Islamic banking firms have begun to grow in

popularity in the United States. Also, the Quran outlines financial rights for an individual. The alms-giving provides a form of distribution to of wealth (2.7 % of net capital given annually by all). The month of Ramadan is the center of the year. Prayer five times a day dictates the rhythm of the day preventing it from being defined by 9 to 5. The aforementioned principles are actual rational orders that give form to a social structure. This is not to say that it is exclusive, what I am describing is not an alternative, but it is a balance in hierarchy in orders. The relationship between the actual rational orders of capitalism and Islam is what interests me. The points at which they intersect can provide possibilities to work through capitalism.

One example of the difference is: Chris presented the idea of what it means for society to try and explain homosexuality by using genetics (the Gay gene). That this would result in the limiting of one to relate to oneself, as one's behavior is not of one's volition by of genetic composition. Recently I heard an Imam bring up a similar point, that scientists have also tried to explain religion/prayer with genetics (the God gene). He dealt with this idea with the Quranic category of Fitra -- idea that it is human nature to follow God. Modernity is characterized as the breaking of "the circle" that that was contained in and of God (Lukács), however, it is clear here that for some the circle is not broken.

The point I would like to focus on is, what is the nature a dialectical unfolding of Islamic society as it exists under Capitalism? Considering what I have said about society and the individual in Islam and as provides the structure of living for millions of Muslim's around the world. As Islamic practice is how one relates to oneself and the world, how can this present possibilities to negotiate capitalism. How can this be expressed without creating a polemic?

I would also like to say one thing concerning the Abdul Rahman case in Afghanistan which could also help to frame the situation as it is now. Ccutrone stated that that the current war cannot be thought of as a war on Islam and then cited how Islam had actually been enshrined in the new constitutions of Afghanistan and Iraq. This form of Islam was determined by the leaders of the country. The U.S. gave the Afghanis the freedom to realize ideas about themselves as they relate to Islam in their governing structure. However, this particular issue has been dealt with 13 times in the Quran under the category of Rida -- to go back on one's religion. It states that to be a Muslim is a matter of consent and an agreement with God. This agreement can be broken by the individual with no social consequence. The only point at which there can be action take against one who has committed rida is to in the case of Hiraba -- when large groups of people convert out of Islam and come back to (militarily) attack the community they were once a part of, in that case they can be killed -- but it is a matter of defense. So what has been allowed to be enshrined in the Afghani constitution is a vulgar form of Islam that contradicts the Quran. This is where things get tricky, as the U.S. has allowed for the perpetuation and vulgarization of a religion that is having direct consequences on the lives of all Muslims (as it threatens to undermine the knowledge of Islamic principles), and has very real consequences for the citizens of Afghanistan. If the U.S. is to allow for this relationship with religion in a country then does it not necessitate an order to make sure that it is appropriate? For instance, Iran (in the abstract) -- a nominally Muslim country -- has a governing system that depends upon the conference of Islamic scholars to arrive at its laws (Iran however, has limited severely what it considers to be a scholar).

The last thing I would like to mention, that might be apparent in just writing this email. In trying to know what possibilities Islam might hold for the Left in the context of capitalism -- what are the categories and terms that can be used? Islam operates in terms that always point back to the Quran. In this discussion of Islam, whether political and now or whatever, requires a negotiation of Islamic and Marxist categories and terminology -- how can this be done? It may be a small example of the main point I mentioned earlier.

-- Haseeb

ccutrone says: [March 27th, 2006 at 5:55PM]

First of all, Muslim societies have known capitalism, in a certain sense -- meaning, commercial trading -- for at least as long as the "West," and, in some ways for longer than the West has.

Also, how can we ignore the glaring fact that the entire Muslim world today is comprised of capitalist economies and states, as it has been for at least many decades if not for centuries?! (The only exception would be the Central Asian republics during the Soviet era.) (-- By capitalism, in this instance, I mean economies defined by the market and private property.) So there is absolutely no contradiction between capitalism and Islam!

Usury, or interest earning, is not capitalism, any more than trade is: modern capitalism is defined, historically, by a free market in wage labor, and a money economy that meets the subsistence needs of the vast majority of people. Interest, in the modern sense, is what allows one to preserve the value of one's savings (capital) in the face of a dynamic economy (i.e., to offset value loss due to inflation). Modern interest is not equivalent to usury (which was banned to Christians as well, and has a tradition of being illegal to this day). The definition of capitalism suggested here has very anti-Semitic overtones!

(By the way, the mandatory alms-giving mentioned is quite a regressive tax for people, which would obviously be a far greater burden on poor people than on rich people! In the U.S., such a "flat tax" idea is associated with the radical right wing! As a mandatory religious tax, it is obviously very problematic, for it assumes that everyone is Muslim.)

I think it's curious that the assumption of an inherent conflict between Islam and capitalism has been assumed in this conversation. Since this is empirically inaccurate, I think that what's at work here is an assumption of a contradiction between capitalism and culture. But "culture" cannot be taken for granted, but must be interrogated as well!

