Snapshots of Islamic Modernities

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He project of multiple modernities presents a challenge to the monocivilizational narratives of "Western modernity." It attempts to reintroduce some of the pluralistic features of Western modernity that were repressed, marginalized, or simply forgotten on the side paths of modernity's historical and intellectual trajectory. It also attempts to open up readings of the modernization of other civilizations and cultures. Modernity, as it is currently reappropriated, rejected, distorted, or simply reshaped and produced in a plurality of contexts other than the Western one, becomes both a historical and an intellectual challenge to established norms of analysis. Decentralizing the West and reflecting on modernity from its edge, from a non-Western perspective—and an Islamic one at that—can spell out the limits of modernity, generate new conceptualizations, and raise questions concerning modernity.

First, the multiple-modernities project puts the emphasis on the inclusionary dynamic of modernity, on borrowing, blending, and cross-fertilization rather than on the logic of exclusionary divergence, binary oppositions (between traditions and moderns), or the clash of civilizations (between Islam and the West). But, at the other extreme, an all-encompassing concept of modernity can lead to its self-erosion, to a collapse of its boundaries and hence to its loss of meaning.

Second, introducing multiplicity into the model of modernity inevitably brings forth a relativistic conceptualization as be-

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tween different experiences. But not every cultural distinctness is justified. Two questions, one historical, the other normative, are linked together: Can there be a plurality of culturally different modernities? Can we create a normatively superior modernity? An ethical question is intrinsic to the intellectual effort of understanding the limits of modernity, the conditions for its transcendence, and the discovery of the sources of creativity in cultural difference.

Third, the multiple-modernities perspective increases our capacity to see and read diverse trajectories and distinct patterns neglected by our social scientific language. It aims to analyze the specific characteristics of civilizations, not only in terms of their approximations to the West, but also in their own terms. Furthermore, it implies the possibility of different experiences existing, significant divergences capable of changing and transforming the practice of modernity. It raises the question of whether there can be “alternative” higher forms of modernity. Yet the search for alternatives and the affirmation of authenticity can also easily lead to self-retreat from globalized competition, to the establishment of authoritarian political regimes with a nationalist and fundamentalist rhetoric.

Hence, there is a constant oscillation between affirmation of authenticity and globalization of modernity. The tensions between identity and modernity are more salient and dramatic in the non-Western contexts of modernity. There, where traditions and memory are a source of social drama rather than cultural innovation, the process of coming to terms with the past needs to be reflected on. Can there be a creative tension between the affirmation of specificity and the general principles of modernity, without one annihilating the other? How are we to grasp the dialectical juxtapositions between modern temporality and the quest for ever-same? Islamism as a contemporary protest movement invites us to revisit these questions.

Islamism can indeed be read as a divergence from the basic premises of Western modernity, namely, the idea of future-oriented progress and individual emancipation. In some respects, contemporary Islamist movements join the “new social movements” of the West in their criticism of the Enlightenment tradition and of industrial values. However, new social move-
ments are civil, societal, and nonrevolutionary and raise a critique from within—that is, from the very centers of modernity. Islamism carries the ideal of changing the society as a whole—of Islamization of all spheres of life, ranging from faith to gender relations, private/public boundaries, scientific knowledge, and governance principles. Furthermore, it rests on the historical memory of a civilizational antagonism. As it seeks past-oriented change, hierarchical conceptions of gender relations, and submission of self to religious precepts, Islamism rejects the dominant features of modernity.

Paradoxically, contemporary Islamist movements endow Muslims with a collective identity that works critically against both traditional subjugation of Muslim identity and monocivilizational impositions of Western modernity. As such, Islamism can be thought of as a critical introduction of Muslim agency into the modern arenas of social life. In return, the presence of an Islamic idiom, of voices and practices in everyday life, in urban spaces, in public debate, and in the marketplace, throws new challenges at classical premises of the modernist project—basically, those of secularism and Western boundedness. In this essay, modernity is reexamined from the edge, from its margins (margins referring both to distance—that is, non-Western contexts—and to the affirmation of difference through the Islamist project). More precisely, I will try to highlight some of the patterns that carry a potentiality through which modernity is not simply rejected or readopted but critically and creatively reappropriated by new religious discursive and social practices in non-Western contexts.

POST-ISLAMISM

Contemporary Islamist movements have undergone major changes during the last two decades. The actors of Islamism acquired professional profiles, increased their diversity and their public visibility. This was true not only of the militants and politicians, but also of the engineers, lawyers, intellectuals, novelists, and journalists; all contributed to the production, transmission, and dissemination of Islamic values and discourse. In addition to political activism, forms of artistic and intellectual expression
entered into the domain of Islamic cultural criticism with the publication and circulation of newspapers, periodicals, novels, films, and music. Islamization of the ways of life led to the emergence of Islamic arenas of communication (Islamic radio and television stations), banking (without interest), and new patterns of consumption (including fashion and tourism). In other words, Islamism is concomitant with the formation of new middle classes and is on the way to creating its own intellectual, political, and entrepreneurial elites, drawing on their increasing public visibility and commercial success. We can speak of a post-Islamist stage in which Islamism is losing its political and revolutionary fervor but steadily infiltrating social and cultural everyday life practices. Islamism, which made its appearance with the headscarf issue in the secular bastions of modernity on university campuses at the beginning of the 1980s, is today expanded to many spheres of public and cultural life. As can be observed in the Turkish context, not only are Islamists using the latest model of Macintosh computers, writing best-selling books, becoming part of the political and cultural elite, winning elections, and establishing private universities, but they are also carving out new public spaces, affirming new public visibilities, and inventing new Muslim lifestyles and subjectivities.

