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The Driftages of Modernity: the Case of Africa and the Arab World

The driftages of modernity

1. The contemporary world is simultaneously one, diverse and unequal.

It is one, whether we like it or not, because of the “force of facts”, that is to say, because of that power that characterizes capitalism –“the market”, to name it with the common, approximate and ambiguous term with which the dominant discourse describes the world system– namely that of integrating, even if under unequal terms, all the peoples of all regions of the world, within a system ruled by the same dominant logic. What we today call “globalization” –the integration in question– is, without being something truly new, the expression of that reality.

Yet it also is and remains diverse. Peoples have their history, which did not wait for modernity or for integration into the world system of capitalism to be constructed. Peoples, while incorporating modernity –well or badly– haven’t erased their past; rather, they have transformed their inheritance, reinterpreting it, lucidly or not. The ideology –the hope, the will itself, for many– that thinks that by doing so they would end up erasing the diversity that had characterized their previous paths to become similar in their social organizations, their ways of life, their adherence to a system of common values, in sum, to a common culture, relegating specificities to the folklore museum or to what is of little significance or downright insignificant, has been and continues to be denied by the facts. Specificities are resistant, and therefore, whether this pleases or saddens us, they must be taken into account.

It is also, and at the same time, unequal. The formation and development of the modern world system have not reduced –not even gradually– the inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power among the peoples of the planet. Quite on the contrary, these inequalities have been deepened and made even more blatant.

2. The cultural issue, like the others –development or geopolitics– is inscribed within that contradictory framework of a world that is one, diverse and unequal.

The challenge may therefore be formulated in the terms of the following alternative: can we construct (or reconstruct) a coequal modernity (abolishing the inequality of wealth and power)? And in that case, is it necessary to sacrifice diversity, destined to be gradually extinguished? Or can we “save” the latter, even stress and develop it to place it at the service of the project of creating a coequal other world? Or else, since modernity appears to be incapable, by itself, of becoming something different from what it is –in other words, since inequality appears to be immanent in it– should it be repudiated, and the diversity of origins, which is being lost, refounded? Thus proposing a radical criticism of modernity. What is the status of each of these options: are they realistic, equally realistic and therefore credible, and more than that, probable? Are they efficient –and under what conditions?

The debate with regard to these issues is not new. It has obsessed the days and the nights of all thinkers, particularly those of Asia and Africa, since their peoples found themselves “integrated”, willingly or under duress, into the world system of the really existing capitalist modernity. Each of the answers sketched out here has had its defenders. And none has been definitively removed from the scene, even if, at one moment or another, here and there, one of the answers appeared to be the vanquisher, expelling the others to the wings. Until they

reappear on stage! Each of these answers has been associated, according to circumstances, with formulations that could be classified in political terms as “right-wing” (respectful towards the interests of the property-owning and leadership classes) or “left-wing” (aspiring to “serve the people”, i.e., its dominated majorities). Each of these formulations has attempted, according to circumstances, either to conciliate the strategies it espoused with the concerns we term “democratic” (conferring a definite sense on them), or else to roundly reject the issue.

3. Modernity is thus permanently subjected to two drift movements that operate in opposite directions, but are in fact complementary to each other and sometimes also curiously associated.

This twofold driftage hits all the peripheral regions of the contemporary world system, in particular Asia and Africa, whose historical cultures are “non-European”. At the current time, this double driftage is manifested with violence, as we shall illustrate with the examples of the contemporary Arab and African worlds.

The first driftage is produced by the contradiction that characterizes the dominant ideology of the really existing –that is to say, capitalist– culture of modernity. The discourse that issues a call to rally around its flag (today that of globalization) claims that the system offers all peoples “the opportunity to develop” –on condition that they accept to sacrifice those “specificities” of their inherited culture that are in conflict with the fundamental logic of capitalist expansion. Now then, in the actual event this expansion generates a growing inequality among peoples. The leading classes of Asia and Africa that accept globalization as it is therefore nourish a driftage that empties cultural diversity of any serious content –the “right to difference” must be accompanied by the accepted inequality.

The second driftage is expressed in a violent rhetoric against modernity, rejected in the name of the cultural specificity that it is attempted to safeguard. But the regard directed toward this specificity is in fact a conservative one: it is not a question of acting for the culture to be transformed; it is about conserving it as it is, even of “returning to the origins”, eliminating the damage with which modernity may have contaminated it.

“Condemning” these two attitudes, or condemning just one of them to legitimate the other, does not solve the problem –since the challenge is precisely that of transforming modernity itself to make it capable of constructing a world that is *one, coequal and diverse*. The two drifts deserve their name; they are the expression of impotence in the face of the challenge formulated in my previous sentence. One alternates with the other to stand at stage center, or else share it.

The Arab and African worlds offer a good illustration both of this succession and of this combination. At the moment of the apparent “ascent” of the nations of Asia and of Africa –the decades from 1950 to 1980– modernity is espoused by the dominant ideologies of the (“national-populist”) systems and claims to solve the issue: “recover” and draw abreast of the developed centers and “remain themselves” (politically and culturally). These experiences quickly reach their historical limits and end in a double failure: limited recovery, in the best of cases; loss of meaning of the national cultures. The setting is thus in place for the ascendancy of the other discourse, “anti-modernistic” in every way, attempting to re-establish the “authenticity” manifested by the cultures of the past.

In these worlds, the first period is marked by a “national” project of “recovery”, social (if not socialist), that is to say concerned with reducing social inequalities, secularizing (if not secular). These projects are expressed in a “pan-Arab” framework for some (Nasser), “pan-African” for the others (Nkrumah). In the second period, political Islam is triumphant among the Arabs (and other Asian and African Muslim peoples) and “ethnicity” among the others.

This tragedy is not specific to the Arab and African example that illustrate our exposition. In India, the ideological succession of Congress (and the communist parties) and of the so-called Hindutva (“Hinduism”) and in China that of Maoism, followed by the contemporary confusion (well studied by Chen Yan), illustrate the same pendulum-like movement from one driftage to the other.

MODERNITY, REASON AND EMANCIPATION

There are moments in history whose impact seems to me to have been decisive for us.

1. The first of these moments refers to the birth of modernity. It is the time of the Enlightenment (the European seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), which is also, and not coincidentally, that of the birth of capitalism. I shall not return here to the comments I have made of this moment: I will be satisfied with summarizing it in two propositions.

The first of these propositions is related to the definition of modernity, which is to my mind the affirmation that the human being must and can, individually or collectively, create his own history. An affirmation that marks a rupture with the dominant thinking in all previous societies – in Europe and elsewhere– which were founded on the principle that God, having created the universe and the human being, is the ultimate “legislator”. The ethical principles that this divine legislation erects are, of course, formulated through the historical religions or transcendental philosophers, thus opening the door to diverse interpretations through which the social realities under permanent transformation have been expressed. Reason is in that case frequently –but not always– invoked in order to serve those interpretations, but in that case it is subjected to the duty of “conciliating faith and reason”. The new affirmation that defines modernity frees itself from this duty, without necessarily ignoring issues of faith. The new affirmation closes a chapter, but opens another with its own problems: the freedom that human beings give themselves must be defined in turn. History, when it no longer operates as a force outside mankind, must be explained by other “laws” whose discovery is the object of a new set of sciences, whose constitution becomes simultaneously possible and necessary: those of man and society. Reason is mobilized anew in search of these objective determinations of the movement of societies. The new freedom that modern mankind confers on itself therefore remains subjected to the limitations of what we believe constitutes the logic of social reproduction and the dynamics of the transformation of societies.

The second refers to the bourgeois character of modernity as expressed by the thinking of the Enlightenment. The emergence of capitalism and the emergence of modernity constitute the two facets of one and the same reality.

The thinking of the Enlightenment thus offers us a concept of reason, inseparably associated with that of emancipation, without which the phrase “the human being creates his own history” would lack meaning.

It turns out that the emancipation in question is defined and limited by what is demanded and allowed by capitalism. The discourse of the Enlightenment nevertheless proposes a concept of emancipative Reason that claims to be transhistorical, while the examination of what it actually is will show its terribly historical nature.