This is also where the matter of U.S. "imperialism" becomes tricky. Is it really the case that the U.S. is encouraging a "vulgarized" Islam (to undermine Islam?) in places like Afghanistan and Iraq? Doesn't this attitude necessarily disregard the self-understanding and stated wishes of the people (including imams et al.) who have been involved in drafting these constitutions? Are they all frauds? What does this say about people in the Muslim world? Are they just dupes with no agency whatsoever? It sounds like the U.S. is being blamed for everything! And this involves a highly condescending attitude towards people in the Muslim world.

Capitalism subjects the U.S. no less than any other polity or social or cultural group. Bush's actions are constrained by capitalism. (For example, it would have helped Bush's policies immensely, both "foreign" and "domestic," if there had not been an economic recession during his first term.) So capitalism is a social system that constrains all the actors within it, although clearly with more dire consequences for those who are more economically vulnerable!

The issue here seems to resolve around the matter of individualism vs. communalism. At this level, differential conditions of capitalism matter. Capitalism historically has been associated with the possibility of self-legislating subjects, which are obviously undermined by degraded economic conditions.

But the matter of self-legislation and hence the popular sovereignty of the state is key. (A key criterion of popular sovereignty is violated by the role of religiously qualified experts in Muslim jurisprudence, because it places judgment entirely outside popular democratic control and in the hands of self-selected religious authority, no matter what form this takes.)

Religious authority was a key subject of critique for the Enlightenment for just these reasons, because religious authority violates the idea of a rational political order of popular sovereignty. But the Enlightenment was and is not reducible to capitalism, and in fact it gave birth to modern movements struggling against capitalism, when, for instance, the radical questioning of society during the French Revolution refused to stop at private property and the market but insisted on challenging these hallowed principles of capitalism in the struggle for greater social equality and individual freedom. Islam, as a religion, obviously mandates submission to an extrinsic authority -- God -- and is therefore anti-enlightenment, and is really opposed to individual freedom. ("Freedom" to submit to immutable "principles" is no freedom at all!)

-- Chris

ccutrone says: [March 27th, 2006 at 6:36PM]

P.S. I must beg leave of this conversation at this point; I will not reply in this forum after this. For there does not seem to be enough common ground for fruitful dialog in these specific terms. I believe that (*pace* hahmed's discussion of Lukács) the "circle" has indeed been broken, and irremediably so (though many will continue to live in denial or with no apparent need for recognition of this). What seemingly cannot be questioned is the prioritization of Islam over all else. I do not object to this priority per se, and I can understand the motivations for it, but it does exclude me from being able to contribute to the conversation productively in any degree, beyond a certain tangential remove, from what seem to be the abiding concerns here (about which I am unqualified to speak). I hope my comments have been helpful and stimulating and/or challenging. I would especially encourage further rumination on the issue of conservative vs. progressive/emancipatory intent.

Best,
Chris

hahmed says: [March 30th, 2006 at 9:48AM]

I would like to make it clear that I was not pushing for an ideological hierarchy to be expressed in the form of pedagogy.

What would separate my statement from this is that In order to recover the principles contained within the Quran requires a negation of the vestiges of past implementations of these principles. The degree to which any of the apparatus of the past was maintained and carried over into the present is the degree to which the present implementation is contrived. So, as is the case with Emancipatory politics -- no tradition can be maintained for tradition's sake as it leads to a retardation of social development in any case.

This is why I stressed the use of Quranic categories as they are a means of accessing the Quran, and are reserved specifically for the study of Quran. These categories do not point towards ethnic traditions of Arabs or whatever.

These are not principles are not exclusive as they often take the form of moral law. It is important to claim and objectivity (which can/should be disputed) in order to establish an idea of ethics that applies to all people.

When I mention that the Circle is not broken for some -- I do not mean to put towards a completely external and definite God. The Islamic conception of Allah bounds him up everything. Out of the 99 attributes of God none can be isolated, this creates a conception of the world that is of and in Allah. Once God can be located (e.g. external to us) "he" ceases to be such. I did not mean to invoke pre-Enlightenment thinking that placed a very clear hierarchy of men on society.

Islam also requires self-legislating subjects as well. As one must struggle to negotiate the abstract principles into the particular -- this struggle is the actual formative element of a Muslim as such. Again, these principles cannot be neatly parceled out -- if there is the case in which they can be it is definitely in a vulgar form. This being said the power does not lie in a single group of men that might act as authorities because it essentially must reside in each individual in order for them to be Muslim at all. A Muslim is characterized by realizing principles of Islam and then actualizing them. This prevents the possibility of alienation from one's own religion. It is the case then that the freedom to realize possibilities within oneself is essential to Islam as such. Islam is the choice of certain possibilities over others by a self legislating individual (any of those possibilities can be realized whether they accord with Islamic principles or not is what allows one to define oneself as Muslim or not). This is why I mention Ridda above. The degree to which one engages with these principles is the degree to which they can be realized and actualized.

