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Eleven Theses on the Resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism

- Debate - Marxism and Religion -

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Given the renewed discussion, we are producing this 1981 document, which stands the test of time. The "Eurotheses" were circulated widely and have been translated into many languages. Their success was due to the fact that they gave a Marxist analysis of a phenomenon that was then still relatively new. The current resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism dates from the 1970s, and reached its first crescendo, after years of underground activity, with the Iranian revolution of 1979.

1. The extent and diversity of the forms taken by the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, which has marked the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century, preclude any hasty, generalized conjectures about it. It would be totally mistaken to equate the Catholicism of the Polish workers with that of Franco's reaction, though this should not make us overlook the common features of the agrarian histories of Spain and Poland or the political and ideological content that their respective forms of Catholicism share.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ayatollah.jpg>]

Similarly, elementary analytical caution forbids putting such diverse phenomena as the resurgence of Muslim clerical and/or political movements in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, or Senegal, Zia Ul-Haq's military dictatorship in Pakistan or Gaddafi's in Libya, the seizure of power by Iranian Shi'ite clergy or by Afghan guerrillas, etc., all into the same category. Even phenomena that on the surface appear clearly identical, such as the progress made by the same movement, the "Euro-Muslim Brotherhood," in Egypt and Syria, have different underlying political content and functions, determined by their different immediate objectives.

Beneath their agreement on otherworldly matters, beyond their agreement on problems of everyday life, when they do agree on such issues, and notwithstanding their similar, even identical, denominations and organizational forms, Muslim movements remain essentially political movements. They are thus the expression of specific socio-political interests that are very much of this world.

2. There has been no eruption of Islam into politics. Islam and politics have always been inseparable, as Islam is a political religion in the etymological sense of the word. Thus, the demand for the separation of religion and state in Muslim countries is more than secularist: it is openly anti-religious. This helps explain why none of the major currents of bourgeois or petty bourgeois nationalism on Islamic soil, with the exception of Kemalism in Turkey, have called for secularism. What is an elementary democratic task elsewhere—separation of religion and state—is so radical in Muslim countries, especially the Middle East, that even the "Euro-dictatorship of the proletariat" will find it a difficult task to complete. It is beyond the scope of other classes.

Furthermore, the democratic classes of Muslim societies have on the whole shown no interest, or almost none, in challenging their own religion. In fact Islam has not been perceived in the twentieth century as the ideological cement of an outmoded feudal or semi-feudal class structure in these societies. It has been seen instead as a basic element of national identity jeered at by the foreign Christian (or even atheist) oppressor. It is no accident that Turkey is the only Muslim society not to have been subjected to direct foreign domination in the twentieth century. Mustafa Kemal too was exceptional among his peers. He waged his main battle not against colonialism or imperialism but against the Sultanate, a combination of temporal and spiritual power (the Caliphate). On the other hand Nasser, however radical a bourgeois nationalist, had every interest in identifying with Islam in his main combat against imperialism; all the more so because this was a cheap way for him to protect his left and right flanks.

3. The following theses do not deal with Islam as one element among others, albeit a fundamental element, in the

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ideology of nationalist currents. That kind of Islam's time is up, as with the currents that identify with it. More generally, we shall distinguish between Islam used as one means among others of shaping and asserting a national, or communal, or even sectarian identity, on the one hand, and Islam considered as an end in itself, a total, general objective, a unique, exclusive program, on the other. "The Koran is our constitution," declared Hassan Al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. The Islam that interests us here is Islam elevated to an absolute principle, to which every demand, struggle and reform is subordinated—the Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood, of the "Jamaat-i-Islami," of the different ulemas' associations and of the movement of Iranian ayatollahs whose organized expression is the Islamic Republican Party.

The common denominator of these different movements is Islamic fundamentalism, that is, the wish to return to Islam, the aspiration to an Islamic utopia, which incidentally cannot be limited to a single nation but must encompass all Muslim peoples if not the whole world. In this spirit, Bani-Sadr declared to the Beirut daily An-Nahar in 1979 that "Ayatollah Khomeini is an internationalist; he is opposed to Islamic Stalinists who want to build Islam in one country (sic!). This internationalism is also visible in the way that all these movements go beyond the borders of their countries of origin and/or maintain more or less close relations with each other. They all reject nationalism in the narrow sense, and consider nationalist currents—even those that claim to be Islamic—rivals if not adversaries. They oppose foreign oppression or the national enemy in the name of Islam, not in defense of the nation. The United States is thus not so much imperialism for Khomeini as the Great Satan; Saddam Hussein is above all an atheist, an infidel. For all the movements in question, Israel is not so much a Zionist usurper of Palestinian land as the Jewish usurper of an Islamic holy land."

