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Jihad Revisited

2004

In the mid-'90s I was invited to a big philosophy conference in Libya. I wrote a little paper on the influence of "Neo-Sufism" on Col. Qaddafi and his *Green Book*. I wondered if the Libyans would even allow me to read it. After all, Q came to power in 1969 by overthrowing a king who was also a Sufi master. Perhaps he had repudiated the influence of Sufism on his own life and thought?

Turned out the Libyans loved the paper and told me I was correct: in a sense the Libyan Revolution had been directed against corrupt Sufism on behalf of reformed Sufism. Unfortunately, Q himself never showed up at the conference to confirm or deny this, but I'm sure they were right.

Neo-Sufism arose in the 19th century in response to the corrupt authoritarian Sufism of colonial times and partly in response to colonialism itself. Anti-French resistance in Algeria was spearheaded by the great Emir Abdel Kader, guerilla chief and brilliant Sufi shaykh in the school of Ibn Arabi.

Neo-Sufis broke with the medieval concept of the all-powerful "master." Instead, they sought initiation in dreams and visions. In North Africa, the Sanussi Order and the Tijani Order, amongst others, were founded by seekers who'd been empowered in dreams by the Prophet Mohammed himself.

The Neo-Sufi orders were also conceived and shaped to some extent as reform movements within Islam, in competition with modernism & secularism on one hand and Salafist/Wahhabi neo-puritan "Islamism" on the other. Education & health and economic alternatives to colonialism were stressed in the Sanussi Order in Libya. And when armed struggle against Italian rule erupted, Sanussi fuqara (dervishes) led the uprising.

After independence, the head of the Order became King Idris I. Young Moammar Qaddafi, born in a Sanussi village to Sanussi parents, attended a Sanussi elementary school and high school. In England for military training in the '60s, the young officer read Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* and absorbed some New Left ideas, including "council communism" and the notion of the Spectacle. (See *The Green Book*, esp. the section on sports.)

Libyan Islam is not "fundamentalist," as so many Americans seem to believe. In fact it's anti-fundamentalist. The Islamists hate Q as a heretic, innovator & crypto-sufi. The Libyan ulema (religious authorities) declared the Ahadith (the Prophetic traditions) to be non-canonical, an extremely "liberal" position. There is still a Council of Sufi Orders in Libya, and the Sanussi Order still exists ("Just not the royal branch of it," as a Libyan delegate told me).

Elsewhere in the Islamic world, however, Neo-Sufism largely failed to provide a paradigm for contemporary spirituality or politics. "Westernization" and its reactionary double "Islamism" have swept the field. The old Sufi ideals of tolerance, difference, cultural depth, the arts of peace — as the Tunisian poet Abdelwahab

Meddeb asserts in *The Malady of Islam* (Basic Books, 2003) — are despised by both secular modernists and rabid neo-puritans.

Mebbed also points out that the Islamists by no means adhere to "anti-materialist values." They adore technology and Capital as fervently as Westerners — provided it's "Islamic" tech and "Islamic" money, of course.

The synthesis of mysticism and socialism, envisioned by anti-Capitalist/anti-Soviet thinkers of the '60s and '70s like Ali Shariati of Iran, or Col. Q himself, appears to be a lost cause — along with "third world socialism" in general, and "third world neutralism" as well. The very terms indicate their historical emptiness: how can there be a third world when the "second world" has imploded and vanished?

The conference in Tripoli turned out to be a curious circus of "lost causes," including two anarchists from New York (we were cheered as heroes for defying the "travel ban"), countless African liberation fronts, the interesting French "New Right" philospher Alain de Benoist and some Australian Red/Brown types, two charming Turkish Greens, a Slovenian anarchist, a clique of Parisian Maoists, etc., and a phalanx of hospitable Libyans, all fuelled by excessive coffee intake. A German doctor gave a paper on depleted uranium in Iraq, the first time most of us had heard of such a thing. A New Zealand delegate told horror stories about privatization of water; ditto.

At one point I overheard one of the Parisian Maoists say that the real objectively-existsing enemy of humanity was not neo-liberal/Global Capital, but the USA. At the time I considered this view misguided, in part because of my enthusiasm for Zapatismo, in part because the Maoist line sounded so old-fashioned. At that time neo-liberalism was on the ascendent and a nuanced global response seemed more vital than any Vietnam-era anti-Americanism.