The most systematic fundamental expression of this discourse is the one that has been formulated by Adam Smith, unfortunately calling it “utilitarianism”, an ambiguous but spontaneous word in the tradition of English empiricism. In this view of the human world, society is conceived as an assembly of individuals, and here we have a view that breaks with the tradition of the *ancien régime*. It is therefore an unarguably emancipative ideology for the individual, once again one of the dimensions of modernity. This individual is, meanwhile, of course endowed with reason. The social order that must ensure the victory of this emancipative Reason –and therefore the happiness of human beings– is therefore imagined as a system of “good institutions”, to employ the phrase still used today in United States social thinking. This system is in turn founded on the separation, in social life, of the arena of politics and that of the economy. The “good institutions” that must ensure the management of political life by reason are those institutions of democracy that guarantee the liberty and equality of individuals. In the management of economic life, reason imposes choosing contractual freedom (expressed in another way, “the market”) as the foundation of relations of exchange and of the organization of the division of labor among the “individuals” which society is composed of. And the healthy operation of the economy in turn demands the protection of property, considered as of that time as a sacrosanct value in the “good society”.

Emancipative Reason is therefore expressed in a classical triptych: liberty, equality, property. The formula of the successive precocious revolutions of the United Provinces and of the English “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, before being more systematically taken up again by the United States Revolution and later by the French Revolution in its first period.

The constitutive elements of the triptych are regarded as “naturally” and harmoniously complementary with one another. And to the present day the statement that there is an equal sign between “market” and “democracy” has continued to be the cornerstone of bourgeois ideology. The conflict that in actual fact has, on the contrary, incessantly pitted the extension of democratic rights to all citizens, men and women, bourgeois and proletarian, whether property owners or not, against the unconditional defenders of “the market” –a conflict on which I have insisted elsewhere– is removed from the debate from the outset.

Adam Smith and the thinking of the Enlightenment certainly contain the intuition that the system of the “good society” that they propose –rational and emancipative for all the eternity– faces some difficulties. But these, they ignore. The “invisible hand” that guarantees the triumph of reason in the management of economic life very often appears as an “unpredictable” hand, for that very reason again putting into question human beings’ capacity to really create their own history as modernity envisions. And the guaranteeing of freedom, of equality, of the security of property implies that the “visible fist” of the state must complete the work of the invisible hand of the market.

The emancipative Reason of the Enlightenment does not exclude, but actually implies, the importance that is attached to an ethical principle. Reason here is not instrumental but rather inseparable from the emancipative goals and means whose triptych summarizes the fundamental ethical elements.

The ethical aspect associated with the thinking of the Enlightenment may or may not be of religious inspiration. God is present for those who attribute to him the quality of being at the origin of the need for emancipation to which all human beings aspire. He disappears when this aspiration is only verified as “natural”. The difference is minimal.

The contemporary version of bourgeois emancipative Reason made fashionable with all the insistence that is allowed by vulgarization through the mass media –that of the egalitarian liberalism of John Rawls– does not contribute anything new, having remained a prisoner of the liberty-equality-property triptych. Challenged by the liberty/equality conflict that is necessarily implied by the unequal distribution of property, the liberalism that is termed egalitarian is only very moderately so. The inequality is accepted and legitimized by a scarcely “reasonable” acrobatics, which takes from vulgarized economy its pseudo-concept of “allocations”. It is a very simple-minded analysis: the “individuals” (society being the sum of these latter) who participate in the “market” are endowed with differing fortunes (some are –by chance?– the heads of powerful corporations, others have nothing). These unequal “allocations” nevertheless continue to be legitimate since they are the product (evidently an inherited one) of work done and of savings made (by their ancestors). We are therefore invited to turn backwards the chain of history until the –mythical– day when the original social contract was signed among equals. Yet later these formerly equal fellows became unequal because supposedly they wanted to, by virtue of the inequality of the sacrifices they consented to make. I believe that this form of facing the issues related to the specificity of capitalism does not even deserve to be considered as elegant.

But if the falsely egalitarian liberalism is stubbornly proposed as an ideological alternative in face of the bewilderment of the society of our period it is because the front stage is no longer occupied by utilitarianism (which the so-called egalitarian liberalism barely distinguishes itself from) but by the driftage represented by the right-wing (actually an extreme right) libertarian ideology. This ideology substitutes the “liberty-property” diptych for the Enlightenment’s triptych, decisively refusing to give equality the status of a fundamental value. The Von Hayek version of this new extreme right-wing ideological formula reestablishes that of its inventors, the “liberals” of the nineteenth century (Bastiat and company) who were at the origin of the driftage, coming as they did from a declared aversion towards the Enlightenment, responsible for the French Revolution. But the diptych in question has for a long time now constituted the kernel of the “US ideology”, establishing a contrast with European ideologies that still remain partly faithful to the Enlightenment. I remit the reader here to what I wrote elsewhere on the subject of this contrast.

In the right-wing libertarian version ethics disappears because human beings, if they create their own history properly, are authorized to create it by behaving as if they were in the jungle: they are not responsible for the consequences of their actions, in particular for the inequalities which they may deepen, and which are even welcome. Therefore, without responsibility there is no ethics. Little therefore matters that some –in fact many– of these right-wing libertarians

proclaim themselves to be “believers” –in this case Christians. Their religion is in fact amoral, tending for that very reason to be transformed into simple social convenience, an expression of “communitarian” singularity and nothing else. This is perhaps one possible interpretation of religion; the least we can say is that it continues to be arguable.

2. The second decisive moment is launched by the criticism that Marx directs at the bourgeois emancipative Reason of the Enlightenment.

This criticism opens up a new chapter in modernity, which I call modernity critical of modernity.

Emancipative Reason cannot ignore this second moment of its deployment –more precisely, of the beginning of its redeployment. After Marx, social thinking can no longer be what it had been before him. What I wrote earlier referring to the criticism of the emancipative Reason of the Enlightenment –my second observation– certainly couldn’t have been so without Marx. Marx is inevitable.

Emancipative Reason can no longer inscribe its analyses and its propositions under the “liberty-equality-property” triptych. Having grasped the magnitude of the unsolvable conflict that pits the conservation of capitalist ownership against the deployment of equality among human beings, emancipative Reason cannot but suppress the third term of the triptych. And must substitute it by that of fraternity, stronger than that of “solidarity”, proposed here and there today by one and the other. “Fraternity” thus meaning, evidently, the abolition of a capitalist ownership which necessarily pertains to some –a minority, the true dominant and exploiting bourgeois class– while depriving the others (the majority) of access to the conditions for an equality worthy of that name. “Fraternity” thus meaning substitution of this exclusive and exclusionary form of ownership by a new form: that of social ownership, exercised by and for the benefit of the social body as a whole. Social integration would then operate by democracy, an inevitable requisite not only for the sound management of political life in the strictest sense of the term but for social ownership as well.

Integration through democracy would replace the partial and unequal integration via nature operated within the limits of respect for capitalist ownership, that is to say, for the exclusive “market”, to employ the language of the dominant vulgate.

“Liberty, equality, fraternity” –the motto was not invented by Marx, as every Tom, Dick and Harry knows. The French Revolution, like all the great revolutions, as I already wrote elsewhere, was ahead of its time and is projected far beyond its demands. For that reason it both is a bourgeois revolution (and will tardily become stabilized on that basis) and, being projected forward, is experienced as a popular revolution and can be read today as initiating the socialist criticism of the bourgeois system. Exactly in the same way that the two other great revolutions of modern times –the Russian and the Chinese– are projected in an attempt at a communist society far beyond the immediate demands and possibilities of their societies.

The “popular ownership” that the French Revolution believes it can and therefore must guarantee is that of millions of peasants and artisans; and the “market” that it protects, it is declared, must be authentically open and competitive, shutting out monopolies and the profits they produce. But this popular ownership is already, in that period, threatened both on the right and on the left. On the right, by the bourgeoisie of the large businessmen and capitalists who will crystallize in the symbol represented by those famous “two hundred families” that own the Bank of France. On the left, by all those excluded in the city (proletarians and the hard-scrabble poor) and in the countryside (poor and landless peasants). The jolts of the French Revolution will take up the entire nineteenth century through to its end, as of when the “Republic” becomes stabilized, adopting the motto of the Revolution, but after having quashed the Commune and emptied the term “fraternity” of its original content, to eventually substitute it by that which can be expressed in, and by, being a part of the “national” community.

All the ambiguities, contradictions and diverging interpretations of “French ideology” constitute the essence of this story, up to our time. And it is these ambiguities that we today seek to rid ourselves of by means of a brutal return to the formula that guarantees the supremacy of the security of bourgeois property.

Bourgeois reason, placed on its feet again, is no longer, can no longer be, emancipative. At the same time, it stands only on its two feet: liberty and property. From this point onwards, Bastiat and Von Hayek, who proclaim their open hostility against any fancy for attaching any importance to equality, are the true representatives of a degenerate reason, which isn't even that which the Enlightenment had conceived. And this is why the bourgeois reason reduced to liberty and to ownership is the reason of the "US ideology"; this retreat –the abolition from thinking of the French Revolution, as well as, naturally, of the Russian and French ones– is nothing but the expression of the essence of what we may understand by "Americanization of the world".