4. However progressive, national and/or democratic the objective significance of certain struggles carried on by various Islamic fundamentalist currents, it cannot mask the fact that their ideology and their program are essentially, by definition, reactionary. What sort of program aims to construct an Islamic state, faithfully modeled on the seventh century of the Christian era, if not a reactionary utopia? What sort of ideology aims to restore a thirteen-century-old order, if not an eminently reactionary ideology? Thus it is wrong and even absurd to define Islamic fundamentalist movements as bourgeois, whatever the extent to which some struggles they wage align them with all or part of their countries' bourgeoisies, just as wrong as to define them as revolutionary when they happen to come into conflict with these same bourgeoisies.

In terms of the nature of their program and ideology, their social composition, and even the social origins of their founders, Islamic fundamentalist movements are petty bourgeois. They do not hide their hatred of representatives of big capital any more than of representatives of the working class, or their hatred of imperialist countries any more than of "communist" countries. They are hostile to the two poles of industrial society that threaten them: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. They correspond to those layers of the petty bourgeoisie described in the Communist Manifesto:

"The lower middle class, the manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history."

Petty bourgeois Islamic reaction finds its ideologues and leading elements among the "traditional intellectuals" of Muslim societies, ulemas and the like, as well as among the lower echelons of the bourgeoisie's "organic intellectuals," those coming from the petty bourgeoisie and condemned to stay there: teachers and office workers in particular. In a period of ascendancy Islamic fundamentalism recruits widely at universities and other institutions that produce "intellectuals," where they are still more conditioned by their social origins than by a hypothetical and often doubtful future.

5. In countries where Islamic fundamentalist reaction has been able to become a mass movement and where it now has the wind in its sails, the labor force includes a relatively high proportion of middle classes, according to the Communist Manifesto definition: manufacturers, shopkeepers, artisans and peasants. Nevertheless, any outbreak of Islamic fundamentalism mobilizes not only a larger or smaller layer of these middle classes, but also layers of other classes newly spawned by the middle classes under the impact of capitalist primitive accumulation and impoverishment. Thus parts of the proletariat whose proletarianization is very recent, and above all parts of the sub-proletariat that capitalism has dragged down from their former petty bourgeois level, are particularly receptive to fundamentalist agitation and susceptible to being caught up in it.

This is Islamic fundamentalism's social base, its mass base. But this base is not the natural preserve of religious reaction, the way that the bourgeoisie relates to its own program. Whatever the strength of religious feeling among the masses, even if the religion in question is Islam, there is a qualitative leap from sharing this feeling to seeing religion as an earthly utopia. In order for the opiate of the masses to become an effective stimulant once more in this age of automation, the peoples must truly have no other choice left but to throw themselves on God's mercy. The least one can say about Islam is that its immediate relevance is not obvious!

In fact, Islamic fundamentalism poses more problems than it solves. Although Islamic law is several centuries younger than Roman law, it was produced by a society considerably more backward than ancient Rome. (The Koran was largely inspired by the Torah, just as the Arabs' way of life was fairly similar to the Hebrews'.) And besides the problem of updating a thirteen-century-old civil code, there is also the question of completing it. In other words, the most orthodox Muslim fundamentalist is incapable of responding to the problems posed by modern society with exegetical contortions alone, unless the contortions become totally arbitrary and therefore a source of endless disagreements among the exegetes. There are thus as many interpretations of Islam as there are interpreters. The core of the Islamic religion, which all Muslims agree on, in no way satisfies the pressing material needs of the petty bourgeois, quite apart from whether it can satisfy their spiritual needs. Islamic fundamentalism in itself is in no way the most appropriate program for satisfying the aspirations of the social layers that it appeals to.

6. The social base described above is notable for its political versatility. The quotation from the Communist Manifesto above does not describe a fixed attitude of the middle classes, but only the real content of their fight against the bourgeoisie when there is a fight, when they turn against the bourgeoisie. Before fighting against the bourgeoisie, the middle classes were its allies in the fight against feudalism; before seeking to reverse the course of history they contributed to advancing it.

