

French Brothers and Capitalism: Pragmatism, Radical Questioning, and Impasses



By Haoues Seniguer

Report n. 21, April 2021

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European Eye on Radicalization

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Introduction

The New Spirit of Capitalism offers “a minimal definition of capitalism”, which attempts to remain normatively neutral:

[O]f the different characterizations of capitalism (or, today frequently capitalisms) over the last century and a half, we shall employ the minimal formula stressing an imperative to unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means. The constant reintroduction of capital into the economic circuit with a view to deriving a profit — that is to say, increasing the capital, which will in turn be reinvested — is the basic mark of capitalism, endowing it with a dynamic and transformative power that has fascinated even the most hostile of observers.¹

A second, more classical definition comes from Max Weber.² In this seminal work, Weber emphasizes that, in the capitalist economy, profit becomes an end, and that in doing so, it no longer correlates to the satisfaction of individuals’ material or elementary needs. In addition, Weber refers to the works of his compatriot, Werner Sombart (1863-1941). In the genesis of capitalism, Sombart saw the meeting of two guiding principles at the heart of the history of economic machinery: firstly, “the satisfaction of needs”; and secondly, “the pursuit of profit beyond the limit set by the needs”.³

In terms of the forms of capitalist life analyzed by Boltanski and Chiapello, and in the work of scholars of Islamism such as Tammam and Haenni, there is a quest for well-being, pleasure, maintaining desire, or performance culture, which are other essential ingredients for capitalism.⁴

Considering Sombart’s two guiding principles and their manifestations, can their opponents justify or explain their opposition to capitalism? If yes, when is this appropriate and what alternative(s) do they propose?⁵

¹ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, 2011. *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.

² Max Weber, 1904/2008. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Norton.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Patrick Haenni and Husam Tammam, 2008. ‘Penser dans l’au-delà de l’islamisme.’ *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 123 July. Available at : <http://journals.openedition.org/remmm/5473>

⁵ Amghar, Samir. 2013. *L’islam militant en Europe*. Paris: Infolio.

This report examines the public speeches and behaviors of four known activists/scholars in the French Islamist field who have discussed different aspects of capitalism:

- 1) Tariq Ramadan: a Swiss intellectual and grandson of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, who is a key figure in French Islam and has influenced to a significant degree the French Islamist field in terms of thought and mobilizations, from the beginning of the 1990s to the present day.
- 2) Yamin Makri: head of the *Union Française des Consommateurs Musulmans* (UFCM [French Union of Muslim Consumers]) and one of Ramadan's most faithful lieutenants. He is also one of the founders of faith-based publisher *Tawhid* and was the linchpin of Lyon's *Union des Jeunes Musulmans* (UJM [Union of Young Muslims]), which he founded in 1987.
- 3) Nabil Ennasri: president of the *Collectif des Musulmans de France* (CMF [Collective of French Muslims]) and currently a director and lecturer in Islamic sciences at the Shatibi Center in the Paris region.
- 4) Abdelaziz Chaambi: founder, president, and facilitator of the *Coordination contre le Racisme et l'Islamophobie* (CRI [Coordination against Racism and Islamophobia]) since 2008. He was also one of the principal architects of the UJM alongside Makri.

These Islamists criticize capitalism from different points of view. These criticisms are both religious and political. They come from actors who have at least one thing in common: the idea that Islam is a universal religion, capable of offering alternatives to liberal capitalism. But there is no unique "brotherly" answer to capitalism, only criticisms of its practical, moral, and/or social effects or consequences.

This report puts forward a theory and two complementary hypotheses.

Firstly, the hypothesis: there is no intrinsic and prohibitive incompatibility between the *capitalist spirit* and the *Islamist spirit* if one goes back to the origins of Islamism, whose key theoretical milestones were laid in the first half of the twentieth century in a predominately Muslim-Arab context. Indeed, from the works of the pioneers of Islamism, like Al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), there emerges a significant alignment between the fundamental basics of the *spirit of capitalism*, its extension through the spawning of a *new capitalist spirit*, and key elements of the Islamism. Since then, nothing, in terms of economic vision, has significantly changed for the people who are today more or less faithful, more or less openly, to this heritage, and who have

the opportunity to publicly express their ideas, based on the religious semantics and grammar borrowed from the Brothers.