This bourgeois reason, deprived from that point on of every emancipative ambition, thus becomes by the force of facts an instrumental reason, summary, hollow, irresponsible (and therefore lacking in an ethical foundation).

The consummate expression of this non-emancipative reason is displayed in the field of "what pertains to economics", which, by the way, is defined by its inventors and defenders as "a pure science" ("pure economics"). I shall recall here very briefly the criticism I directed on another occasion at this truncated rationality. In the first place, the fact that it never reaches the point of establishing, with consistent logical arguments (in the simplest sense of the term "logical"), the veracity of its fundamental proposition: that market freedom produces an "optimum general equilibrium". Next, that it obstinately refuses to reflect on the reasons for its failure, reasons which are the result of its unreal conception of society, reduced to the sum of the individuals that compose it. On the contrary, it attempts to emerge from the confusion in which it has installed itself by reinforcing its initial axiom (the individual constitutes the exclusive cell of which society is constituted) with the invention of those famous "anticipations". But the integration of the latter into "economic reasoning" worsens the chaos and leads to a sole possible conclusion: that the market shifts from imbalance to imbalance without ever tending towards equilibrium (a conclusion to which Marx and even Keynes had arrived a long time before). The cherry on the cake that the term "social optimum" wanted to cause it to disappear. It should not remain at that pure economics that gives up this ambition, without which, however, the emancipation of the human being –the happiness of the Enlightenment and of Adam Smith– loses sense. The human being is declared as irresponsible as the market through which he expresses himself. The cynics of pure economics will dare think and say it, and it is necessary to thank them for this courage. The market can produce three billion "useless" human beings, a rising proportion of "poor" in the wealthiest countries –it matters little. It seems to be "rational". Reason, converted into a destroyer of the alienated and/or excluded human being, of nature (something which the economic calculation that is called rational, always a short-term one, implies) and of entire societies (and therefore of human cultures), not only gives up on being emancipative, but also accepts to perform the role of a demolition company against humanity.

I don't know if the "culturalist" adversaries of the real world and of the trends in its evolution – understood as "Americanization" by some, "Westernization" (in general) by others– can be termed "rational". Confronting the threats of "Americanization", some therefore solely defend the "cultural values" without questioning the general trends in the system, as if reality could be cut into slices, like salami, for the purpose of saving "a piece for tomorrow". Others, having previously confused capitalism with "the West", forgetting the determining reality of the latter for the sake of a gratuitous and false affirmation of a supposedly eternal "West", believe they can transfer the locus of the confrontation from the terrain of a social reality in permanent movement to the heaven of a trans-historical cultural imaginary for everyone.

The heteroclitical contents of these attics –the pure economics of imaginary markets, plus the falsely egalitarian liberalism, plus the trans-historical culturalist lucubrations– are pompously set up as a "new" thinking, the so-called "post-modernism". Having erased the criticism of bourgeois modernism and the reason having given up of its emancipative vocation, hasn't contemporary bourgeois thought become anything other than the thinking of a system well advanced in the stage of senility?

A dangerous senility, and a danger reinforced by adherence to the principle of irresponsibility. A dangerous senility because the system has reached a degree characterized by the monstrous power of its destructive capabilities. Destruction, I have said earlier, of the human being, of nature, of entire societies. Emancipative Reason must respond to this challenge.

3. Reason is emancipative, or it is not reason.

The concept of reason therefore implies more than the creation of a set of mental procedures that allow the progress of intelligence on the relations among objects and all sort of phenomena. This intelligence on relations is also about the extent of their degree of necessity, which is absolute –or virtually so– only in situations of extreme banality of no interest. The deployment of science –knowing more but also, and above all, knowing the limits of knowledge– therefore allows the localization of the degree of freedom with which human actions can be endowed, the definition of the possible and efficient options. But also the recognition that there is uncertainty (few absolute certainties) and the appreciation, as much as possible, of its margins.

This set of procedures does not in itself constitute reason, even if numerous researchers in the sciences termed as sciences of nature or sciences of man can, in a first approximation, not only adhere to this (it is necessary to do so) but also be satisfied, be content with it. All live beings –and above all the higher species– put into practice, over the course of their lives, methods of action and choices that testify to a certain degree of this type of intelligence, at least in its first step, intelligence about relations.

Reason demands more. Because emancipation presupposes responsibility, without which the options among different possibilities have neither scope nor meaning. He who says responsibility says ethics, the principles of which cannot be eliminated from a reflection that aspires to be scientific.

The principles of the ethics in question can be those that non-deistic (and *a fortiori* non-religious) universalist humanism inspires since the Enlightenment (and even previously), in Marxism and in our own times. But they can also be those of a deistic universalist humanism – even a religious one in the sense that is inscribed in a given religious tradition, Christian or other. Strong probabilities exist that these tributaries would flow into the same great river. The example that comes immediately to our mind is that of the theologians of liberation whom I read as believers for whom being a Christian isn't to stop at Christ but to start out from him. There could be other religious interpretations (Islamic, Buddhist and other), or non-western philosophical ones (in the sense that their ancestry isn't the "Hellenism" common to the peoples of the Christian and Muslim worlds), that will appear in this future to be built, common to all humanity. It is in this sense and only in this sense that one must, with regard to the diversity named as cultural (for want of a better description), more than "respect" it ("tolerate" it is a pejorative term, as I have said elsewhere), wish to see it deployed in all its potential richness. I distinguish this diversity –oriented, in the tradition of emancipative Reason, toward the construction of the future– from the false diversity of the specificities inherited from the past, which the culturalists turn into trans-historical invariants (which they are not) in order to cling neurotically to them.

To return to the challenge which emancipative reason faces today is to invent the efficient means that may allow progress toward well-defined goals, progress in the direction of emancipation from mercantile alienation, a distancing from the practices that destroy the potential of nature and of life, a convergence toward the abolition of the gigantic disparities of the so-called (material) "development" that the polarizing expansion of world capitalism necessarily produces.

Marxism is to my mind the efficient instrument that makes it possible both to analyze the challenges and to define strategies capable of changing the world in the directions specified here, as long as we also consider that Marx only launched the reflection and actions in this regard. Stated differently: what we will define as arising from Marx and not ending with him.

I won't go here beyond this conclusion formulated in very general terms. I shall only say that it is not enough to proclaim adherence to emancipative Reason or even to make efforts to define what we believe to be the challenges that it must overcome (or vanquish) to advance the cause. The true difficulties begin at that point. Marxism, understood as a living theory and practice, and capable therefore of permanent enrichment, cannot have readymade recipes in response to challenges, any more so than any other appropriate method for contributing to the conceptualization of the demands of emancipative Reason.

The issues to be solved, in theory and in practice, are complex, and in their entangled condition they do not allow any one-sided solution, since the latter would ignore the conflicts arising among the different elements of the challenge. I shall select just one example, because it entails, to my mind, the greatest magnitude of the challenge on a global scale. The huge centers/peripheries contrast which capitalism has constructed must be destroyed. This will, without any doubt, demand a certain development of productive forces on the peripheries of the system –and we must admit that by doing so we run the risk of relegating the other dimensions of emancipation to the background. The contradiction resides in reality itself. Some think it can be overcome by eliminating one of its terms. They persist in ignoring 80% of humanity, being content to declare that it must first “pass through the capitalist stage” without taking into account that the polarization that is immanent in this system will never allow them to “catch up” with the others. They ignore the dimensions of emancipation as a whole, to the exclusive benefit of the prior development of productive forces. Emancipating Reason, must, in its living Marxist formulation, be able to combine the two contradictory terms of the challenge.

The exacerbated modernity of the contemporary liberal discourse

1. The ideology of globalized liberalism is founded on an impoverished and exacerbated concept of modernity.

The “general ideas” that command the dominant liberal vision of the world at the present time are simple, in fact, and are summarized, in some of the following propositions.

a) Social efficiency is confused with economic efficiency, and economic efficiency is confused with the financial profitability of capital. These confusions reflect the dominance of the economy, inherent in capitalism. The atrophied social thinking ensuing from this is economist in the extreme. Curiously, this reproach –wrongly aimed at Marxism– in fact applies to liberal thinking, which is the thinking of capitalism *par excellence*.

b) The deployment of the generalized market (as little regulated as possible) and of democracy are decreed to be complementary to each other. The issue of the conflict between the social interests that are expressed through their interventions in the marketplace and those that gave to political democracy its meaning and scope is not even posed. Economy and politics do not constitute two dimensions of social reality, each one with its own autonomy, and operating in a dialectical relationship; the capitalist economy in fact rules over politics, whose own creative potential it annihilates.

c) The seemingly most “developed” country, in which politics is indeed conceived and practiced entirely at the exclusive service of the economy (in reality of capital) –evidently the United States– is the best model for “everyone”. Its institutions and practices must be imitated by all those who hope being present on the world scene.

d) There appears to be no alternative to the proposed model founded on economist postulates, the market/democracies identity and the reduction of the political at the service of the economy, since the socialist option, attempted in the Soviet Union and in China, has demonstrated it is both inefficient in economic terms and anti-democratic on the political level.