The question that needs to be asked is not whether Islam is compatible with modernity but how Islam and modernity interact with each other, transform one another, reveal each other’s limits. Neither Islam nor modernity can be taken as a static project; on the contrary, they are ongoing processes scrutinized continuously by human interpretation and agency. Instead of focusing on the political discourse, the textualized ideal, and the collective will of the actors, my purpose is to observe the unintended consequences of the Islamist movements, capturing them, following Simmel’s advice, in “momentary images,” in snapshots (momentbilder). In these fragments of social reality, we are able to glimpse the meaning of the whole.  

The cultural significance of contemporary radical Islamism greatly outweighs its political program. Paradoxical though this may seem, its radicalism conveys both a resistance to religious conservatism and a criticism of modernity. Islamic
mental strategies may be said to be modernity-oriented. Religion is reappropriated, reinterpreted selectively in the light of problems facing the individual and the modern way of life in a non-Western context. The difficulty of grasping Islamism stems from the very ambiguous conception of time and self that it both cultivates and experiences. On the one hand, it carries a sense of mythical continuity with the past and claims an immutable and timeless concept of religion and puritan self; on the other, Islamism is a new, contemporary phenomenon, instigating a discontinuity with time, traditions, and the past, blending with modern experiences and identities.

My argument is that the agency of women, self-reflexivity, individuation, mass media, market forces, and public spaces are transformative forces, underpinning the cross-fertilization of Islam and modernity. I see the illustrations of Islamic experiences of modernity not simply as adaptations to consumption patterns or market rationality but as self-reflexive “individually lived experiences” (Erlebnis). Hence, the claims of covered Islamist women who are challenging the secularist premises of a public sphere, the autobiographical novel written by a young Islamist that presents a criticism of political Islam, the sexual abuse in an Islamic sect that triggers a public debate on religious marriages, the luxury hotels for Islamic vacationers, and the critical self-examination of an Islamist sociology student are among my “snapshots.”

RADICAL ISLAMISM: HOW TO DEAL WITH MODERNITY WITH A SENSE OF ETERNITY?

The new actors of Islamism, both the leaders and the followers in almost all Muslim countries, including Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, come from recently urbanized and modern educated social groups. They often become “Islamist” by following a common path: after moving from their small provincial towns to cities, they encounter, during their years in high school and university, the works of authors who set up the landmarks of contemporary Islamist ideology. These include the Pakistani Abu al-Ala Mawdudi, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, the Iranian Ali Shariati, and, more particularly for Turkey, Ali Bulaç and Ismet Ozel.
One common feature of these authors is their effort to redefine Islamic "authenticity" in a manner that is no longer apologetic before Western modernity. This new critical stand in relation to Western modernity marks the principal difference between the new generation of Islamists and those of the nineteenth century, including Muhammed Abduh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and Rashid Rida, all of whom tried to accommodate Islamic values with modernity.

If traditionalism implies conservatism, the conservation of traditions, and continuity with the past, Islamist movements are radical in that they aim at revolutionary change, a rupture with the chains of social evolution. Rather than seeking to preserve traditions, the existing religious establishment, or popular religious practice, Islamism aims at changing them in the light of "true Islam." The golden age of Islam, or asri saadet, that is, the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate companions, provides a model ideal community, demonstrating the ways to apply revelation to human society. The call for a return to the fundamentals of Islam and an idealized past reaffirms the authenticity and historicity of Islam as a basic source of scriptural guidance. The process of restoration and renewal (tajdid and islah are the two concepts of Islamic resurgence encapsulating both the regeneration of the authentic Islamic spirit and the righteous reform) is inspired by the example of a past experience rather than impelled by self-conscious innovation or by a hope for a future utopia. Islamism does not propagate a progressive utopia, as is the case of socialist revolutionary movements that posit an advanced stage of society that will be reached in the future, never having existed before. Furthermore, the task of restoring the disrupted past order is seen as the primary responsibility of believers, whose purpose is to increase the righteousness of the people, to fulfill God's will, and not to be concerned with human practicality, efficiency, or prosperity. Islamist movements are revolutionary, yet past-oriented; they are moral religious movements.

The time concept is absolutely crucial for any understanding of the radicalism of new Islamist movements. The desire to restore the Islamic faith, to make society conform to the mythic model of the formative years of Islam, goes hand in hand with
the dismissal of centuries-old historical forms of the Islamic state. Transferring the concept of *jahiliya*, which originally meant the pre-Islamic period, to contemporary Muslim societies, Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb posited a historical break, made legitimate by the religious idiom. The obliterating of centuries of historical Islamic experience frees the contemporary Islamic actors from the historical chains of continuity, enabling them to imagine the blueprint of an alternative society. The desire to make a *tabula rasa* characterizes present interpretations and practices of Islam—it is a nonconservative orientation; it expresses the radicalism of Islamist movements.

Islamism is radical in its desire for a rupture with historical continuity, in its criticism of traditional interpretations and interpreters of Islam, and in its political mode (Islamic revolution) and its conception of change (total Islamization). The goal of radical change legitimated by political opposition, to be attained by the seizure of state power, is a feature of modern politics, especially that shaped by socialist revolutionary movements. Denial of the past, the priority given to political action, and the will for a systemic change characterize all modern revolutionary movements. But Islamist movements are distinguished from revolutionary political movements by the paradoxical relation they cultivate with the Islamic past. For Muslims, the historical existence of an ideal Islamic society in the past does not require any validation by the progressive forces of history. The Islamic golden age is not a utopia from the perspective of a Muslim; it has existed in both time and space. Therefore, the leap backwards endows Muslims with a sense of mythical continuity with the past, with an immutable and timeless concept of religion. By the same token, such a revivalism of an initial, authentic Islam bestows contemporary Islamist actors with a critical sense of earlier traditions.