Hypothesis one is: far from being dissolved in the dynamics of capitalism and the market as Haenni,⁶ Tugal,⁷ and Habibi⁸ argue, Islamism has mutated because the context from which it arose no longer corresponds to the current one. It has simultaneously adapted in two ways: a) it has re-appropriated specific capitalist dynamics, and b) it has denounced other aspects deemed in conflict with the representations of Islam Islamists put forth.

Hypothesis two: the opposition to capitalism is ambiguous in these militants' discourse. In reality, the capitalist spirit is to a large extent integrated into the social practices and representations of Muslim activists under multiple modalities. However, there are still militants, whether "autonomous", "organic," or "dissident", who combat capitalism, each in their own way.⁹ While the figures assessed in this report are all France-based, the debates they are engaged in are transnational, affecting, therefore, in a feedback loop, what is discussed within the broader Islamist movement.

The four activists' thinking on capitalism and Islam questions some of the assumptions of the founding fathers of Islamism. One can observe a break and sometimes an updating of these activists regarding the first reflections or enunciations on the economy and capitalism their elders carried out. However, there is no actor in the Islamist field who truly proposes an alternative or completely innovative approach to relations between Islam, economy and capitalism.¹⁰

This report largely agrees with the conclusion of French anthropologist Bergeaud-Blackler: Muslim fundamentalism and capitalism use each other.¹¹ While this is true as a practical matter, in discourse the actors studied mainly denounce capitalism, focusing on its negative effects in relation to their religious precepts and desired goals. Through discourse, the neo-Muslim Brothers use religious and non-religious references to condemn capitalism in different ways.

⁶ Patrick Haenni, 2005. *L'islam de marché*. Paris: Seuil.

⁷ Cihan Tugal, 2009. *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

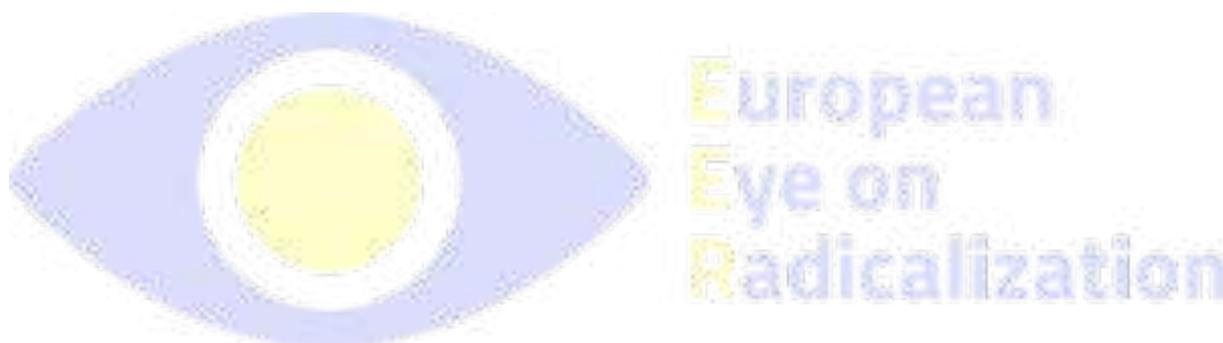
⁸ Don Habibi, 'The Proportionality Problem and Human Rights NGOs.' In Thomas Cushman (ed.). *Handbook of Human Rights*. London and New York: Routledge, pages 548-59.

⁹ Amghar, 2013.

¹⁰ Olivier Roy. 1992. *L'échec de l'islam politique*. Paris: Seuil.

¹¹ Florence Bergeaud-Blackler, 2017. *Le marché halal ou l'invention d'une tradition*. Paris: Seuil.