That is to say that the propositions formulated above would have the virtue of being “eternal truths” (“the Reason”), revealed through the deployment of contemporary history.

Their victory is assured, especially since the disappearance of the “socialist” alternative experiences. We appear to have arrived, as has been stated, to the end of history. Historical reason has triumphed. This victory thus means that we live in the best of all worlds, at least potentially, in the sense that the world will indeed be so when the ideas on which it is founded are admitted by all and put into practice everywhere. All the blemishes of today’s reality are only due to the simple fact that these eternal principles of reason still aren’t being put into practice in the societies that suffer these deficiencies, particularly those of the South.

In this simplistic and exacerbated view of modernity, there is no more room for diversity.

The hegemony of the United States, the normal expression of its vanguard position in bringing reason (liberal, necessarily) into practice, is for this reason both inevitable and also favorable for the progress of all humanity. There is no “American imperialism” but only good (“benign”) –painless– leadership, as it is termed by liberal United States intellectuals.

In reality these “ideas” are nothing but nonsense, founded on a para-science, so-called “pure” economics, and on an accompanying ideology, “post-modernism”. “Pure” economics isn’t the theory of the real world –of the really existing capitalism– but that of an imaginary capitalism. It isn’t even a rigorous theory of this imaginary capitalism, whose foundations and development of arguments would merit to be considered as “consistent”. It is no more than a para-science, closer at times to sorcery than to the “sciences of nature” whose model it attempts to imitate. As regards post-modernism, it constitutes no more than a discourse meant as an accompaniment, one which calls for acting only within the limits of the liberal system, for “adjusting to it”.

The reconstruction of a citizenship policy demands that the movements of resistance, protest and struggle against the real effects of this system get rid of the liberal virus.

2. This is a matter of an authentic driftage, since, in its deployment in two stages –the bourgeois philosophy of the Enlightenment and then its critical improvement by the ideologies of socialism, in particular by Marxism– modernity has shown itself to be both contradictory and unfinished.

The globalized liberalism, that nowadays catches the full wind in its sails, ignores the contradiction that characterizes the real world modeled by the capitalist modernity that proclaims itself “fulfilled” (the end of history). It ignores the fact that, under the limiting obligations of capitalism, modernity promises much more than it can deliver, and this generates unfulfilled hopes.

Modernity sketches out an enormous social advancement summarized in the term “emancipation” and testified by the progress of political democracy, however limited it may have been. It has given legitimacy to the action of the dominated, exploited and oppressed classes, and has allowed them to gradually wrest democratic rights from the power of the dominant capital, rights which never were spontaneously produced by the logic of capitalist expansion and of accumulation. It has freed a potential for political transformation that allows the expansion of the class struggle, establishing a sense of equivalence between these two terms, politics and class struggle, which imbues them with their full strength. But at the same time, it has invented and developed the means that allowed it to reduce the potential power of emancipative democracy.

Simultaneously, the capitalism that was being accompanied by modernism has triggered the development of productive forces at a pace never seen before in history. The potential of this development should allow a solution to the major material problems of mankind as a whole. But the logic that governs capitalist accumulation precludes this from being so, on the contrary ceaselessly deepening a polarization of wealth on a scale heretofore unknown in universal history.

Contemporary peoples are thus confronted with the challenges constituted by the really existing capitalism and modernity. Nowadays the dominant ideology only devotes itself to ignoring the challenges. This fact of ignoring them is expressed in a naive manner, despite the eventual sophistication of their language, by the ideologues of liberalism. This “discourse of the satiated” only recognizes one sole human value, to which it reduces modernity: individual freedom. It does so at the price of ignoring that this freedom is what, in the framework of capitalism, allows the strongest to impose their law on the others; that this freedom is perfectly illusory for the vast majority (the liberal hypothesis imagines that each individual can potentially become a Rockefeller, as it was said that each soldier carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack); that it smashes head-on against the aspiration to equality that constitutes the foundation of democracy.

This same fundamental ideology is shared by all the defenders of the system –for whom capitalism constitutes an insurmountable horizon, the “end of history”. The most extremist do not hesitate to accept that society can be conceived as a jungle of “individuals”, to sacrifice the eventual pacifying interventions of the state to the principles of an administration that reduces public power to the functions of an instrument at the exclusive service of the “winners”. Others wish to give a human face to this dictatorship and attempt to mitigate the extremism of the exclusive principle of individual freedom by diluting it in positions that associate it with other pragmatic considerations of social justice and of “recognition of the differences”, communitarian

ones among others. Post-modernism, with its invitation to “accept” and to “adjust” to contemporary reality, to “administer” it well close to the ground as best as possible, in the immediate term, without further ado, is likewise inscribed in this perspective of denial of the challenge.

For the vast majorities, this modernity in question is simply hateful, hypocritical, based on the cynical practice of “two weights, two measures”. Their rejection is therefore violent, and this violence is perfectly legitimate. The really existing capitalism and the modernity that it accompanies have nothing to offer to this majority.

Capitalism is, from its outset, riven by unbridgeable contradictions that leads us to think about its historical supersession.

This social need is expressed very early on and at all the great moments of modern history: the three great revolutions of modern times, the French, the Russian and the Chinese. For this reason, the French Revolution occupies an exceptional place in modern history. The radical Jacobin wing very soon perceives the reality of the contradictions of the bourgeois project, and clearly expresses their nature, namely that economic liberalism is the enemy of democracy. It will attempt to ensure the victory of a concept of popular revolution that will go beyond the “objective demands” of the moment, that is to say, the achievement of the strictly bourgeois tasks. From this radical current will therefore emerge a first generation of communist critics of the budding capitalism (the Babeufists).

In the same way, the Russian and Chinese revolutions will project themselves far beyond the tasks that their societies were immediately called on to perform, and will set themselves a communist goal that is far beyond them. It is therefore no coincidence that each one of these three revolutions, unlike others, was followed by a restoration. The progress that marked them at their best nevertheless continues to be a living symbol for the future, having placed the equality of human beings and their liberation from the market’s alignment at the heart of their project, very preciously so in the case of the French Revolution.

In a general way, the historical conditions that have accompanied the development of capitalism in Europe have favored the ripening, in the dominated classes, of a political class consciousness. This appears very early on, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, inspired by the most radical advances of the French Revolution. At the end of the century, it inspires the formation of great parties that will force capital, over the course of the twentieth century, to “adapt itself” to social demands that do not emerge from the exclusive logic of the accumulation of capital. “Equality”, as a value, is thus imposed, in a conflictive complementation, with that of “liberty”.

The alienation of the market leads to privileging liberty among human values. That of the individual in general, certainly, but more particularly that of the capitalist businessman whose energy it frees and whose economic power it reinforces. Equality, on the contrary, does not proceed directly from the demands of capitalism, except in its most immediate dimension, that of the (partial) equality of the rights that on one hand allow the development of free enterprise, condemning on the other the freed worker to submit to the status of wage-earner —a seller of labor, itself a merchandise. At a higher level, the value of “equality” enters into conflict with that of “freedom”. But, in the history of one part of Europe, especially in France, the two values are proclaimed on an equal footing, as in the motto of the Republic. It is no happenstance.

The complex history of Europe finally leads to a dual concept that articulates economy on one hand and politics on the other, in a dialectic that respects the autonomy of each of the two terms.

3. The driftage is defined, precisely, by the abandonment of the economy/politics duality, which is substituted by a unilateral concept of economy “without politics”.

The specific conditions of the historical formation of the American society lent themselves to this driftage, which Europe had more or less resisted until now.

Political culture is the product of history regarded over the long term, which is always, of course, specific to each country. That of the United States, on this level, is marked by specificities that break with those that characterized history on the European continent: the founding of New England by extremist Protestant sects, the genocide of the aboriginal

populations, and the displacement of the “communitarisms” associated with the migratory waves of the nineteenth century.