The middle classes are first and foremost the social base of the democratic revolution and the national struggle. In backward, dependent societies such as Muslim societies the middle classes still play this role as long as the tasks of the national and democratic revolution are still more or less uncompleted and on the agenda. They are the most ardent fans of any bourgeois leadership (and even more of any petty bourgeois leadership) that champions these tasks. The middle classes are the social base par excellence of the Bonapartism of the ascendant bourgeoisie; they are in fact the social base of all bourgeois Bonapartism. So the only time when large sections of the middle classes strike off on their own and seek other paths is when bourgeois or petty bourgeois leaderships that have taken on national and democratic tasks run up against their own limits and lose their credibility.

Of course, as long as capitalism on the rise seems to open up prospects of upward social mobility for the middle classes, as long as their conditions of existence are improving, they do not question the established order. Even when depoliticized or unenthused, they normally play the role of "Eurosilesent majority" in the bourgeois order. But if ever the capitalist evolution of society weighs on them with all its force—the weight of national and/or international competition, inflation and debt—then the middle classes become a formidable reservoir of opposition to the powers that be. Then they are free of any bourgeois control, and all the more formidable because the violence and rage of the petty bourgeois in distress are unparalleled.

7. Even then the reactionary option is not unavoidable for the petty bourgeoisie, downtrodden though it is by capitalist

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society and disillusioned with bourgeois and petty bourgeois democratic-nationalist leaderships. There is always another option, at least in theory. The middle classes are faced with the choice between reaction and revolution. They can join the revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie, as the Communist Manifesto foresaw:

If by chance [the middle classes] are revolutionary, they are so only in view of their impending transfer into the proletariat, they thus defend not their present, but their future interests, they desert their own standpoint to place themselves at that of the proletariat.

In the backward and dependent societies that the Communist Manifesto did not take into account, however, the middle classes have absolutely no need to abandon their own viewpoint in order to place themselves under proletarian leadership. Quite the contrary, by taking up the middle classes' aspirations, notably national and democratic tasks, the proletariat can manage to win them over to its side.

But for the proletariat to win the middle classes' confidence, it must first of all have a credible leadership itself, a leadership that has proved itself politically and practically. If on the other hand a leadership with a majority in the working class has discredited itself on the level of national democratic political struggles (while maintaining its majority position because of its trade union positions or simply the lack of an alternative), if it proves politically flabby in face of the established order, or if even worse it supports the established order, then the middle classes will really have no choice but to lend their ears to petty bourgeois reaction-even if it is as inscrutable as Islamic reaction-and possibly respond to its calls.

8. In all the countries where Islamic fundamentalism has gained considerable ground, particularly in Egypt, Syria, Iran and Pakistan, all the conditions described above exist. In all these countries middle class living standards have manifestly deteriorated over the last few years. Although some of these countries are even oil exporters themselves, the only effect the massive oil price increases have had on most of their middle classes has been unbridled inflation. In addition, bourgeois and petty bourgeois democratic-nationalist leaderships are generally discredited in these countries. In all four countries, democratic-nationalist leaderships have undergone the test of state power.

All of these leaderships had had virtually unanimous middle class support at certain moments in their history as they were trying to implement their national democratic programs. Some went a long way in this direction, notably in Egypt and countries under Egyptian influence, where Nasser towered over the political landscape. Nationalists were able to stay in power for a long time, or are still in power-in the latter cases because they owe their power to the army.

In Iran and Pakistan, where the nationalists formed civilian governments, the army soon swept them away; Mossadegh and Bhutto came to sad ends. In all four countries, in any case, the progress made so far in carrying out the national democratic program, even within the framework and limits of a bourgeois state, ranges from very little to almost none. Even in Iran where the Mossadegh experience was a very short one, the Shah took it on himself (on his US tutors' advice) to bring about with his own pseudo-Bismarckian methods what the combined efforts of Robespierres and Bonapartes accomplished elsewhere.

On the other hand, the only noteworthy working class political organizations in the whole region are Stalinist parties.

These, when they amount to anything, have totally discredited themselves with a long history of selling out popular struggles and making deals with the powers that be. So when middle class discontent began to surface these past few years in the four countries mentioned, no working class or bourgeois or petty bourgeois nationalist organization was able to capitalize on it. The way was wide open for petty bourgeois Islamic fundamentalist reaction.