Olivier Roy has highlighted the main driving forces of “the Islamic economy”, its “ideological construction”, and the “systemization and conceptualization of basic shariatic prescriptions” by Islamists, “to construct a coherent and functional ensemble that would offer a middle ground between the two systems of the twentieth century, Marxism and capitalism”.¹² Moreover, Roy stresses that, in “in the Islamist conception of the economy”, an “ethical model” predominates. Above all, this makes the Muslim individual aware of his responsibilities, far less than engaging the responsibility of the state or political institutions, as “the general attitude of the Islamists ... is favorable to individual free enterprise, balanced by a moral discourse regarding the preferred practices of the economic actors”.¹³ As a “man’s superior aim is salvation, his economic activity must be exercised within the ethical framework defined by the Quran”.¹⁴ Although this study shares much of Roy’s analysis, it needs to be updated and readjusted according to developments that have occurred in the Islamist camp over the last three decades.



¹² Roy, 1992, page 133.

¹³ Roy, 1992, page 138.

¹⁴ Roy, 1992, page 134.

Tariq Ramadan: Between Islamism, Anti-Globalization, and Capitalist Imprint

Tariq Ramadan is a leading European Muslim personality. He emerged in the French landscape at the beginning of the 1990s. He is simultaneously an intellectual, a teacher, and a preacher. Although he follows the ideological heritage of his grandfather, Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, by promoting a publicly engaged Islam, he does not subscribe to the entirety of Al-Banna's recommendations or ideas due to the minority position of Islam and Muslims in Europe. While it is difficult to situate the origins of Ramadan's anti-globalization, his participation in the European Social Forum in Saint-Denis on 12-15 November 2003 is one of the possible temporal benchmarks of his anti-globalization engagement. NGOs, trade unions, and anti-capitalist organizations like the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR [French Revolutionary Communist League]) and French Communist Party were also in attendance. Ramadan and his supporters wanted to draw closer to anti-capitalist political organizations so as not to remain just strictly denominational and confined to Muslim activism.

Ramadan, through the support of Muslim networks in France and Europe and for whom *Présence musulmane* (Muslim Presence association) acts as a relay, explained in an opinion column in French weekly review *Politis* (23 June 2003) that he is fully involved in the “citizen movement” of “resistance”, and that he opposed the G8 summit being held in Evian from 1 to 3 June 2003, or indeed at any other site or time. At the rhetorical level, Ramadan also claims he is aligned with Latin American liberation theology, expressing a “radical refusal of liberal neo-capitalism.” He also states that he is favorable to “a fairer globalization”, as “another world, more humane, more dignified, is possible”. Ramadan espouses the watchwords of anti-globalization mobilization by railing against “soulless capitalism ... that turns everything into a commodity (human beings, intelligence, the body, public goods and services, the air, nature, etc.)”. He demands “respect for justice and human dignity”, for “the environment and genetic equilibrium”, “the right of people to self-determination and democracy”, especially in relation to the Palestinian question. Although he appears to be aligned with the anti-globalization struggle, he nevertheless criticizes its main founders who are, according to him, too influenced by a “very Western-oriented” spirit.¹⁵

When Ramadan unpacks his reproaches to anti-globalization actors and their “very Western-oriented” spirit, he points to the dynamics they unleashed with “their near total absence of serious consideration for cultural and religious diversity”. Ramadan criticizes the “duty of

¹⁵ Tariq Ramadan, 2008. *Islam, la réforme radicale. Ethique et libération*. Paris: Archipoche.

tolerance” façade of anti-globalization militants, in addition to denouncing the “old colonial outlook”, which generally confines religion, in particular Islam, to archaism. Thus, Ramadan very clearly links the critique of capitalism to the denunciation of “cultural imperialism” and to the necessity of recognizing the real capacities not only of “Western rationalism,” but of religion “against the uniform commodification of the world”. What is striking is the will to make non-Muslim anti-globalists recognize the critical capacities specific to Islam and Muslims, in the name of the faith that is their own, against “arrogant” anti-capitalist militants expressing “a universal set of values for everyone”.¹⁶