The Protestant sects that found themselves compelled to emigrate from seventeenth-century England had developed a very particular interpretation of Christianity which is not shared by either Catholics or the Orthodox, or even –at least not with the same degree of extremism– by the majority of European Protestants, including of course Anglicans, predominant among the leading classes in Britain. The Reformation as a whole reestablished the Old Testament that Catholicism and Orthodoxy had marginalized in an interpretation of Christianity that did not see it as a continuation of Judaism but as a break with it. Here I refer to what I have written elsewhere with regard to the real or pretended specificities of Christianity, of Islam and of Judaism. The use, which has become frequent, of the appellation “Judeo-Christian”, popularized by the expansion of the US-Protestant discourse, testifies to this shift in the vision of the relations among these two monotheistic religions, with which the Catholics (but not the Orthodox) have aligned themselves without much conviction, but rather because of political opportunism.

The Reformation, as we know, has been associated with the birth of capitalism, in a relation of cause and effect interpreted in very different ways in modern social thinking. We know the popularized version of Max Weber’s thesis, which became famous and certainly dominant in the Anglo-Saxon and Protestant world, according to which the Reformation is said to have allowed capitalism. A thesis that appeared in counterpoint –purposely, I believe– to that of Marx, who reads the Reformation as an effect of the transformations caused by the constitution of capitalism. Hence the variety of Protestantisms, according to whether what is expressed through them is the protest of the popular classes victimized by the nascent capitalism, or the strategies of the dominant classes.

The fragments of ideologies and the value systems that are expressed in this religious terrain retain all the traces of primitive forms of reaction to the capitalist challenge. The Renaissance had been further ahead in some of these aspects (Machiavelli is one of the most eloquent witnesses to this). Now, then, the Renaissance is deployed in a Catholic terrain (Italy). And the management of some Italian cities as true commercial societies led by the syndicate of the wealthiest shareholders (Venice being the prototype) establishes an even more frank relation with the first forms of capitalism than the relation that will exist between Protestantism and capitalism. Later, the Enlightenment that spreads both in Catholic countries (France) and in Protestant ones (Britain, Low Countries and Germany) is situated more closely in the secular tradition of the Renaissance than in that of religious reform. Lastly, the French Revolution, because of its radical nature, gives secularism its full bloom, deliberately abandoning the terrain of religious reinterpretations in order to situate itself in that of modern politics, which is to a vast extent the product of its invention.

Now, then, the particular form of Protestantism implanted in New England was destined to leave a profound mark in the American ideology with a strong imprint, up to our days, since it will be the means by which the new society will set off the conquest of the continent, legitimizing it with terms drawn from the Bible (the violent conquest by Israel of the promised land, an example repeated to exhaustion in the dominant US discourse).

Later the United States would extend to the entire planet the project of carrying out the work that “God” had reserved for them to accomplish, since the Americans perceive themselves as the “chosen people” –a synonym for the Nazi’s *Herrenvolk*, to take that parallel once again. This is where we are today.

The successive immigrant waves have likewise played their part in the reinforcement of the US ideology. The immigrants are certainly not responsible for the squalor and oppression that stand at the origin of their departure. On the contrary, they are their victims.

Nonetheless, circumstances –i.e. their emigration– lead them to renounce the collective struggle to change the conditions common to their classes or groups in their own countries, for the benefit of adherence to an ideology of individual success in the country that receives them. This adherence is stimulated by the American system, which plays its part to perfection. It hinders the acquisition of a class consciousness which, as soon as it has begun to mature, must face a new wave of immigrants that causes its political crystallization to be aborted. But at the same time migration stimulates the “communitarization” of US society, since individual success does not preclude a strong insertion in a community of origin (the Irish, the Italians, etc.),

without which individual isolation could become unbearable. Now, here too the reinforcement of this dimension of identity –which the American system regains and praises– is carried out to the detriment of class consciousness and of the shaping of the citizen.

While in Paris the people got ready to set off to “take heaven by storm” (I refer here to the Commune of 1871), in the United States the bands constituted by the successive generations of impoverished immigrants (the Irish, Italians, etc.) slaughtered one another, manipulated with perfect cynicism by the dominant classes.

In the United States there is no workers’ party; there was never one. Labor unions, which are powerful, are “non-political” in every sense of the term, referencing to no political party that might feel close to them by nature and unable to remedy this situation by generating themselves a socialist ideology. They share with the rest of society the liberal ideology that is dominant without any rivals. They struggle, therefore, within the limited and precise sphere of demands that do not put liberalism into question. Concretely, they are “post-modernist” and have always been so.

Communitarian ideologies could not substitute for the absence of a socialist ideology in the working classes. This applies even for the most radical of these, the black community, since by definition, communitarism is inscribed within the framework of the generalized racism that it intends to fight in the latter’s terrain.

The result is that US society disdains equality. Extreme inequality is not only tolerated, it is appreciated as the symbol of the “success” that liberty promotes. Now, liberty without equality is equal to savagery. The violence under every form that this unilateral ideology produces is not the result of chance, nor in any way a motive of radicalization; quite the contrary. The dominant culture in European societies had until now combined the values of liberty and equality with less imbalance; this combination then constituted the foundation of the historical commitment of social democracy. It so happens that unfortunately the evolution of contemporary Europe tends to bring the society and culture of this continent closer to those of the United States, erected into models, and the object of a very uncritical admiration that invades us.

One of the most neglected aspects in the analysis of the differences opposing “European” ideologies (in their diversity) and the US ideology refers to the impact of the Philosophy of the Enlightenment in their respective shaping.

As we know, the Philosophy of the Enlightenment is the decisive launching element in the constitution of the cultures and of the ideologies of modern Europe, to the extent that its impact continues to be important up to our days. This is true not only for the early centers of the budding capitalism, be they Catholic (France) or Protestant (Britain and the Low Countries), but also for Germany and even Russia. In the United States, on the contrary, the Philosophy of the Enlightenment only had a marginal impact, in fact only having interested an “aristocratic” (and slave-holding!) layer represented to perfection by Jefferson, Madison and a few others, the New England of the sects remaining impervious to its critical spirit. Its dominant culture is closer to the Witches of Salem than to the “ungodly” Enlightenment.

What ensued from this, consolidating along with the strengthening of the “Yankee” bourgeoisie that arose from New England, is a simple and wrong substitution: that “Science” (to be understood as the hard Sciences-Physics) governs the march of society.

This has undoubtedly been one of the most commonly shared opinions in the United States, for more than a century, both among the dominant classes and, by repercussion, among the exploited and oppressed classes as well.

On the basis of this substitution I can explain some of the outstanding features of the US ideology. In the first place the insignificance of its philosophy, reduced to the most wretched version of empiricism. Then, its insane search for the reduction of the social sciences and the humanities to “pure” (and “hard”) sciences: “pure” economics substituting for political economy, “gene science” for anthropology and sociology. This latter driftage comes very close, unfortunately, to the contemporary ideology that was promoted by the Nazis and that has undoubtedly found a terrain facilitated by the thorough racism generated by the history of the United States. Another driftage that ensues from this vision of “Science”: the attraction for cosmological Constructions (the “Big Bang” being the most popular expression). The Enlightenment had made it understood that Physics is the science of the “parts” of the Universe chosen as the arena for research not the science of the Universe as a whole, which is a

metaphysical concept, and consequently a non-scientific one. US thinking is, in this terrain, closer to the pre-modern (not to say medieval-like) vision concerned with conciliating Faith and Reason, than to the modern scientific tradition. This –backward– drift was as convenient to the sectarians of New England Protestantism as to the society steeped in the diffuse religiosity that it has produced.

The combination pertinent to the way United States society was historically shaped – “Biblical” religious dominant ideology and absence of a workers’ party– ultimately produced a still unparalleled situation, that of a *de facto* sole party, the party of capital.

The two segments that constitute this sole party share the same fundamental liberalism. One and the other aim at the only minority –40% of the electorate– that “participates” in this type of truncated and impotent democratic life that is offered to it. Each one of them has its own clientele –in the middle classes, because the popular classes don’t vote– and has adapted its language to it. Each one of them crystallizes in its midst a conglomerate of segmentary capitalist interests (the lobbies) or of “communitary” supports.

US democracy today constitutes the advanced model of what I call “low-intensity democracy”. Its operation is based on a total separation between the management of political life, based on the practice of electoral democracy, and that of economic life, regulated by the laws of accumulation of capital. And what is more, this separation isn’t the object of any radical questioning, but rather a part of what we call the political sphere. It castrates representative institutions (parliaments and others), which become impotent in the face of “the market”, whose impositions they accept. To vote Democrat, to vote Republican, that has no importance at all, since the voters’ future does not depend on their electoral choice but on the contingencies of the market.

