

The Market as an Opportunity Space for Islamic Activism

The counter-hegemonic strategy
of the Muslim Brotherhood

Presented by

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Proposition

- Islamic activism identified in the market an opportunity space to carry out a counter-hegemonic struggle against the ruling elites of the Islamic world

The focus will be on “moderate” Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and on their links with the middle class

Theoretical framework 1/3: Constructivism

“The constructivist approach to Islamic political identity has three advantages [...]

- First, it does not confer agency to a reified Islam but rather to living Muslims whose actions are embedded in particular loyalties and networks.
- Second, it recognizes the power of ideas and everyday practices either to constrain or stimulate socio-political transformation.
- Third, it views (Islamic) social movements as not necessarily representing the disintegration of civil society but rather as contributing to its strengthening”

(Yavuz, 2003, p. 21)

Theoretical framework 2/3: Social Movement Theory

- Islamic groups are conceptualised as “signifying agents engaged in the social construction of meaning”

(Wictorowicz 2004, p. 15)

- In other words, Islamic groups transform potential individual contention into actual collective action through interpretative frames, linked to specific cultural and historical contexts (i.e. Islam)

Theoretical framework 3/3: Gramsci's Hegemony

- The hegemony of the ruling elites is based upon two pillars:
 - Dominance, through the coercive force of the state (political society)
 - Intellectual and moral leadership, through the pervasive control of civil society
- Islamic movements are here conceptualised as “counter-hegemonic forces”:
 - Islam is used as “a “revolutionary” ideology to attack, criticise, and de-legitimise the ruling elites and the power structure on which their authority and legitimacy is based”
 - “These organisations classified as ‘political Islam’ (...) are authentic counter-hegemonic movements focused on the overthrow of these despotic regimes and the acquisition of political, economic and social power”

(Butko, 2004, p. 41)

The aim of Islamic activism

- Islamic activism is here intended as a nexus of groups and activities whose declared aim is the implementation of *shari'a* in society
- In terms of political economy, political Islam provides the language and the tools (“frames”) to express the frustration of social strata excluded from power

State vs. Islamic movements

- The state is conceptualised as a producer of social knowledge (hegemonic narrative), through his intellectual and moral leadership and his coercive apparatus
- Islamic movements, seen as producers of a counter-hegemonic knowledge, attempt to control civil and political society, *fora* of the social production of meaning (Wictorowicz 2004, 16)
- Indeed, the control over social production of meaning will enable Islamic movements to achieve their goals, promoting conformity to Islamic values
- Such an endeavour can be achieved spreading “insurgent consciousness” (McAdam 1982/1999, Smith 1991) through mobilisation of dissent and networks of alliances

Opportunity spaces

- The political domain (the state) is precluded to Islamic movements
- Thus, Islamic movements use the only opportunity spaces available (market, media, education)
- The counter-hegemonic struggle takes place in the civil society

Why do moderate Islamists support neo-liberal policies?

- Demise of Arab socialism, historical enemy of Islamist movements
- The economic restructuring policies allowed a new middle class to develop and thrive
- The state withdrew from the provision of public services (Washington Consensus)
- Islamic social institutions expanded their welfare networks, taking over services previously guaranteed by the state
- Islamic movements became “reluctant” supporters of neo-liberal economic policies and fostered the rise of Islamic business

Islamic business is composed by:

- Financial activities of Islamic banks and economic activities of various Islamic groupings as economic faces of Islamism, whose declared goal is to achieve a profit whilst respecting Islamic tenets
- Islamic social institutions, like NGOs, which mainly strive for spreading Islamic values in the society with the resources created and supplied by Islamic private business

Egypt: a case study

Landmark events for the Egyptian Islamic movement

- 1928: Founding of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hasan al Banna
- 1948: The “secret apparatus” of the MB kills the Egyptian PM; al Banna is in turn murdered by the police
- 1952: Coup of the Free Officers
- 1954: Nasser orders the dissolution of the movement
- 1966: Execution of Sayyid Qutb
- 1967: Defeat of Arab nationalism in the Arab-Israeli war; “Islamic awakening”
- 1970: Sadat is appointed new President of Egypt
- 1974: *Infitah* policy
- 1981: Sadat is murdered, Mubarak succeeded

Islamic Awakening in Egypt is determined by endogenous and exogenous factors:

First Wave

- Defeat of Arab nationalism (1967), oil windfall (1973)

Second Wave

- Neo-liberal reforms → withdrawal of the state from the welfare sector → provision of social services by the Islamic movements

Outcome:

- Islamist hegemony over the Egyptian civil society

In Egypt, political Islam largely benefited from the new trends of the global political economy

- 1974: *Infitah*, demise of state-led development (Arab socialism) and rise of a new Islamist middle class based on:
 - Banking and finance
 - Trade, manufactures, small and medium enterprises
- Islamic movements took over the representative bodies of the middle class professional associations (journalists, doctors, lawyers, engineers)
- The withdrawal of the state through the '80s and '90s, due to the implementation of neo-liberal policies, allowed Islamist economic activities to thrive and expand their control over the society

- “It can reasonably be claimed that those currently in control of the Muslim Brothers are of the Islamic *infitah* bourgeoisie who ‘bought’ the organization with resources acquired through collaboration with the Sadat regime”

(Springborg 1989, p. 236)

- Development of a rift between the political society (and the old middle class linked to it through patronage networks) and a new bourgeoisie, emancipated from the state
- Embryo of an Islamic civil society
- The Islamist middle developed its own specific identity, made of Islamism and of middle class pattern of consumption (“air-conditioned Islam”)

- At the same time, Islamic activism successfully attracted the segments of the population radically opposed to neo-liberal reforms
- When segments of the (Islamist) “periphery” began to share consumption patterns of the (secularist) “centre”, those who did not partake the benefits of free market criticised the others in the name of Islamic authenticity
- Indeed, political Islam has also been widely used as a framework of resistance against capitalism from the poorer social strata

As a result:

- Political Islam, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, largely benefited from the opportunity spaces provided by neo-liberal policies
- In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood legitimised a capital accumulation compatible with the neo-liberal agenda and supported the business interests of the new Islamist bourgeoisie
- The market has been the opportunity space *par excellence* for Islamic activism (e.g. Islamic investment companies)

■ “I want to be rich so that people will look at me and say, ‘You see, rich and religious,’ and they’ll love God through my wealth. I want to have money and the best clothes to make people love God’s religion”

Amr Khalid, TV preacher

Conclusion

- The market became the main focus of moderate Islamic activism, the battleground where the Muslim Brotherhood conducted their counter-hegemonic struggle
- The discourse of moderate Islamism legitimised the capital accumulation of the new middle class in a neo-liberal framework (e.g. Turkey, Egypt, Jordan)
- This shift of the Islamist bourgeoisie into the “centre” (mainly through the adoption of new pattern of consumption) determined a further radicalisation of the popular strata
- Political Islam provides extremely flexible frames, that can support both neo-liberal and anti-capitalistic discourses

Questions & Answers

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