This is the first paradox of Ramadan’s position. On the one hand, for him and for those in whose name he speaks, it is a question of being considered the same as those in the anti-globalist movement. On the other hand, he accuses those anti-globalists or alter-globalists of not taking into sufficient account the cultural and religious specificities of Muslims. However, if Islam offers values reasonably close to or convergent with the West, what more, or different, can Islam and Muslims then offer to the anti-capitalist movement? Ramadan also underlines “the inconsistencies” of the anti-capitalist movement at the international level, which omits “Arab” and “Muslim” voices when, according to him, considering them would further allow anti-globalization to “reach out to the millions of activists in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.” In his words: “the worryingly deficient and conformist nature of the arguments put forward by the ‘alter’-globalizers on the question of the Middle East or Islam cannot be emphasized enough ... Absence of awareness about Islam, as much as the fear cultivated and shared at the heart of a caricaturally constructed West, have led those seeking another kind of globalization to engage in superficial, if not dangerous talk on Islam”. Without explicitly employing the term “Islamophobia,” Ramadan implicitly levels this criticism at the anti-globalists, who are not, in his view, sufficiently in tune with the fight against anti-Muslim prejudices in Western Europe and North America. It becomes quickly apparent that for him, identity and religious considerations are coupled with the critique of capitalism. For him, there can be no “political and cultural liberation” without a prior “economic liberation”. This proves that the neo-Muslim Brothers’ anti-capitalism reconciles political criticism and religious identitarian affirmation.

However, it should be noted that, aside from a biting criticism of “policies imposed by industrialized countries, the economic (de)regulations dictated by international institutions (IMF [International Monetary Fund], WTO [World Trade Organization]) or the voracity of

¹⁶ Ibid.

multinationals from the [Global] North”, Ramadan is also concerned with challenging “Muslim state leaders”. In order to maintain their authoritarianism, these “autocrats” do not hesitate to use the Palestinian cause to “control the passions of the street” and are only “valets of the honeypot of industrialized powers”. Thereby, according to him, there is political complicity between the powers of the economic North, and authoritarian elites in place in “the Arab-Muslim world”.

Ramadan’s Islamism remains critical, in the sense that he does not, as a reflex of ideological solidarity, approve of *all* the economic positions and politics certain Islamist movements, such as the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP). Ramadan says of the AKP, which has been in power in Turkey since 2002, that it “has consented to yield to the structural adjustment requirements imposed by the IMF, in order to be accepted on the international scene”. One could then wonder if Ramadan laments that the AKP is not more Islamist. He calls for ideological convergence within the Arab world between Communists, socialists, and Islamists in the name of shared “common values, demands of citizenship, even of cultural identity”. However, he has never specified the meaning of “cultural identity” and how he couples it with Islam.

Is it enough to describe the preacher as an absolute, definitive anti-capitalist, having renounced the political critique and ideological project of a conservative Islamic religion visible in the public space and claimed by large segments of the denominational European Muslim population? The answer can only be nuanced. In reality, Ramadan’s position on capitalism reveals the Muslim Brothers’ difficulties in finding an “Islamic” economic alternative radically different from the conventional capitalist system.

An Ambivalent Relationship with the ‘Capitalist Spirit’

Tariq Ramadan’s thought is not monolithic when it comes to the economy, its evolution is not linear, and it has changed over time. In more recent writings, for example, he clearly affirms that there is no “Islamic economy”.¹⁷ He gives no credit to the idea that there could be an economy specific to Islam from an organizational and methodological point of view, other than what he calls “a general philosophy of the purposes of the economy”, drawn from “a series of principles” urging Muslim to be more ethical in their way of perceiving and practicing economics.¹⁸ Thus, Ramadan does not claim to replace capitalism with something else. As a result, the response to

¹⁷ Ramadan, 2008, page 411.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the capitalist economic system lies more at an individual level than at the level of an abstract or mythicized *umma* (global Islamic community). This actually says nothing about the concrete economic practices conforming to the presupposed ethics. Ramadan affirms that there is less an “Islamic economy”, in the sense that Islam has the keys to a perfectly developed and different economy in relation to non-Muslims, than a singular Islamic “ethics” in its approach to economic questions. We see here that there is never any absolute differentiation between the Muslim religion and the economy, because linking *economy* and a strictly *Muslim* ethics is to some extent wanting to continue to *specifically* exist in the Muslim economic and militant fields. This is why he writes that “the great slogan of an ‘Islamic economy’ is far from being a replacement solution, at best it is simply a ‘margin’ ... whose function is to imperceptibly confirm the preeminence of the ‘main text’, the liberal market economy”.¹⁹