The US state is, for this reason, at the exclusive service of the economy (that is to say of capital, whose faithful and exclusive servant it is, without having to concern itself with other social interests). It can be so because the historical formation of US society has –in the popular classes– blocked the maturing of political class consciousness.

4. The exacerbated modernity in the form of a liberalism without obligations stands at the origin of an ideological conflict that is growing in the midst of the “Western” cultural area, the most severe expression of which currently pits Europe against the United States.

The above reasoning has made it possible to discover the origins of the difference, that even today remains visible, between US society and culture on one hand and those of Europe on the other. The operation and the interests of the dominant capital in the United States and in Europe are probably not as different as we sometimes suggest (through the very well-known opposition between “Anglo-Saxon capitalism” and “Rhineland capitalism”). The coming together of their interests undoubtedly explains the solidity of the “triad” (United States-Europe-Japan). But the judgments of society, the societal projects that trouble spirits, even in an implicit manner, are to a certain extent different. In the United States, the value of “liberty” alone occupies all the ground without this causing any problems. In Europe it is permanently counterbalanced by support for the value of “equality”, with which the former must be ready to compromise.

It turns out that the alignment of the dominant segments of transnationalized European capital with unfettered liberalism is a threat to Europe which is not safe from an impoverishing driftage of this nature, given the liberal alignment of its socialist parties and the crisis in the labor world that it has already unfailingly begun. But Europe could avoid it. Because in Europe the state has been (and could again become) the compulsory meeting ground of the confrontation among social interests and can, as from there, favor the historical commitments that give meaning and real scope to democratic practice. If the state is not compelled to perform this role by class struggles and political struggles that preserve their autonomy in the face of the exclusive logic of the accumulation of capital, then democracy is transformed into a derisory practice, as it now is in the United States.

The US ideology is liberalism without obligations disguised as para-religious fundamentalism and wrapped in an insipid “democratic” rhetoric. This ideology fulfills the roles that power expects of it, because, naturally, the US ideology in question is not the cause of the imperialist expansion of the United States. The latter follows the logic of the accumulation of capital, whose

interests it serves (the completely material interests). But this ideology comes in wonderfully handy by messing the cards.

Will European ideology follow the example of this driftage, even if it is without the religious disguise?

At the same time, the exacerbation of the drifting “Western” modernity is therefore articulated with the complementary drifts –despite their apparent opposition– that affect the peripheries of the system. I examine below the Arab and African examples.

In the Arab world: the driftage of political Islam

1. The fatal mistake is to believe that the appearance of political movements that mobilize masses while reaffirming Islam is the unavoidable product of the bursting onstage of culturally and politically backward peoples incapable of understanding any other language than that of an almost atavistic obscurantism.

A mistake unfortunately widely disseminated by the dominant, oversimplifying media, and taken up again in the pseudo-scientific discourses of Eurocentrism and of bad “Orientalism”. Discourses based on the prejudice that only the West could invent modernity, while the Muslim peoples are believed to be locked inside an immutable “tradition” that makes them incapable of understanding the scope of the change needed.

Like other regions of the world, the Muslim peoples and Islam have a history of diverse interpretations of the relations between reason and faith, of the transformations and mutual adaptations of society and of its religion. But the reality of this history is denied not only by Eurocentric discourses, but also by the contemporary movements that claim to pertain to Islam. One and the other in fact share the same culturalist prejudice by virtue of which the “specificities” inherent in the different trajectories of peoples and of their religions are believed to be of an intangible, immeasurable and trans-historical nature. To the Eurocentrism of the Westerners, contemporary political Islam does not oppose anything other than reverse Eurocentrism.

The emergence of movements that claim to belong to Islam is in fact the expression of a violent rebellion against the destructive effects of the really existing capitalism; against the unfinished, truncated and deceitful modernity that accompanies it. It is the expression of a perfectly legitimate rebellion against a system that has nothing to offer to the peoples in question.

2. The discourse of Islam that is proposed as an alternative to capitalist modernity (to which the experiences of modernity of the historical socialisms are assimilated without nuances) is of a political and in no way theological nature.

The charges of “integristism” and “fundamentalism” that is often foisted on it in no way corresponds to this discourse which, it must be said, makes no allusion to that, except among some contemporary Muslim intellectuals who use those terms to address Western opinion rather than their own.

The proposed Islam is in this case the adversary of any theology of liberation. Political Islam is a call to submission, not to emancipation. The only attempt at a reading of Islam that moved in the direction of emancipation was that of the Sudanese Mahmoud Taha.

Sentenced to death and executed by the power in Khartoum, Taha has not been championed by any party within the Islamic current, whether “radical” or “moderate”, and was not defended by any of the intellectuals who claim to favor the “Islamic Renaissance” or even just express the wish to hold a dialogue with those movements.

The heralds of the “Islamic Renaissance” in question have no interest in theology, and never mention the great texts that refer to it. In this aspect, what they understand as Islam seems to be only a conventional and social version of religion, reduced to a formal and thorough respect for ritual practice. The Islam in question would define a “community” to which one belongs by inheritance, like ethnicity, and not an intimate and strong personal conviction. It is merely a question of affirming a “collective identity”, nothing more. This is the reason why the expression

“political Islam”, with which these movements as a whole are named in the Arab countries, is certainly more accurate.

3. Modern political Islam had been invented by the Orientalists at the service of British power in India, before being taken up again unchanged by the Pakistani Mawdudi.

It was a question of “proving” that Muslim believers are not authorized to live in a state that would not be Islamic –looking ahead to the division of India– because Islam was believed to ignore the possibility of a separation between state and religion. The Orientalists in question had omitted to notice that the English of the thirteenth century could not have conceived their survival outside Christendom either!

Abul Ala Al Mawdudi thus takes up again the issue by which power emanates from God and from him alone (*wilaya al faqih*), ruling out the concept of citizens who have the right to legislate; the state only has the duty to apply the law defined once and forever (the *sharia*). Joseph de Maistre had already written analogous things accusing the Revolution of the crime of having invented modern democracy and the emancipation of the individual.

Challenging the concept of emancipative modernity, political Islam rejects the very principle of democracy –the right of society to construct its future through the freedom to legislate that it endows itself with.

The principle of *Shura* that political Islam claims to be the only Islamic form of democracy is no such thing, since that principle is still prisoner of the interdiction of innovation (*ibda*) not accepting, except at its extreme, anything more than the endless re-interpretation of tradition (*ijtihad*). The *Shura* is just one of the multiple forms of consultation that we find in all pre-modern, pre-democratic societies. Surely this interpretation has sometimes been the vehicle of real transformations, imposed by new demands. But it turns out that by this very principle –the rejection of the right to a rupture with the past– that interpretation locks the modern struggle for social change and democracy inside a *cul-de-sac*. The alleged resemblance between Islamic parties –radical or moderate, since they all adhere to those same “anti-modernist” principles in the name of the supposed specificity of Islam– and the Christian Democrat parties of modern Europe lacks in fact validity, although the US media and diplomacy make constant allusion to this to legitimize their support for potentially “Islamist” regimes. Christian Democracy is located within modernity, of which it accepts the fundamental concept of creative democracy as essential for the concept of secularism. Political Islam rejects modernity. It proclaims it, without being in a condition to understand its meaning.

Therefore, the proposed Islam in no way deserves to be called “modern”; and the arguments wielded in this field by the friends of “dialogue” are of an extreme banality, ranging from the use of cassettes by its propagandists to the observation that the latter are recruited among the “educated” strata –engineers, for example! The discourse of these movements, meanwhile, does not involve anything other than the Wahabite Islam, that rejects everything that the interaction between historical Islam and Greek philosophy had produced in its time, an contents itself with repeating the banal writings of the most reactionary of the theologians of the Middle Ages –Ibn Taymiya. Although some of their heralds term this interpretation a “return to the sources” (even to the Islam of the time of the Prophet), in actual fact it is nothing but a return to the conceptions reigning two hundred years ago, the years of a society halted in its development for many centuries.

4. Contemporary political Islam is not the product of a reaction against the supposed abuses of secularism, as is unfortunately very often stated.

This is because no Muslim society in modern times –save in the defunct Soviet Union– has ever been truly secular, much less affected by the boldness of any aggressively “atheistic” power. The semi-modern states of Kemalist Turkey, of Nasserite Egypt, of Baathist Syria and Iraq, had been content with taming the clerics (as had often happened in the past) by imposing a discourse aiming exclusively at legitimizing the state’s political options. The outline of a secular idea existed only in some critical intellectual groups but with no much influence over the state. This state, driven by a nationalist project, has often retreated in this arena, as is testified

by the worrisome involution launched in Nasser's era, which produced a rupture with the policy that the Wafd had adopted since 1919.