By contrast, in Algeria, Libya and Iraq, where the enlightened despotism of a bourgeois or petty bourgeois nationalist

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bureaucracy allowed broad middle class layers to benefit from the oil manna, Islamic fundamentalism could be contained.

9. While Islamic fundamentalism has made notable gains in Egypt and Syria as well as Iran and Pakistan, the forms and extent of its gains differ greatly from one country to another, as do its political content and function. In Syria, the fundamentalist movement is the main opposition to the declining Bonapartism of the Ba'athist bourgeois bureaucracy, and engaged in a life-and-death struggle against it. Syrian fundamentalists have profited from the fact that the Ba'athist ruling elite belongs to a minority faith (Alawi).

The outrageously, purely reactionary nature of the Syrian fundamentalist movement's program reduces its possibilities of seizing power on its own to almost nothing. It cannot on its own, on the basis of such a program, mobilize the forces needed to overthrow the Ba'athist dictatorship. Still less can it run, alone, a country whose economic and political problems are as thorny as Syria's. The Syrian fundamentalist movement is thus condemned to co-operate with the Syrian propertied classes (bourgeois and landowners). It is not, and cannot be, any more than their spearhead.

In Egypt too, for the same reasons, the possibility of an independent seizure of power by the fundamentalist movement is very limited, all the more so because it has less influence there than in Syria. In both these countries a long struggle against progressive regimes has hardened the fundamentalist movement, thus highlighting its reactionary character. Moreover, the very scope of Egypt's economic problems makes the fundamentalists' bid for power even less credible.

The Egyptian bourgeoisie is perfectly aware of this fact and is thus very obliging toward the fundamentalist movement. The fundamentalists constitute in its eyes an ideal "fifth column" inside the mass movement—a particularly effective "antibody" to the left. That is why it is not at all worried about Egyptian fundamentalist movement's trying to outbid the left on the left's two favorite issues: the national question and the social question; any gains made by Islamic reaction on these two issues mean equivalent losses for the left. The Egyptian bourgeoisie's attitude toward the fundamentalist movement resembles that of any bourgeoisie faced with a deep social crisis toward the far right and fascism.

Pakistan is different from Egypt in that the Pakistani fundamentalist movement has consolidated itself mainly under reactionary regimes. It has therefore been able to reclaim some elements of the national democratic program for long periods of time and thus form a credible opposition to the established order. But during these same long periods, bourgeois democratic-nationalist tendencies were themselves in opposition, and more credible and thus more influential than the fundamentalists were.

Only when Bhutto, skipping the stages of a Nasser-type evolution in an impressive historical shortcut, rapidly alienated the masses by getting entangled in his own contradictions was the way opened up for the extreme right dominated by the fundamentalist movement (given that the Pakistani far left was insignificant). Bhutto's bankruptcy was so glaring that the fundamentalists managed to mobilize a huge mass movement against him.

The army's coup d'état was meant to forestall the "anarchy" that could have resulted had this mobilization led to Bhutto's overthrow (as in Iran!). To win the fundamentalists' sympathy, Zia Ul-Haq's reactionary bourgeois military dictatorship took over their projects for Islamic reforms and used them to its own advantage. Today it is counting on the fundamentalist movement to neutralize any "progressive" opposition to its regime, including the late Bhutto's party.

In the three cases analyzed above, the fundamentalist movement has proved itself to be nothing but an auxiliary for

the reactionary bourgeoisie. But Iran is different.

10. In Iran the fundamentalist movement, represented mainly by the fundamentalists among the Shi'ite clergy, was forged in a long and bitter struggle against the Shah's eminently reactionary imperialist-backed regime. The sad historical bankruptcy of Iranian bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism is too well known to describe here. Because of this exceptional combination of historical circumstances, the Iranian fundamentalist movement managed to become the sole spearhead of the two immediate tasks of the national democratic revolution in Iran: overthrowing the Shah and severing the ties with US imperialism.

This situation was all the more possible because the two tasks in question were in perfect harmony with the generally reactionary program of Islamic fundamentalism. So as the social crisis matured in Iran to the point of creating the preconditions for a revolutionary overthrow of the Shah, as the middle classes' resentment of him reached fever pitch, the fundamentalist movement personified by Khomeini managed to harness the immense power of the embattled middle classes and sub-proletariat and deal the regime a series of body blows.

The fundamentalists were almost suicidal in their determination to remain unarmed, a feat that only a mystical movement is capable of. The Iranian fundamentalist movement managed to carry out the first stage of a national democratic revolution in Iran. But its fundamentalist character very quickly got the upper hand.