From this point of view, Tariq Ramadan is extremely suspicious of “Islamic finance”, which he criticizes for reproducing the neo-liberal diktat: papered over with religious gilding, it is ultimately obeying to the same logic of profit, no different than the materialist approaches. He declares that he is against “an adaptation reform” and against a purely technical, instrumental approach to a so-called “Islamic” economy, which seeks to give a Muslim aura to practices whose “purposes” are in direct opposition to the principles of the Islamic faith.²⁰ In other words, prohibiting the *riba* (usurious interest), refusing “interest”, or imposing “the purifying social tax” (*zakat*) for instance could potentially remain within the “heart of the conventional economic system” and be, where appropriate, a pure expedient, an inoffensive instrument against the structural dynamics of the capitalist market economy.²¹

By the same token, Ramadan berates the, “mercantilist”, “materialist” “state of mind” “of the economy of so-called ‘Islamic’ products”:

We pay little interest to the squandering of natural resources, to the exploitation of men, women, and children, to the shameful treatment of animals; all that matters, after all, is the lawful character of the product to be consumed or worn and the ‘Islamism’ of commercial transactions that allowed it to be launched on the market. This Islamization of means, while legitimizing a capitalism without ethics regarding its purposes, is

¹⁹ Ramadan, 2008, page 413.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ramadan, 2008, page 412.

the most complete and cunning expression of counterproductive formalism acting against the values that it claims to defend.²²

Ramadan blames “Muslim operators and consumers themselves” for being allies of the “capitalist system”, as the latter integrated the Muslim frame of reference into its strategy for the purpose of expanding its clientele.

Ramadan concludes by promising an alternative solution — but never says anything about what it is. Once again, Ramadan symbolizes the European Islamist movement’s failure to offer an economic model specific to Islam.

The religious norm remains omnipresent, even if Ramadan suggests alleviating the importance of what he calls “formal faithfulness”. His means of addressing the question of *halal* (permissible) confirms this tendency, without ever offering any “radical” solution or alternative, for which he indeed calls. Hence, he falls into what could be called a double ideological pragmatism, ultimately accepting the capitalist order, whatever his rhetoric, while refusing to directly oppose the fundamentalist religious Sunni magisterium to which he remains linked.²³

Moreover, Ramadan’s “positioning” has to be understood as just that: he is a public brand, as much as an intellectual, and he knows — more skillfully than most — how to use his brand in the media and within Muslim community spaces. His oratory talents are put in the service of Muslims seeking advice, his authorized opinions are always somewhat marked with a religious seal. On this basis, we could say, without distorting reality, that he is both one of the best examples of “market Islam” and a key actor in the capitalist system. This is because his discourse and social behavior attempt to reconcile public Islam through the externalization of its denominational appearance (women wearing headscarves, which he judges to be mandatory; the Muslim greetings that he promotes in public, etc.), with offers of services made possible by the globalization of goods and services.

Sometimes this synthesis, or at least non-antagonism, between moral rigor on the one hand and the promotion of free enterprise and wealth on the other, can be glimpsed in Ramadan’s public

²² Ramadan, 2008, pages 423-4.

²³ It is worth recalling that Tariq Ramadan is a member of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, which is presided over by [Yusuf al-Qaradawi](#), who remains entirely faithful to the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the Ramadan sometimes is critical of one or another of Qaradawi’s positions.

utterances. During the seventh networking evening organized by the *Association Belge des Professionnels Musulmans* (ABPM [Belgian Muslim Professionals' Association]), held on 23 November 2009, under the title, “Muslims and Professionals: How Can One Harmonize Faith and Professional Activity?,” Tariq Ramadan spoke in terms confirming this concern with freeing Muslims of guilt about profit, money, and economic success. To this end, he summons accepted religious words:

You must free yourselves from this false authority that is imposed on you. The second thing that I wanted to highlight is that when we have ethics, there is nothing embarrassing about succeeding and making money. Abu Hanifa (699-767) was, as we know, a great scholar of Islam; he was a merchant and he succeeded, he was rich! ... Sometimes they [scholars] were rich and against the power! You see the link that I am making between the two; the relationship with power and authority is very important. ... Beware of yourselves, beware of yourselves! Power corrupts but wanting to succeed can also corrupt! ... There is no problem with succeeding and become rich! The point is, what intention? What were the means? ... The meaning of success in Islam is sharing!²⁴

Once the Muslim is critical of established political powers and nurturing God in their being, he can become wealthy without any scruples. Ramadan also implicitly affirms that Islam does not have a complex regarding money and economic opulence in relation to other spiritual and religious traditions.

But even among his strongest supporters, Ramadan does not necessarily attract overwhelming support for his theories on capitalism and how to deal with it. Yamin Makri is a perfect example of this. Less prolific than his close friend, the Lyonnais militant nonetheless regularly expresses himself on the subject, demonstrating his completely unabashed radicality.

²⁴ Hakima Bairi, “Tariq Ramadan: Professional Success in Islam”, YouTube, 19 November 2011, available [here](#).

Yamin Makri: A Neo-Muslim Brother Critique of the General Modern Economy

Yamin Makri is, as we would not say, “Very Online”. Throughout the Web, one can find his numerous writings and speeches, which criticize capitalism in all its forms. As in Ramadan’s case, Makri uses criticism of capitalism as an opportunity to renew the political critique of the Western-dominated world order and to denounce the very foundations of the modern economy by invoking the need for the centrality of religion.

In a work published in 2012, Makri predicts “*La fin d’un monde*” (The End of a World)²⁵. He scathingly criticizes technical reason, highlighting the abysmal gap between the planet’s rich and poor. Speculation and speculators, that is to say the main operators of capitalism, are setting “the planet on fire and (putting it to) the sword”. He even speaks of the “submission of political elites” to global capital, adopting the patented rhetoric of the nationalist and identitarian Right conspiracy spheres.

Makri places himself beyond Right and Left, arguing that all factions of national political elites have surrendered to the omnipotence of the market. That said, Makri notably denounces the Left and even the extreme-Left anti-globalization types, more than the anti-capitalist, nationalistic Right. The implicit reason for this, never stated openly, is that he blames them for the moral liberalism within capitalism. Makri expresses this stance in the name of “Islamic ethics”:

Criticizing the liberal ideology responsible for this situation ... should not be understood as a replica of the anti-globalist or Leftist discourse. It is simply based on our Islamic ethics, which demand social justice, and on our spirituality, which cannot accept a lifestyle that only places profit and money at the center of society’s preoccupations, to the point of making them into new idols to which we should all submit.²⁶

The pejorative use of the term “Leftist”, the ideological distancing from the anti-globalization movement, and from the Left and liberalism — both economically and politically — is in many respects similar to the criticism coming from Right-wing groups or from political parties like the *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in France.

²⁵ Yamin Makri, “The End of the World”, *Research Centre for Islamic Legislation and Ethics*, 1 October 2012, <https://ribh.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/cile-la-fin-dun-monde.pdf>

²⁶ Ibid.

Makri goes on:

In economic logic, Labor is only made from living Capital. And if the forces of capital and those of Labor clash, it is never to challenge the foundations and purposes of a materialist system based on the permanent quest for profit, but uniquely to fight over the shares of wealth generated by this same system. The whole Marxist discourse or liberal reformist rarely question the foundations of this system.²⁷

Makri provides his personal interpretation of Marx, centered on a radical critique of the modern economic system, where capitalism is in essence merely the completion of Marx's "materialist" schema. Marx had envisioned the disappearance of religion as a higher norm and criterion to which human action should conform — and Makri bitterly laments that under capitalism exactly this has come to pass.