The explanation for this driftage is perhaps evident: rejecting democracy, the regimes in question substituted it with the "homogeneity of the community", the danger of which is seen to increase even in the regressing democracy of the contemporary West itself (cf. diversity inherited from the past and diversity in the invention of the future).

Political Islam seeks to conclude an evolution already widely underway in the countries concerned, attempting to reestablish an undisguisedly conservative theocratic order, associated with a political power of a "Mameluke" type. The reference to this military caste wielding leadership until two centuries ago, positioning itself above all law (simulating to know only the *Sharia* in this sphere), seizing for itself all the benefits of economic life and accepting –in the name of "realism"– to incorporate itself in an ancillary position in the capitalist globalization of the period, comes suddenly to the mind of anyone who observes both the degraded post-nationalist regimes of the region and the new allegedly Islamic regimes, their twin brothers.

5. There is, from this fundamental point of view, almost no difference between the so-called "radical" currents of political Islam and those that would like to present a "moderate" aspect. The project of one and the other is identical.

The case of Iran itself does not escape the general rule despite the confusions that were at the origin of its success, owing to the concomitance between the expansion of the Islamist movement and the struggle carried out against the dictatorship of the socially retrograde and politically pro-US Shah. In a first instance, the extremist extravagances of the theocratic power were compensated by its anti-imperialist positions, from which it extracted its legitimacy and which gave it an echo of powerful popularity beyond the borders of Iran.

But the regime was gradually to prove that it was incapable of meeting the challenge of an economic and social development offering renewals. The "dictatorship of the turbans" (the clerics) that had replaced that of the "caps" (of the military men and technocrats), as is said in Iran, leads to a fantastic degradation of the country's economic apparatus. The Iran that boasted it was "doing like Korea" is today positioned among the countries of the "Fourth World". The insensitivity of the hard liners to the social problems confronting the country's popular classes is the reason for its replacement by those who called themselves "reformers". The latter defended a project certainly capable to mitigate the rigors of the theocratic dictatorship. But this project does not give up the principle –enshrined in the constitution (*wilaya al faqih*)– on which rests the monopoly of their power that has gradually led them to abandon their "anti-imperialist" positions in order to integrate into the banal "compradore" world of the capitalism of the peripheries¹.

The system of political Islam is at a standstill in Iran. The political and social struggles to which the Iranian people are as of now openly committed must sooner or later lead to the rejection of the very principle of the *wilaya al faqih* that places the clerics above all institutions of political and civil society. It is the condition for their success.

Political Islam is in the ultimate analysis nothing more than an adaptation of the ancillary condition of purchaser capitalism. For this reason, its allegedly "moderate" form probably constitutes the principal danger threatening the peoples in question, the violence of the "radicals" having no other role than that of destabilizing the state to allow the installation of the new "compradore" power. The lucid support that the diplomacy of the countries of the Triad aligned behind the United States provides for this "solution" to the problem is perfectly consistent with its will to impose the globalized liberal order at the service of the dominant capital.

6. The two discourses of globalized liberal capitalism and of political Islam are not in conflict, but on the contrary, perfectly complementary.

The ideology of the US-style "communitarisms" that the current fashion endeavors to popularize annuls collective consciousness and social struggles to substitute them with supposedly collective "identities" that ignore them. This ideology is thus perfectly instrumented by the strategy of domination of capital, because it shifts the struggles from the area of real

social contradictions to the world of the imaginary described as cultural, trans-historical and absolute. Now, political Islam is precisely a “communitarism”.

The diplomacy of the G7 powers, and especially that of the United States, knows what they are doing in choosing to support political Islam. They have done so in Afghanistan, terming its Islamists as “freedom fighters (!)” against “the horrible dictatorship of communism”, which was actually only a project of enlightened despotism, national and populist, which had the audacity to open school doors to girls. They continue to do so from Egypt to Algeria. They know that the power of political Islam has the virtue –for them– of reducing the peoples in question to impotence, and consequently ensures their “compradorization” without hindrance.

With the cynicism that characterizes it, the US establishment knows how to obtain further profit from political Islam. The forms of “driftage” of the regimes it inspires (the Taliban, for example) –which actually constitute no drift, but, although it may seem impossible, are inscribed within the logic of their programs– can be exploited each time imperialism judges it useful to intervene, brutally if necessary. The “savagery” attributed to the peoples who are the first victims of political Islam allows “Islamophobia” to be nourished. That makes it easier to accept the prospect of an “apartheid at worldwide scale” that is the logical and necessary result of an ever more polarizing capitalist expansion.

The only political movements identified with Islam that are condemned without mitigating factors by the G7 powers are those inscribed –by the objective local situation– in anti-imperialist struggles: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine. It is no coincidence.

The ethnicist driftage in Africa: the case of Ethiopia

1. The reactions of driftage of the victims of capitalist expansion in the face of the challenge constituted in that event by modernity adopt diverse forms. Ethnicism is one of them, a particularly devastating one in Africa, but not exclusively there, as can be seen in the examples in Eastern Europe.

The triumphant modernity produced by the current of national liberation in the 1950s and 60s had been invested in a project of trans-ethnic national construction, both in the states that accepted submission to the demands of neo-colonial imperialism and in those that aspired to free themselves through “socialism” (in reality populist nationalist formulas).

The reflux has caused the legitimacy of the powers resulting from national liberation to be questioned anew. The cornered leading classes have in most cases sought to reconstruct a new legitimacy on the basis of ethnicity (or of religion). The urban popular and peasant classes had experienced their “ethnic specificity” without any conflict with their adherence to the national project as long as the latter, in its deployment, allowed the hope of greater welfare. It isn’t the people but the leading classes that have again spotlighted “ethnic authenticity”. Fish starts rotting from the head, it is said in Africa. Examples of this model of driftage are not lacking. The latest: Côte d’Ivoire, previously hailed as a triumphant model of capitalist modernity.

If I choose here the case of Ethiopia, it is because in many ways it seems to me to be exemplary. The historic Ethiopia lived under a feudal-family system originating in the north of the country, and then extended in particular ways in the southern regions conquered by Menelik in the nineteenth century. It later knew two forms of modernization, the first one frankly capitalist, established by Emperor Haile Selassie, and the second populist national, under the leadership of the Derg and of Haile Mariam Mengistu. The successive exhaustion of these two experiments in modernity is the origin of the ethnicist driftage promoted by the leading classes in power in Addis Ababa.

2. During the period of “imperial restoration” that followed the country’s liberation (1942) and until the fall of the Empire (1975), Ethiopia was the object of systematic “modernization” policies through integration into world capitalism, promoted by power and its leading class.

In this framework, the members of the leading class (generally the “good families” of the aristocracy, whose offspring were educated at least in part to fill the best posts in the modernized state, but also the “new rich” who had become wealthy in trade), acting with the complicity of the authorities, appropriated major tracts of farmland, among the best in the country. There they developed an exclusively commercial production (for export and for the

new, expanding urban market) and resorted to a variety of means to exploit labor (in part wage-earners, but above all tenant farmers). In addition, all the means assigned by the state to “agricultural development”, be they banking credit or subsidies (for imported equipment), were exclusively aimed at this small minority of beneficiaries of the new agrarian capitalism. The work on communication infrastructure (roads) likewise privileged the regions favored by this expansion.

Nothing –or virtually nothing– was done for the rest of the rural countryside, condemned for this reason to vegetate. But still there was no peasant rebellion, protest or vindication “movement”; rather, there were only localized, sporadic explosions, as there had always been in the ancient history of the country. In the regions affected by modernization, the peasants were no more than the passive “objects” of social transformation, not its active “subjects”.

The pauperization produced by this development model, despite the “successes” expressed in the growth rates for export-oriented output, reached dramatic proportions in the 1970s –years of drought and famine. But it is not the battered rural world that causes the monarchy to fall: it is a revolt by the army (in a prolonged war in Eritrea) and the radicalized urban elites (especially the students).

The new regime (the Derg, from 1975 to 1991) proceeded to carry out a radical agrarian reform, at one stroke of the pen suppressing almost all the medieval forms of exploitation of the peasantry, and setting up in this way a gigantic, free “small peasantry” of small family landowners/cultivators. The reform was not the product of a peasant movement, but awarded by the new political leadership class emerging from segments of the petit bourgeoisie and from the radicalized urban intellectuals who thus established claim to being socialists, even in a “Marxist-Leninist” version. Nevertheless, it was very well received by the peasants.