As contemporary Islamist movements offer a radical critique of the classical tradition and of the *ulema*, that is, those who hold religious authority and legitimacy because of their knowledge of religious texts, they open up a space for the interpretive process. In a paradoxical way, radical Islamism instigates democratization of religious knowledge; various actors can lay a claim to the interpretation of Islam. The detailed issues of
personal, social, and political life, such as the veiling of women (hijab), the penalty of adultery (rajm, stoning to death), questions of taxation (faiz), criminal laws, and religious marriage are no longer issues settled under the monopoly of religious ulema but become subjects of controversy between competing political actors, including female Islamists. Contemporary Islamist women are not only the subjects of controversy but also very active participants in the process of public debate. As new actors of Islamism are endowed with two sources of educational capital—religious and secular—they communicate Islamic idiom to the public debate. New actors of Islamism regain authority through the use they make of religious knowledge, but also through their criticism of modernity as a cultural program. Rather than being a simple return to religious resources and a withdrawal from modernity, Islamism is an attempt to cross-fertilize the two.

In sum, Islamism introduces modern times to the world of Islam, but also spells out the limits of the present time and the ephemeral nature of modernity. It reminds all of the everlastingness of religion and the otherworldly sense of eternity. Instead of a future-oriented utopia, fundamentalist religious movements call for the rediscovery of memory, of a golden age, an uncontaminated model of society that promises a new resource of social imagination for Muslims. Islamic fundamentalism, far from being a withdrawal from the modern world, enables Muslims to participate collectively and critically in worldly affairs. There is a different time orientation in the Islamist project. The ideal is not conceived in the future-oriented terms requiring validation by the progressive forces of history, but anchored in the past. The ideal society exists for Muslims: it is a "realized utopia," an eternal model to be emulated.

ISLAMIC WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
"THE FORBIDDEN MODERN"

The radicalization of Islamism (in the sense of a return to the fundamental sources of Islam and a refusal to take an apologetic attitude in the face of modernity) engenders a process in which the relations between tradition and modernity are con-
stantly redrawn and blurred. The place of women in contemporary Islamism begets a constant challenge that necessitates the redefinition of the frontiers between modernity and identity, between political ideology and social practices. In their traditionally defined roles, women are confined by a “natural life cycle”: the woman as a young girl, wife, mother, and grandmother follows her life cycle, and she obtains social status by accommodating herself to traditional values of chastity, fertility, and respectability. Women, as they succeed in education and come to participate in public life, acquire an independent personal life-space and distance themselves from the socially expected roles of spouse and mother. Similarly, through engagement in politics and education, Islamist women break away from the confinement of the interior space and develop personal strategies of education and professional life. In other words, women’s participation in Islamist movements has had undesired consequences. Islamic politics enables Muslim women to participate in public life, to organize meetings, to publish articles, to establish associations, to abandon the private domestic sphere and its traditionally defined roles. Islamism serves as the legitimization of their public participation both in practice and in ideology. In practice, it justifies women’s visibility in politics and public life through their devotion and contribution to the “Islamic cause” (recalling the similarity to modern secular women whose public roles are justified by the nation-building project). To a certain extent, Islamism provides ideological legitimacy for women’s newly acquired public roles. Women active in education, commerce, and politics during the time of the Prophet are constantly mentioned by those who refer to the fundamental sources of Islam and criticize those traditional popular interpretations that are held responsible for women’s seclusion in interior spaces. These were some of the hypotheses developed in my book, *The Forbidden Modern*, which analyzed the rise of Islamist women. The title in Turkish, *Modern Mahrem*, suggests a hybridization, to which both the secularists and the Islamists strongly object. The more that Islamist women gain public visibility, finding a realm for the realization of their educational and professional ambitions, the more they find themselves called upon to criti-
cize traditions or interpretations that prescribe maternal and marital duties as their foremost moral obligations. Interestingly, some Islamist women in Turkey, but also in other Muslim contexts, break away from the moralizing definition of woman in Islam by referring to Western feminism. They maintain that patriarchal oppression is a phenomenon independent of the capitalist system; it exists in all societies, including Islamic society. They refuse to share the deprecating views that Islamic male leaders hold of Western feminism. They argue: “Feminism urges women to revolt against the oppression of men in the family, in work settings, and in the street. What is there to fear in this?” These women reject the role assigned to them as “mother and wife in the house” and assert that “this role serves only to reassure the Muslim man of his identity.” “The pseudo-protection of women,” one of them writes, “is a need of men and a source of oppression for women.” They criticize the sublimation of maternal love, and, inspired by the feminist literature, one characteristically writes: “A woman who remains confined to her role as mother and wife and does not realize herself individually and socially develops a neurotic fixation either on her child or on cleanliness.” As these quotations suggest, Islamist women claim the right to leave this sequestered space to affirm their personalities without relying on men.

In doing so they break a taboo of Islam, claiming the right to exit from the private/interior sphere and work. This indicates an individuation of the Muslim woman who demands “a private life” independent of her husband and child. These women identify the source of women’s oppression neither at the level of Western values nor at that of an Islam contaminated by tradition, but at the level of Muslim men. By their individualistic affirmation, they create a “disorder” in the Muslim community, which reminds them not of their individual rights but of their religious tasks or maternal duties. They risk turning the categories of “inside” and “outside” upside-down and subsequently disrupting gender relations within the community.