Makri is scathing about every aspect of capitalism — consumerism, goods, labor — seeing them as substitute "gods" that crush humans by turning them into slaves, and raising up "economic experts" as the "new oracles":

The goods demanded by consumer society, the labor that alienates everything by being the first demand of the marginalized, money and its financial agents who authorize everything in its name, the state that is no longer sovereign and its subservient political personnel, economic experts who have become the new oracles of modern society: all these categories serve this capital-promoting system, this world system that humankind has created but that it no longer controls and that, today, dominates it. What this crisis reveals is the alienating character, the central place, and the impersonal and fetishized domination exercised by goods, money and labor on the whole society. These categories are seen as if they were gods governing us. Today, everyone participates in them, from the simple worker to the wealthy entrepreneur, though of course neither in the same role nor with the same benefits.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Makri, just like his mentor Tariq Ramadan, engages in a discourse that strongly criticizes modernity (politically, philosophically, economically), finding nothing positive in it, and attempting to rehabilitate Tradition, specifically fundamentalism. His anti-modernism is expressed as follows: he associates the political liberalism promoted by “the philosophers of the Enlightenment” with Tradition’s decline and, in its wake, that of religion. The advent of capitalism is, then, the direct consequence of these two premises: subsequently, the great deception of the philosophers of the Enlightenment was to make believe that the “liberated” human could escape his condition of worship. Yet the reality is, although humans have the freedom to choose their worship, it is impossible for them to live without worshipping, as it is impossible for them to live without sleep. If they don’t worship God, humans are condemned to have other objects of worship, like material goods.

In the manner that Makri tries to promote Islam as the exclusive lifeline of freedom from the dynamics of the global market, he is being faithful to the fundamental conception Hassan al-Banna, developed and continued, after several ideological alterations, by Tariq Ramadan:

And the alternative to this world system, global and complete, can only be worldly, global and complete. Islam, which offers a life system and vision of death, is a worldly, global, total and radical alternative. Islam provides a belief system, it defines its space-time around *tawhîd*. Because what gives meaning, is what is what is placed in the Center. And around the Center and in the name of the Center, a world is organized on the principle of Justice and respect of creation, and always in the name of the Creator and nothing else. This is the reason why Islam cannot submit to a system that puts the quest for profit above ethics, it can never accept a model of society that subjects humankind to the limitless imperatives of profitability and we will never accept turning away from the adoration of the Most High for that of things. Islam encompasses and refuses to be encompassed, Islam integrates and refuses to be integrated because Islam aligns, limits and directs our everyday towards one goal: the exclusive adoration of the one God, the All-Merciful, the All-Forgiving.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid.

What confirms Makri's preference for the fundamentalist is his view of what has happened to Christianity, where "in modern societies, moral codes are often the remnants of Christian religiosity, but in Western societies aligned with the Enlightenment, religiosity has become a personal affair without obligation, it is no longer a system structuring social life". Makri is somewhat conspiratorial when he writes, "if the attacks on [Islam today] are multiplied, if pleasure is taken in attacking the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him and his family), it is because Islam continues to define itself as a life system (*deen*) which, more or less consciously, is directly opposed to this 'civilization of money,'" but his conception is clear. That religion should be an all-encompassing system, not only a private belief, is a view shared by identitarian Catholics, among others, who also perceive capitalism as a conscious agent of destruction in undermining the fabric of organic, faithful societies. In this war with the tradition-destroying market, Makri argues for Islam being best-equipped to resist it — and this is what he sees as being behind the cartoons and other polemics directed at Islam in the West.

Through a video on the Oumma.com site, Makri elucidates what he calls the "five pillars of commercial society".³⁰ While addressing the relationship between "Islam and consumerism", he takes the opportunity to challenge the "marriage of same-sex couples," legalized in France in 2013, since he sees it as a useful way to refute the banalization of "good" and "evil". These five negative pillars are the exact opposite of the five positive pillars of Islam: 1/ "Absolute truth no longer exists!"; 2/ "There are no longer limits ... The sole criterion is personal fulfillment"; 3/ "There is no absolute morality"; 4/ "There is nothing before or after death"; 5/ "All is relative [and] becomes the unquestionable norm". Modernity is seen as the prelude to a devastating capitalism. He especially targets the Renaissance, with its spawning of a free, autonomous subject, or "the primacy of the individual", and transcendence, by turning its back on religious tradition. Political modernity is the companion of commercial society: "and this modern conception that cut off humankind, that cut off humankind in its vertical relationship, in its horizontal relationship with its kind, with God, produced a human being without coordinates, who found itself at a point without abscissa and without order".