In a collection of essays, *Millennium* (Autonomedia, 1996), I speculated on the need for new ways to express anti-Capitalist strategies in a post-Spectacular situation. If Zapatismo could draw on Mayan spirituality as well as anarchist influences, perhaps something similar could happen with Sufism. Islam contains a potential for socialism in its strictures against usury and its communitarian idealism (according to Ali Shariati, for example). "Lawless" (bishahr) Sufism and some types of Islamic heresy have anarchistic aspects. At the time, I thought Islamism was on the wane.

Sufism itself is sometimes defined as the "greater jihad," while holy war is called the "lesser jihad." The struggle to "become who you are" takes precedence over even the most righteous cause. But esotericism is not always quietistic in Islam. Sufis have launched revolutions, including 19th and early 20th century anti-colonialist/imperialist struggles. Perhaps, I fantasized, it's now time for a kind of Islamic Zapatismo to emerge. I actually proposed this in a preface for the

recent Turkish translation of my now-quite-elderly book, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Autonomedia, 1985).

Since 1996, two changes seem to have occured within the so-called End of History. First appeared neo-conservative neo-liberalism, a.k.a. the USA as sole superpower and hegemon of Global Capital's final triumph — a.k.a. the Empire.

Second, it turned out that puritanical Islamism was given new life during the Soviet *gotterdamerung* in Afghanistan. American Intelligence discovered a magic lamp and rubbed it — once, twice, thrice — and then the genie escaped and became the Old Man of the Mountains. The US then invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, and committed itself to the Israeli Right. Islamism somehow became the new Evil Empire of Pure Terror. It also became anti-Americanism.

A few people have misguidedly complimented me on "predicting" this New Jihad. Anyone who ever wrote a word on Islamism before 9/11/01 is now burdened with this dreary mantle. In fact the jihad I "predicted" (or rather imagined) has not come to pass. By now it's probably too late.

From the US Empire's p.o.v., Islamism makes the perfect enemy because it's not really anti-Capitalist or anti-technocratic. It can be subsumed into the one great image of Capital as Law of Nature, and also simultaneously used as a bogeyman to discipline the masses at home with fear-of-terror, and to explain away the miseries of neo-liberal readjustment. In this sense Islamism is a false ideology or "Simulation" as Baudrillard put it.

America makes a perfect enemy for the Islamists because Americanism isn't a real ideology either. Brute force, McDisney-kultur, an Orwellian "Free Market" and a frothy "post-industrial" economy based on out-sourcing the entire misery of production to the former third world — all of this fails to achieve even the tarnished and untrustworthy status of "ideology" — it's all simulation. "Money talks," as the popular wisdom has it. Money is the only master of speech here and money speaks only to itself. "Democracy" is now a codeword for coca-colonization by cluster-bomb — "Islam" for the emotional plague. It's the wrong jihad.

At present (May '04), the Empire seems to be choking on an overdose of its own image addiction, stupid lies, suffocating mass media, politics as snuff porn. Staying in Iraq or "pulling out" of Iraq: both seem equally impossible to imagine — the Vietnam Syndrome, complete with atrocity photos.

If the current US regime is changed, presumably the best we can expect is a return to the neo-liberal Globalism of the '90s. But this may prove impossible and it's not clear that the Democrats intend any such retreat. How do you step down gracefully from imperialism?

That Parisian Maoist: was he correct after all? The USA seems to have positioned itself quite deliberately by alienating Europe and horrifying the Islamic

world. It has rushed to embrace the role of enemy-of-humanity and thrown away the last of its diminished popularity as defender of freedom.

But Islamism will never provide the dialectic negation of this Empire because Islamism itself is nothing but an empire of negation, of resentment and reaction. Islamism has nothing to offer the struggle against Globalism except dessicated theofascist spasms of violence.

Americanism & Islamism: a plague on both their houses. As for true jihad, there's more going on in South America and Mexico now than anywhere else. Maybe while President Tweedledee and the Imam ibn Tweedledum bite each other's throats out on CNN, something interesting might have a chance to emerge from the barrios of Argentina or Venezuela, or the jungles of Chiapas.

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