In their own words, they would say “no to femininity, yes to personality,” acquiescing to the values of modesty while simultaneously opening up an autonomous sphere for their individual
self-definitions and life-strategies, independent of their roles as wives and mothers, but also as militants of a collective movement. Feminism would serve as an intellectual source in the building of a distinct consciousness of women’s identity within the Islamic movement. It would form a demarcation line between perspectives of men and women but also between groups of women themselves: between those who acquiesce to the ascribed traditional gender roles and Islamic militancy without question and those who develop a criticism of these roles from within, forging new self-definitions. The latter will refer to feminist sources just as they claim the same right as men to interpret religious sources. This dual reference to secular and religious sources of knowledge endows these new female figures with intellectual and social recognition.

Against the utopia of the “Islamization of the whole society,” women develop their own subjectivity and personal life strategies, breaking the preestablished boundaries of the all-embracing category of the “generalized Muslim other.” Adopting the categories of self used by Seyla Benhabib, we can say that Islamist women criticize the “generalized universal” Muslim identity that projects the male point of view, and seek to be recognized as the “concrete other.” They are “unique individuals with certain life histories,” thereby emphasizing their differences, wholly disregarded by holistic Islamism.

Women acquire legitimacy and visibility for their individual aspirations through their participation in higher education and Islamic politics. Yet there is a covert tension, a paradox in this mode of empowerment through Islamism. Women abandon traditional “life cycles,” making their personal lives a matter of choice (for a professional and/or political career), but women in Islamist politics acquiesce in the Islamic way of life, Islamic morality, and Islamic community. Women as boundary markers of Islamic difference are of paramount importance for Islamic visibility. Hence, Islamism calls for women’s agency and engenders their individuation, yet it also restrains them. Islamism provides women with access to public life, but this is an access limited by contributions to the good of the community. The politicization of the “Islamic way of life” carries the potential to hinder women’s individual choices of life, professional strat-
egies, and personal expressions. Islamism offers modern life to Muslim women, but it is a forbidden form of modernity.

Consequently, The Forbidden Modern points to this critical encounter of Muslim women with modernity that is taking place in practice, but “forbidden” in principle by Islamism—and also by secularism. Islamic women’s increasing public visibility engenders a subversive dynamic within the Islamist movements but also provokes a far-reaching public controversy and political struggle between Islamists and secularists. The “headscarf dispute”\(^{14}\) gained a new dimension after the last general elections (April 18, 1999) in Turkey. A thirty-one-year-old computer engineer, Merve Kavakci, the first woman ever to be elected a deputy from the Islamist Virtue Party, became the first woman to show up—albeit for a few hours—in the secular parliament of Turkey wearing a headscarf. The secularist tradition in Turkey is well anchored among the civil and military elites, but is also internalized by the urban, educated middle classes and vigilantly defended by women’s associations. So, any Islamic symbol making its way to universities or the parliament is considered a threat and is consequently banned. Thus, the questions raised by the Islamic eruption in the secular bastions of modernity go well beyond the Muslim non-Western contexts and join the general question of how to combine the prerequisites of a common public space with multicultural demands.

In sum, the presence of Islamic women in the public sphere that I have labeled as “the forbidden modern” conveys several meanings. Forbidden refers to the gendered construct of the private sphere (mabrem) in Islamic cultural contexts. That is, the interior space is women’s space, and the moral psychology of the domestic sphere depends on women’s controlled sexuality. Women’s corporal and behavioral modesty (therefore veiling) and the social regulation of the encounters between sexes (therefore sexual segregation) are guarantees of the moral-social order. Veiling invokes modesty, thus controls and contains women’s corporal expansion (of visibility and voices) in the public eye. On the other hand, an encounter of women and modernity is taking place. Women, through Islamism, acquire public forms of visibility, sharing with men the same urban,
political, and educational territories. Under the veil a new profile of Muslim women is emerging, which in turn constitutes a threat to the moral psychology of gender identifications. As the forbidden Islamic women become modern, that modernness is forbidden, or at least contained by boundary maintenance. Veiling, segregation of the sexes, and hierarchical gendered separations of private/public spaces all aim at boundary maintenance of Islamic societal difference. Furthermore, Islamism tacitly spells out the limits of the cultural program of modernity. Submission of self and body to religious faith, modesty, and the moral guidance of the community rather than the individual “conscience”—these are signs of difference, hinting silently but visually to religious conceptions of self and society in contradistinction to the public exposure of self, the confessional culture, and the quest for transparency and secular conceptions of the body.

SNAPSHOTS

Islamic Male Subjectivity and Love and Intimacy as Resistance

A novel written by a young Islamist writer may be offered as an example of a more self-reflexive approach to changing Muslim subjectivities. The change is treated as part of the unfolding process of political Islamism. The novel written by Mehmet Efe can be considered autobiographical, a participant’s account of the Islamism of his generation. The writer, in his twenties, tells the story of the Islamist generation during the post-1980 period through the voice of an “Islamist” male student of his own age. Irfan (meaning knowledge, and described as the pillar of the civilizations of the East) is a student in the history department of Istanbul University. He belongs to Islamist movements, defines himself as “a Muslim, religious, Islamist, radical revolutionary, fundamentalist, pro-Iranian, Sufi, etc. . . . somebody among all these.” A typical representative student in the Islamist movements of the post-1980s, he is from a provincial town, of a lower-middle-class family, with a traditional religious family background. He becomes an Islamist at the university when he arrives in the large urban center of Istanbul. (His
itinerary is one of upward social mobility; he is the first in his family to have access to high education and urban life.) As a student, political Islamist, and activist, he goes to collective prayers at the mosque, followed by political demonstrations against Israel and the United States; he attends panels, visits Islamic bookstores, and sits on religious trials. This is his familiar universe. In the university corridors and in the streets of Istanbul he acts as an Islamist revolutionary: “We were actors, heroes of the images in our dreams incited by the Iranian revolution.” Acquiring political consciousness empowers him in his relation to girls as well:

Before when a girl asked me a question, I was so perplexed, not knowing what to do . . . afterwards, that is with acquiring political consciousness . . . finding myself among those people who believe in liberation, salvation through Islam, girls didn’t appear to me so important, to be taken seriously . . . and those who were covered [read Islamist], were my sisters (bacim). They were the pioneers, mothers of the society that I was dreaming of and struggling for.

This narrative of an Islamist student is almost the exact mirror-image of a revolutionary leftist student in the 1970s in Turkey. Both have a dream of an ideal society, a utopia for liberation and salvation. For both, this implies a radical, holistic revolutionary transformation of society. In both cases, the life of a revolutionary requires giving up pleasures or necessities of daily life (as a male, as a student) now considered trivial. In other words, for the sake of public ideals and political revolution, private, intimate identities and relations are given up. Ironically, male actors of leftism and Islamism empower themselves politically by repressing their male identities, reproducing the dominant values of a communitarian morality that tolerates male-female socialization only within the accepted boundaries of sisterhood, motherhood, or comradeship.

The young Islamist character of the novel is not able radically to change society, but he himself goes through a radical change when he falls in love with an Islamist female student. The girl is an idealized profile of the new Muslim woman, and the love he develops for her constitutes a constant challenge to his political convictions and his collective commitments. Being
in love with her plays the role of catharsis in his personal change, in his emerging new Muslim self.

This autobiographical novel follows but also exceeds the latent dynamics depicted in The Forbidden Modern, but with a significant difference. It renders the change from the point of view of a male protagonist of Islamism. A narrative of a young male Islamist student who encounters an assertive and educated young Islamic girl, it brilliantly illustrates the role of Islamist women as generators of change and not simply as passive adherents to the logic of the movement.

The girl represents those female actors of contemporary Islamism who are assertive, yearning for educational success. They meet on the day of registration; Islamists are protesting the prohibitions on veiling, and he asks her to participate in the boycott. She responds by advancing her individual identity—preferring to go on with her registration—using feminist irony and criticism. She does not accept that men should speak and act on behalf of women: “Did you ask my opinion for the action? You men would make speeches, would satisfy yourself exhibiting heroic actions and we would be the decor, ha?”

Furthermore, she mocks the male activists of Islamism: “Protesting became a fixation for you. . . . You feel an inferiority complex with leftists? That is why you impatiently took up our headscarves?”

Falling in love with one of those Islamic girls (“it would have been so much simpler with a traditional, docile girl from a village,” he later complains) is a catharsis in his questioning of revolutionary political Islamism. She is an intellectual pioneer in her criticism. We read her words, taken from her diary:

Such an absurdity! The majority of us start taking seriously the roles we want to play. . . . They are walking in the corridors as if they were going to realize the revolution tomorrow. . . . Some among us even say things such as “Muslim men are too passive.” Everyone is rapidly on the way to “masculinization” [erkeksilestiyor]. . . . They also gave me books. Books with phrases which put on my shoulders the obligation to be a warrior, a guerrilla, to take the responsibility of a war which would change everything and the world fundamentally. . . . I am small. I am weak. I am a girl. I am a girl. . . . GIRL. . . .
As she reappropriates her identity as a young girl, she resists political and collective roles ascribed to her. In an ironic way her “weakness,” her withdrawal to the intimate, small life and identitarian boundaries, constitutes a new source of power to criticize the Islamic ambitions of radical change.

Irfan, the male character finding an echo in her words, writes, at the end of his journey for change, of his desire to distance himself from political militant Islamism: “I want to take off this militant uniform (parka) . . . I want to exist not with my enmities but with my friendships. . . . I want to satisfy myself with small things. I can not bear universal things any longer.” Rediscovering the private “small” life will provide an anchor to limit the totalizing nature of the Islamist project. Love will reintroduce desire, intimacy, and privacy. Already “falling in love” with a woman is problematic for an Islamist, because, in the words of Irfan, “a Muslim does not fall in love with a woman, but only with Allah.” For the first time, he starts to share with his friends, to his own surprise, a “personal” subject: his love for this woman. At the end of the novel, he starts searching for a job and dreams of their happiness together as a married couple, imagining himself buying her a colorful dress and a silk headscarf, sharing daily life, cooking together, reading, and the like.