The balance of the period is a mixed one. On the positive side: efforts (modest but real) to improve peasants’ access to credit and to facilities for the commercialization of their goods, roads, and especially schools and health centers. Signs are also seen of the birth of a political consciousness among the rural masses, produced by the complexity of support measures and of conflicts between them and the administrations in charge of handling them, which took the place of the old aristocracies and of the Church. On the negative side: the rise in the bureaucratization of the towns’ administrative management (and with it, in corruption), vague and disorderly projects for “cooperatives” without much continuity, but above all, the drain represented by recruitment for the army.

3. The crisis in this system is entirely the product of conflicts that have developed within the new “statist-socialist” leading class.

Beyond the diversity of reasons for these conflicts and of their forms of expression, note must be taken of the greater driftage to which they have ultimately led. “Power” claimed to be “pan-Ethiopian” refusing to make any reference to the diversity of ethnic groups that constitute the Ethiopian nation. The force of the major opposition, which “has taken the maquis” (EPRP) and formed an alliance with the Eritrean liberation front in the leadership of the civil war, has opted for a “federative plurinational” vision of its project for a new Ethiopia (cut off from Eritrea).

The driftage produced a displacement of the central issue in the debates in the midst of the radicalized political class. The central concern of the diverse segments of this class centered on this question: how to build a popular national alliance associating urban workers (quickly termed “proletarians”), the peasantry, and “revolutionary” intellectuals.

The clear or confused answers, the proposals for strategies and tactics, the means defined to attain the goals, the struggles for power that might be hidden behind the arguments wielded by one group or another, were all articulated around the central issue of “popular unity”.

The civil war substituted it with a new question: “the ethnic issue”. It should be noted that adherence to ethnicity comes exclusively from fractions of the urban middle classes, which have sometimes taken the initiative in creating “liberation movements” (Oromo and others). In the country, no force, organized or spontaneous, sees itself reflected in these “ethnic” movements.

Will the new –“federal”– constitution and the curious and scarcely democratic stipulations that characterize it (voting rights reserved exclusively for the ethnic groups declared to be the majority in each of the regions in which the country has been divided) poison relations among

the ethnic groups within the popular masses? Up to now, fortunately, this has not been the case. The driftage in the Yugoslav manner has therefore been avoided.

Inherited cultural diversity and diversity in the invention of the future

1. All human societies have a history over the course of which they have been transformed, sometimes through minor and gradual changes operating within the logic of their system, sometimes through qualitative changes in the system.

The participants in these changes, which we could call revolutions, have always proclaimed their decision not to take anything from the past: the Enlightenment intended to destroy the *ancien régime* in every aspect, the Paris Commune and the socialist revolutions “to make a clean sweep of the past”, Maoism to write a new history of China “on an empty page”.

But in fact, it has never been possible to erase the past entirely. Some of its components have been recovered and transformed in order to be placed at the service of new logics; others survived as means of resistance, braking change. The precise combination of the new and the old, specific to each of the historical trajectories considered, constitutes the first source of diversity, in part, therefore, inherited. The modalities of secularism as they are conceived and practiced in the societies that entered capitalist modernity provide a good example of this diversity. Secularism is even more radical than the bourgeois revolution was (as in France). When, on the contrary, the capitalist transformation opened a path for itself through compromises between the new bourgeoisie and the old dominant classes (as in most of Europe), secularism did not exclude the survival of a religious reference in public behavior. There are even national Churches (in the Protestant countries) that have been molded within the new system of capitalism and that have survived as such although they may have lost the coercive power that they enjoyed prior to modernity. The state/religion separation, which defines the concept of secularism, is therefore, according to case, more or less formally confirmed. Let us point out here, in passing, that the modernity that is implied in this separation says nothing further. Modernity is not a negation of religious faith. A “state atheism” (with only one known model, the one attempted by Soviet communism) acts to some extent like a state religion: one and the other distort the very principle of modernity, which leaves opinions – philosophical, religious, political, ideological, scientific – to the exclusive free judgment of individuals.

Nevertheless, the insistence on the need to admit and respect the inherited diversity –which the dominant contemporary discourse rendered fashionable– is not lacking in consequences, since it frequently serves to legitimate policies that aim to reinforce conservative powers, as has been seen in the European debate on, precisely, secularism. What is the purpose of a reference to Christian values in a declaration of rights?

2. There are many other areas of social reality characterized by diversity, the roots of which are frequently remote, as testified by the variety of languages and religions. This diversity has survived even when the elements that constitute it have themselves been transformed over the course of history.

Does the multinationality and/or multiculturalism in the midst of the modern state, that is to say, the state formed by citizens that have a legal right to construct their future, pose problems for the practice of democracy? Does it constitute a challenge to it? Diverse attitudes are proposed in answer to this question.

Fierce partisans of national and cultural homogeneity as the only means of definition of the common identity that according to them is necessary for the exercise of civil rights, will not hesitate to propose either a forcible assimilation of the recalcitrant (very often minorities), or, if they are democratic, the divorce and partition of the state. Meanwhile, as second best, they will only accept a “tolerance” of diversity. The quotation marks are here to remind us that tolerance is something eventually granted to somebody which one dislikes (“one must tolerate one’s mother-in-law”). They will therefore be in favor of a “multi-communitarian” construction –in the US manner– without ever really renouncing to hierarchize these “communities” in the national system. For them, community identity –which is inherited and cannot be the object of personal choice– is essential. A certain “right to a difference” is affirmed here, but at the price of denying its complementary opposite, which has an equal status –the right to similarity, to identical

treatment— and in a more general manner the inalienable individual right not to accept being defined by membership in an inherited community.

Emancipative modernity is founded on a totally different concept of democracy, which implies the rigorous equality of all rights and duties (and the creation of conditions for this equality to be made real) and simultaneously a respect for existing differences. “Respect” is a stronger term than “tolerance”. It implies that the state’s policies create the conditions for equality despite the diversity. “Despite” here merely means that we do not attempt to immobilize the diversity in question, that we allow history to do its work and perhaps lead to an assimilation that thus is no longer forcible. We act for the diversity not to end up being a juxtaposition of communities that are closed and, for that reason, mutually hostile.

It is useful to remember here that socialists —be they Austro-Marxists or Bolsheviks— have called for the launching of this type of delicate dynamics. It is useful to recall that modern classes —the working classes and major fractions of the bourgeoisies— had a favorable view of this kind of solutions that safeguard the advantages of a great state in which multinationality becomes a source of wealth and not of impoverishing oppression.

Meanwhile, the partisans of “communitarian homogeneity” were primarily recruited among the old classes and the traditional peasantry.

This reminder makes it possible to size up the regression represented by the proposals that characterize the dominant fashion. The insistence on the “communities” emerges from a real betrayal of the concepts of emancipating modernity; it accompanies a degradation of democracy through the negation of the manifold dimensions of identity (nationality perhaps, but also social class, sex, eventual ideological or religious persuasion, etcetera). The fashionable discourse no longer recognizes citizens, who are at the same time individuals and persons with multidimensional identities, and substitutes them by “people” (“consumers” for economists, television spectators for politicians), therefore manipulable both as amorphous individuals and as subjects of inherited and imposed communities.

3. Inherited diversities pose problems, since they do exist. But by fixing the attention on them, other much more interesting diversities remain unseen, as those which the invention of the future necessarily generates in its movement. These diversities are much more interesting because their concept ensues from the same origin as emancipative democracy and the always unfinished modernity that accompanies it.

To say that policies must be launched for the liberty of individuals not to be deployed to the detriment of their equality but, on the contrary, for both of these values to be able to advance together, is to affirm that history has not ended, that some transformations of the system are necessary, and that it is necessary to struggle for the latter to move in the direction of progress in real emancipation. Who could therefore say that there is no more than one path, one sole recipe of whose knowledge one or the other would have the monopoly, to meet that need?

The creative utopias around which the struggles can crystallize, endowing them with perspectival goals, have always found their legitimization on the basis of systems with a diversity of values, whether they appeal to any of the versions of secular humanism or are of religious inspiration (the theologies of liberation). Their necessary complement —the systems for the analysis of society— are inspired in scientific social theories, themselves diverse. The proposed strategies for efficiently advancing in the agreed-on direction cannot themselves be the monopoly of any organization.

In the invention of the future these diversities are not only inevitable but they are welcome to everyone who does not share any given dogmatism. This dogmatism would supposedly provide him with a vain certainty about a knowledge that it is much more appropriate to conceive of as always unfinished and in construction.

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Notas

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1. By "compradore" bourgeoisie we refer to the part of the bourgeoisie of the colonial, semi colonial and dependent countries that operates as intermediary of the imperialistic bourgeoisie. The expression was created by Mao Zedong to explain the influence of the commercial bourgeoisie in China (translator's note).