In a sense, the Iranian revolution is a permanent revolution in reverse. Starting with the national democratic revolution, it could under proletarian leadership have grown over into a socialist transformation. Its fundamentalist petty bourgeois leadership prevented that, pushing it on the contrary in the direction of a reactionary regression. The February 1979 revolution was astonishingly similar to February 1917—two identical points of departure ushering in diametrically opposite processes. While October 1917 enabled the Russian democratic revolution to go to its logical conclusion, in Iran the fundamentalist leadership betrayed the revolution's democratic content.

The Russian Bolsheviks replaced the Constituent Assembly, after having struggled to have it elected, with the eminently democratic power of the soviets; the ayatollahs replaced the Constituent Assembly, which they too had placed at the head of their demands but never allowed to see the light of day, with a reactionary caricature: the Muslim Assembly of Experts. The fate of this demand common to the two revolutions eloquently sums up the counterposed natures of the leaderships, and thus the opposite directions they took.

As for the democratic forms of organization that arose in the course of the Iranian February, the Islamic leadership co-opted them. The shoras were a far cry from the soviets! On the national question, while the Bolsheviks' proletarian internationalism made possible the emancipation of the Russian empire's oppressed nationalities, the ayatollahs' Islamic internationalism turned out to be a pious pretext for bloody repression of the Persian empire's oppressed nationalities. The fate of women in the two revolutions is just as well known.

The fundamentalist Iranian leadership only remained faithful to the national democratic program on one point: the struggle against US imperialism. But it stayed true to this struggle in its own peculiar way. Describing the enemy not as imperialism but as the West if not the Great Satan, Khomeini called for throwing out the baby with the bathwater, or rather the baby before the bathwater. He attributed all the political and social gains of the bourgeois revolution, including democracy and even Marxism, which he considered (correctly) a product of (supposedly Western) industrial civilization, to the hated West.

He called on Iranians to rid their society of these plagues, while neglecting the main links between Iran and imperialism: the economic links. The US embassy affair, the way it was managed, gained Iran nothing. In the final

analysis it proved very expensive, profitable in the last analysis to US banks. However the fundamentalist dictatorship evolves in Iran from now on, it has already proved to be a major obstacle to the development of the Iranian revolution.

Moreover, its evolution is very problematic. Beyond the exceptional combination of circumstances described above, there is a fundamental difference between Iran and the three other countries mentioned earlier: Iran can afford the "luxury" of an experiment with an autonomous, petty bourgeois, fundamentalist regime. Its oil wealth is the guarantee of a positive balance of payments and budget. But at what price and for how long? The economic balance sheet of two years of fundamentalism in power is already very negative compared with earlier years. On the other hand, the inconsistency of the fundamentalist "program" and the great variety of social layers who identify with it and interpret it according to their own lights are manifest in a plurality of rival and antagonistic centers of powers. Only Khomeini's authority has made it possible so far for them to keep up a "façade of unity."

11. Islamic fundamentalism is one of the most dangerous enemies of the revolutionary proletariat. It is absolutely and under all circumstances necessary to fight against its "reactionary and medieval influence," as the "Theses on the National and Colonial Question" adopted at the Second Congress of the Communist International said many years ago. Even in cases such as Iran, where the fundamentalist movement takes on national democratic tasks for a time, the duty of revolutionary socialists is to fight intransigently against the spell it casts on the struggling masses.

If not, if they do not free themselves in time, the masses will surely pay the price. While striking together at the common enemy, revolutionary socialists must warn working people against any attempt to divert their struggle in a reactionary direction. Any failure in these elementary tasks is not only a fundamental weakness, but can also lead to opportunist wrong turns.

On the other hand, even in cases where Islamic fundamentalism takes purely reactionary forms, revolutionary socialists must use tactical caution in their fight against it. In particular they must avoid falling into the fundamentalists' trap of fighting about religious issues. They should stick firmly to the national, democratic, and social issues. They must not lose sight of the fact that a part, often a big part, of the masses under Islamic fundamentalist influence can and must be pulled out of its orbit and won to the workers' cause.

At the same time revolutionary socialists must nevertheless declare themselves unequivocally for a secular society, which is a basic element of the democratic program. They can play down their atheism, but never their secularism, unless they wish to replace Marx outright with Mohammed!

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