Interpreting this novel, which became quite popular among Islamic youth, solely as a criticism of Islamism from within would be an over-simplification. In my view, the novel testifies and contributes to the unfolding process of the militants’ evolution from collectivist political Islamism toward an emerging Muslim subjectivity. The writer, using a modern tool of self-reflexivity—the quintessential character of the novel as a literary genre—gives voice to and subjectivizes the “Muslim.” To do this, he needs to overcome the repressiveness of the collective definitions of Islamic identity. Therein lies the paradox. On the one hand, political Islamism empowers Muslim actors and shapes their identity; on the other, it becomes a hindrance to their self-expression, to their own subjectivities. The novel takes a step forward in the Islamic movement’s story. The author presents an emerging Muslim subject who at first owes his existence to the collective political movement, but who no
longer needs confrontational politics for his identity. This may be read as the “normalization” of Muslim identity. The novel is the narrative of a young Islamist transformed by the relationship of love with the “other” sex. The revolutionary role of love in the construction of subject is decisive. As Alain Touraine writes:

It is because self-consciousness cannot reveal the subject that the emergence of the subject within an individual is so closely bound up with relations with the other. . . . The love relationship does away with social determinism, and gives the individual a desire to be an actor, to invent a situation, rather than to conform to one. . . . It is thanks to the relationship with the other as subject that individuals cease to be functional elements of the social system and become their own creators and the producers of society.26

Hence, our male character, as he criticizes political Islamism and gives up antisytemic resistance, is not simply conforming to given values of modernity. He is reappropriating modernity, blending it with Islam, and trying to harmonize self and modernity.27

The novel, both as an expression of self-reflexivity and as exposure of the self in public, is not separable from the birth of the modern individual. Self-reflexivity and self-exposure in public are not common traits in societies where communitarian values of modesty prevail. Farzaneh Milani argues that the absence in Persian literature (evident in Turkish literature as well) of autobiography as a literary genre demonstrates the “reluctance to talk publicly and freely about the self,” a condition not only confined to women who are “privatized” but also seen in men who are expected to be “self-contained.”28 This autobiographical novel unveils the newly emerging Muslim male-female subjectivities in the public sphere, which constitute a challenge to the Islamist movement.29 Against the totalizing ideal of Islamism, the novel carves up a space for intimacy and privacy, resisting the monitoring of the personal by the public. Therefore, it expresses the “self-limiting radicalism”30 of Islamism and constitutes a countervailing force against the totalitarian tendencies embedded in Islamist politics. In other terms, the frontiers of the forbidden Islamic public sphere are challenged
from within by the intrusion of Muslim male-female intimacies. Love constitutes a resistance to the suppression of male-female subjectivities and to the puritanization of the public sphere.

A Sex Scandal and the Lost Honor of Religious Marriages

Political Islam is challenged not only by critical subjectivities and romantic love but also by the misuse of religious marriages. Libidinal impulses and promiscuous relations among the newly urbanized and educated youth, along with exhibitionist drives confused with recently acquainted individualism, added to the voyeurism of the public intensified by the rating wars among private television channels, create an explosive mixture for religious moral claims. A sex scandal in a “religious” order that occupied the public’s agenda in January of 1997 through intense mass media coverage brought the taboo subject of religious marriages to the public’s attention.

One of the Aczmendi sect leaders, notorious for his criticisms of secularism and Kemalism, was arrested by the police in an apartment building in Istanbul for committing adultery with an attractive young university student, a follower, Fadime Sahin. He claimed, in front of the television cameras present in the bedroom shooting the postadultery moment “en direct,” that they have had a religious marriage. By so doing he first implied that there was nothing illicit between him and the girl (as men have the right to polygamous marriages according to Islamic law). Second, he broke a taboo and sought to legitimate in public the Islamic law and religious marriages, which are outlawed in secular Turkey.

In the most unexpected way—since this was a question of the “lost honor” of a young girl expected to show shame and disappear from the public eye—the girl decided to speak up for herself, denying the existence of a religious marriage. She revealed that she was abused by another sect leader as well, whom she had trusted as a “religious savior” or “father.” Appearing almost every day on a different television channel in her Islamic outfit—a headscarf covering her hair and a long gown hiding her shape—she exposed herself as the victim of religious sects. Very assertive and aggressive in debating male Islamists, she blended religious and modern symbols and re-
ferred constantly to her two sources of cultural capital: as a university student, she mastered modern critical argumentative logic; as a religious disciple, she was familiar with the Islamic moralist rhetoric. The public was amazed by her shameless confessions, self-exposure, attractive looks, and especially by her theatrical performance, ranging from tears to outbursts of anger.

The scandal, apart from indicating once more the subversive forces of women, their sexuality, and their self-exposure in public, highlighted several issues: the displacement of the frontiers between the licit and the illicit, between tradition and modernity, between privacy and publicity, between agency and victimization. But most important of all, with this scandal, polygamy and religious marriages as hitherto suppressed topics made their way into the public realm. Religious marriage became a divisive issue not only between secularists and Islamists, but among Islamists themselves. Traditional religious leaders were perplexed about the ways in which religious marriage reappeared in a modern autonomous context to cover permissive, promiscuous relations in contrast to its social function in a traditional context where it preserves socially recognized gender roles. Not only traditional religious leaders but also political Islamists were constrained to spell out their positions and argued against religious marriages justifying free sexual relations. Secular feminists also participated in the debate, taking the case as confirming their secularist criticisms against Islamist movements, namely, the “abuse” of women. Islamist women were themselves fiercely engaged in the debate, through both panels and newspaper articles. Some Islamist female writers took a very critical position and blamed Muslim males who instrumentalized polygamy and religious marriages in their political struggle against the secular regime. One of the writers claimed sardonically that when men chose a second wife, she was always younger, more beautiful, and better educated (the mark of upward social mobility in Islamist circles) than the first one. This writer reminded her audience also that polygamy in Islamic religion was justifiable only in the case of orphans, widows, or elderly women in need. Islamist women’s associations warned young girls not to accept religious marriages in
secret and to secure a civil marriage, the only lawful one, first. Religious marriages, part of traditional practices, were turned into an issue for political Islamists in their opposition to the secularist social order; they were critically discussed by secularists, religious leaders, Islamist politicians, and by women themselves. This debate destroyed the unspoken alliance between radical Islamists and religious people and created new alliances between Islamist and feminist women. Surprisingly, civil marriage, imposed by the secularist republican elites in 1926, became an individual choice principally for Islamic women themselves. Islamism, with a surprising twist, helped consolidate the indigenization of modern egalitarian values.