This necessitates a drive for knowledge for all Muslims -- the First word to the prophet was "Read". The degree to which one has knowledge of one's own principles is the degree to which they can actually be self-legislating individuals and claim ownership over those principles.

The paradoxical idea of surrender is interesting to me here; that is why I mentioned it earlier. As the degree to which one becomes self-legislating is also the degree to which one gains the ability and will to surrender it to Allah they have come to awareness. You

cannot surrender if you have nothing to surrender or have no knowledge of what it is you are surrendering to.

For the reasons stated above I am still interested in discussion of the social development of an Islamic Society which seeks to realize and actualize principles vs. a secular society with emancipatory intent -- which seeks to break the determinate order of relations under capitalism to allow for an the freedom for an individual to realize possibilities within himself -- Emancipation.

Both require a dialectic or a negation, but are very different from one another. What are its dynamics in either case? And both social situations exist under capitalism in which our relationships to one another and objects are determined under a rational order. What is the circumstance of the Muslim when there lies the possibility of the reification of consciousness?

I'm not sure if this conversation is over -- but I felt I wasn't clear earlier and had to take into consideration Chris's comments.

-- Haseeb

lee says: [March 31st, 2006 at 11:59AM]

I'll try again.

I suppose the problem with approaching that issue Haseeb is doing so from the "nature of Islamic societies." Here is how it seems to me. The overall way of going about this seems a little hasty, and is also difficult to respond to if one is not well acquainted with the vocabulary that is heavily relied on. I'm not sure why you would want to compare capitalism and/or secularism to these societies, or to Islam, "high" or "low." It all appears monolithic. I feel I am not appropriately equipped for much of this. However, in the way of the zakah or charity tax, it was imposed at Medina, a community building time, and was designated specifically for the poor (explicitly states as such) ransoming war captives, relief for those in chronic debt, and so on (Q 9:60). The specific amount is not mentioned in the Qur'an, so essentially the tax is conceptually flat, because it is up to people carry out this obligation with what one can do. The designation is primarily for the poor, so, while it has been equated to a flat tax (and it does assume one is Muslim, but that is the running assumption/"goal" for a community of people), its very foundations seem to lie in its utility for the prevention of hoarding money, thus redirecting funds to those causes that need them (including but not necessarily limited to the poor). If a person cannot pay zakat, he or she is the one who is supposed to benefit from it. This is where jurisprudence would come into play, for example, what an appropriate function of zakat for this time period is.

Speaking of which (jurisprudence), while it does theoretically require educated people (those who know the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions, Hadith), this does not equate to a hierarchy. (This is with regards to Sunni Islam.) Since there was no Church (which maintained a definition of what it was to be Catholic), secularization has different implications. There are no clergy, and in fact, there are many different interpretations of the law, which assumes agreement on a few fundamental concepts -- prayer, the zakah, monotheism, not killing (there are qualifications, like self-defense), not stealing. These are explicitly prescribed or proscribed. Other matters, however, are subject to interpretation. There are many different people who interpret and thus many different opinions. In fact, no one is more "correct" in terms of Islamic identity, but there are of course moral conflicts. It's sort of an unapologetic understanding that there is a certain amount of potentiality for interpretation. Actions are taken in the context of interpretation, because this is the idea: the Qur'an informs one's actions, but what does it say? Thus the whole of "Islam" does not change with these different interpretations, because it is not constituted by a Church, but rather by the Qur'an's revelation. Interpretations will win the favor of different groups of people, and they will conflict in so far as their resulting practices (and abstinence from such practices where applicable) conflict (for example, in times of war). However, with this structure, one cannot say someone else who believes in the Qur'an is not Muslim, such action is what one finds with al-Qaeda. This is also why then there cannot be a vulgar Islam I think, because the nature of the concept of Islam cannot be "naturalized," even if it is enacted in regressive ways that are dictated by cultural tendencies. So rather than imagining any sort of relevance strictly in terms of Islamic societies, maybe it would be better to conceptualize it in terms of legal structure, because dynamic disagreement on legal issues is not a bad thing, but progressive, I would think in this context.

So, I would say that Islamic “categories” are essential for Muslims, definitively so. A statement like, “The degree to which any of the apparatus of the past was maintained and carried over into the present is the degree to which the present implementation is contrived,” would seemingly overlook the organic historical nature of specifically legal methods. If you mean by this that the historic methods should be carefully regarded with the understanding of cultural influences (and this would be subjectivity?), then that seems essential. However, I don’t believe you can simply write off Muslims of the world, but rather look at the legal history that they are living out in this world and how it is methodologically affected by capitalism and secularism. So it seems with all of this historical patterning, maybe taking into consideration the Islamic thought structure (legal structure) for such reflection of the Muslim world is essential, because for obvious reasons this was not the historical priority for Western thinkers. I know that will sound short sighted maybe to the extent of naïveté, but, there is a specific sense of history and historiography that the Islamic worldview operates upon too, isn’t there? And if you’re trying to do what I think you are, it would seem necessary to me.