Public Space Battles Public Sphere: An Islamic Way of Life

Cultural liberalism, along with economic liberalism, changes the everyday life of secular Turks but even more dramatically of those yearning for an Islamic way of life. The establishment of the Islamic mass media—television channels, radios, and newspapers—makes for the spread of Islamic cultural entertainment, whether in films, novels, music, or theater. An Islamic service sector offers luxury hotels that advertise facilities for an Islamic way of vacationing; they feature separate beaches and nonalcoholic beverages. Islamic dress and fashion shows, Islamic civil societal associations, Islamic pious foundations, associations of Islamic entrepreneurs, and Islamic women’s platforms all attest to a vibrant and rigorous social presence. These examples show the coming of age of the new Islamist middle classes and their upward social mobility through the appropriation of political avenues, cultural communication networks, the service sector, and new consumption patterns.

The popularity of the new and luxurious “Caprice Hotel” (note that the name is written in French and that the word itself is quite alien to Islamic puritanism), located on the western coast of Turkey and owned by a devout entrepreneur, is a case in point. It illustrates the formation of new pious middle classes, attempting to carve their own alternative space, not one that counters the “official” secular one. The Caprice offers summer vacations in conformity with “Islamic” rules: hours of praying are respected and only nonalcoholic beverages are served at
the “bar” of the hotel. There are separate beaches and swimming pools for men and women; one “common beach,” open to all, implies that it is reserved for families only. Swimwear for both sexes can be purchased at the “boutique” of the hotel.

The hotel suggests that Islamists are not immune to the seductive powers of consumption, pleasure, commodity, and property acquisition—the patterns dictated by global and local trends in the market economy. It underscores the transformative power of the market system in which leisure is “Islamicized.” But at the same time that “lifestyle” is more than just a reflection of trends of fashion, the Caprice acquires a significance well beyond the submission to market forces.

First, this lifestyle provokes a public debate among Islamist intellectuals who criticize it and consider such integrative and conformist strategies a contamination of the Islamist movement by Western lifestyle values of consumption. Yet for many members of the newly formed middle classes, “vacation” is a natural need following “working”; neither can be given up just because of its Western character. Secularist public opinion, on the other hand, is mobilized to intervene to outlaw such an Islamic assault on “public” beaches.

Second, the Islamic participation in different national public spheres almost everywhere problematizes the questions of veiling and spatial segregation. Educational institutions, public transportation, places of recreation and sports, arts and culture, and mass media become the sites where the boundaries between the licit and the illicit, between private and visible, are problematized by Islamism.

Third, Islamism challenges, in both Muslim and European contexts, the idea of the public sphere as a homogeneous, secular, and liberal democratic site of communication between free citizens. The construction of an Islamic public sphere(s) can imply pluralism but can also lead to a fragmentation of the larger public sphere that may cause it to lose its binding character. Or, it can reinforce the integrative, national, but limited participatory order of the public sphere by authoritarian means—Islamist, nationalist, or secularist. In any case, democracy depends on finding ways of cohabitation and sharing spaces—
university classes, ranks of parliament, beaches, concert halls, urban spaces—among different cultural programs.

Finally, the concept of public space in contradistinction from that of public sphere is particularly helpful for understanding Islamist politics because the Islamization of self, body, and everyday life requires a space rhythmmed, separated, and regulated according to Islamic precepts. Claiming universalism, becoming global, and using modern technological tools and communication networks are not in themselves signs of a propensity to share open conceptions of politics and society. Islamists use electronics, establish global networks, and chat in cyberspace. But Islamic morality matters in visual physical spaces where gendered socialization takes place rather than in virtual spaces. Rather than abstract citizenship rights, it is the visual, audible, corporal presence of women that determines the limits of freedom and democracy.

A Modern Muslim: From an Islamization of Sociology to the Sociology of Islam

An article written by an Islamist, entitled “On the State of Mind and Soul of an Islamist Sociologist,” published in an Islamist daily newspaper, offers a critical examination of changing self-conceptualizations of modernity and Islam.31

The author tells us about his personal trajectory, which starts with him as a political Islamist and ends up with his becoming a sociologist. The article, an account of the ambiguous relations of Islamists and the relation of an individual with modernity, deals with the complications of daily life, both in professional aspirations and in the self-definition that a total rejection of modernity in the name of political Islam or religion creates.

This article is built around the debate that The Forbidden Modern has fostered among Islamist intellectuals. A well-known Islamist intellectual, Ali Buluç, has written a review article in which he has fiercely refuted the thesis of the critical interaction and hybridization between Islamists and modernity. To make clear the absolute separation between the two worlds, Buluç has proposed to change the title of the book to The Forbidden and the Modern. In his view, such a separation of Islamist women from modernity would give a more accurate
account of what is permissible in Islam and in Islam’s encounter with modernity. At first, the young Islamist writer tried to follow his advice. But he was also torn between his Islamist ideal, which called for purity, and what he observed around him and in his own life practice. Perplexed by Islamic fashion shows, by his own interest in films and theater, and by his newly acquired taste for summer vacations, he came to the conclusion that there are many things that Muslims can no longer explain to themselves. Once a “candidate to change the world,” he now praises “thought as the strongest action” and makes a call in his article for “self-criticism.” He tells us that he is no longer frightened by the word modernity, does not believe in either the radicalism of the revolution or in the possibility of total withdrawal as a Sufi. He writes of his “loss of purity” as he “interacts with so many diverse people and worlds.” Instead of “Islamisizing sociology,” he finds himself “sociologizing Islam”: “My modern profession blends into my identity. I confess that I am a crossbreed; I am a Muslim sociologist—who does not use the word “and” to demarcate between Islam and modernity.”

CONCLUSION

Politicized Islam endows Muslims with collective agency, enabling them to use a modern political idiom, invade urban and public spaces of modernity, and appropriate tools of communication. Islamism, especially in its inclusionary contexts, where there is access to educational opportunities, market economy, and private mass media, creates its own middle classes, professional elites, entrepreneurs, and critical intellectuals, who in turn operate within a pluralistic and open society. However, Islamist politics calls for boundary maintenance, trying to set limits to this participatory process. How will the dynamics between boundary maintenance and participatory logic work out?

The process of distancing from Islamic traditions, participation in modern society, and the individuation of Islamist actors may engender a dilution of the movement within democratic and market structures, consequently putting an end to the alter-
native claims of the Islamist project. On the other hand, the affirmation of Islamic difference and purity and the maintenance of boundaries may lead to the rejection of modernity and the establishment of autocratic regimes. Are there ways of turning these practices into processes of cohabitation, hybridization, and reciprocal borrowing that may open the way for a reflection on alternative trajectories and modernities? Are there any indicators that there is an exchange—cross-fertilization, for instance—between Western and Islamic conceptions of self and modernity, modesty and truth, faith and secularism, community and individualism, conservatism and consumerism? Can these two different civilizational appropriations of modernity talk to each other, interact, learn from each other? Criticisms of modernity spell out the limits of modernity, which in turn can provide new cultural sources to reinvigorate it. Alain Touraine criticizes modernity as a divided, fragmented state between subjectivization and rationalization, between a society identified with a market and social actors reduced to drives or traditions. The failure of a combination leads easily to technocratic power or cultural fundamentalism. Modernity has had a self-correcting mechanism that assured its reproduction and innovation from its centers. What is the story at the margins? Are non-Western modernizing societies fated to choose between subjugation to global market forces and native fundamentalism?

The snapshots chosen in this essay bear witness to the critical reappropriations of modernity at its margins—margins in relation to the Western centers of modernity but also in relation to the Islamic movement itself. These snapshots may indeed be considered as marginal, not representative of the Islamist movement. Stories about veiled students, the Islamic writer, the sex scandal in a religious order, an Islamic hotel for summer vacations, the Muslim sociologist—all may at first sight seem trivial. But it is precisely with these seemingly insignificant and unconnected threads that we intend to weave a new vision. These snapshots reveal the critical issues for Islamist politics and its encounter with modernity—women’s veiling as a marker of Islamic difference but also as a criticism of modern transparencies; intimacy between men and women as a catharsis for self-
limiting radicalism; religious marriages as a disintegrative force of the Islamic consensus; visual public spaces as new sites for communitarian control or tolerant pluralism; self-reflexivity of Islamic intellectuals witnessing the difficult question of participatory logic versus boundary maintenance. Political pluralism, market rationality, public debate, and communication networks create an interactive medium with secular programs of modernity in which Islamic agencies develop new subjectivities, life strategies, and public spaces. Islamism as a dynamic social movement, in its interaction with secular actors and its blending with modernity, transforms itself, albeit unintentionally, and our images of modernity as well.

Islamism, in its pursuit of the establishment of religious boundaries, gives priority to the visual, corporal, moral regulation of social relations. The presecular public sphere in the West was also concerned with the uneasy relations between the seen and the unseen and with the regiments of body in time and place. In that sense, Islamism is a manifest assault on the secular definition of the public sphere and an attempt to recuperate that element of corporal regulation. Snapshots are a methodological gateway for reproducing the significance of the ocular and the corporal, telling a different version of a story on Islamism and its asymmetrical reproductions of modernity.

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ENDNOTES


Here Islamism and Islam are used interchangeably to refer to Islamic social movements in the contemporary world that endow Muslims with a collective and conflictual identity in respect both to traditional definitions of Muslim identity and to the cultural program of modernity.


Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam, Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 50–82.


Ibid., 33.


Ibid.


Ibid., 78.

Ibid., 16.

Ibid., 15.

Ibid., 17.

Ibid., 32.

Ibid., 49.

Ibid., 50–51.

Ibid., 170–173.

27 The author recently married an American woman whom he “dated” on the Internet.


29 On how to read, analyze, and interpret contemporary “autobiographical voices” as an ethnographical material, as constructions of self and community, as revelations of traditions, as recollections of disseminated identities, and as cultural criticism, see Michael M. J. Fischer, “Autobiographical Voices (1, 2, 3) and Mosaic Memory: Experimental Sondages in the (Post) Modern World,” in *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).


32 Touraine, *Critique of Modernity*.

In the early centuries of the second millennium, wide areas of Eurasia, and most dramatically India and Europe, witnessed a transformation in cultural practice, social-identity formation, and political order with far-reaching and enduring consequences. I call this transformation vernacularization, a process of change by which the universalistic orders, formations, and practices of the preceding millennium were supplemented and gradually replaced by localized forms. The local worlds created by vernacularization, which took on ever sharper definition over time, are now giving way under the pressure of another and more powerful universalizing process, one of whose consequences has been to make us more aware of the very historicity of these local worlds.

Sheldon Pollock

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