Yamin Makri's radical economic pessimism translates into a firm resolve to return to a kind of subsistence economy, an activity aimed at satisfying only humankind's basic needs.

³⁰ "The Five Pillars of the Merchant Society", *Oumma*, 28 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3oxFa0P6uY>

Nabil Ennasri: Hunting Market Vices, Celebrating its (Muslim) Successes

Nabil Ennasri is a militant neo-Muslim Brother who has a considerable online presence, with his official Facebook page attracting more than 70,000 followers. He is also the author of numerous academic and activist writings. In his 2016 self-published work, *Et maintenant que fait-on ? Parce que nous n'avons plus le temps* ([*And What Do We Do Now? Because We No Longer Have Time*], Ennasri castigates “market Islam”, whose negative effects are emphasized in a chapter entitled: “From Quranic Prescription to Diversion of Meaning: The Case of the Hijab”.³¹ Capitalism is first and foremost denigrated for being detrimental to the moral integrity of Muslims and their dogmas.

Ennasri primarily blames capitalism for distorting the ideal or legitimate Islamic norm. According to him, “market Islam” undermines the expected “moral behavior” of Muslims, especially of women. Ennasri deplores and rails against “market Islam”, which finds “pragmatic compromises with the West” by dangerously subsuming religious symbols “to market imperatives and mass consumption”. Ennasri seems to situate himself in opposition to the West. Instead of being a symbol of resistance to a cultural homogenization, an inevitable effect of globalization that he sees as *a priori* hostile to Islam, the veil is for instance assimilated into the market logic. This distorts its deeper meaning and shows that, in his eyes, the headscarf is not only the expression of profound and authentic Islamic integrity but also an identity marker, a way to stand apart, an alternative to a globalization that “gives prominence to charm and seduction”.³² The headscarf also has another signification: a shield against the materialist and shameless Western hegemony. In his systematic criticism of the “liberal-libertarian”, an alloy of economic liberalism and unrestrained promotion of individual freedoms (including the freedom of morals) produced “social-democracy”, qualified by sociologist Michel Clouscard in an eponymous work as the “capitalism of seduction”, within which, he deplores, unbridled permissiveness rules.³³

Ennasri admits to not recognizing himself in either the Left, which allows same-sex marriage, remains Islamophobic, supports the state of Israel, or the Right, for more or less the same reasons. For him, the market logic, which penetrated Islam to subvert its real moral substance, promotes “the prevailing wind of the exaltation of appearances”. Nonetheless, he focuses all his attention on the headscarf (*hijab*), and no other object or clothing. His logic is that woman is “the weak sex”, and therefore the weakest link in the chain of Islamic resistance to the market’s

³¹ Nabil Ennasri, 2016. *Et maintenant que fait-on? Parce que nous n'avons plus le temps*, pages 185-95. Mériqnac.

³² Ennasri, 2016, page 197.

³³ Michel Clouscard, 1981. *Le capitalisme de seduction: critique de la social-démocratie libertaire*. Paris: Editions sociales.

immorality. He blames the major brands or “claws”, such as H&M or Dolce and Gabbana, for taking advantage of Muslim weakness in collusion with “Arabic celebrities” or “certain Muslim women”, contributing to the distortion of the headscarf’s true function in Islam.

The neo-Muslim Brother comes to the following conclusion:

On reflection, the market logic of capitalism has taken hold of a new segment to inoculate its marketing virus in which psychological and sexual reprogramming are at the heart of sales strategies. The liberalization of the veil is becoming a globalized phenomenon that then serves as a juicy market of beauty and clothing, whose sum of several hundreds of billions of dollars wets the appetite of many industrialists.³⁴

The words and expressions Ennasri employs are particularly strong, and noticeably directed exclusively at the capitalist market’s promotion of immorality; he has little to say about its economic effects, even negative effects like increased inequality. When Ennasri uses a word like “vicious” he is referring to the “omnipresence of feminine voluptuousness” or the “aggressive make up” sold by the capitalist market; he is not channeling the Marxist idea of capitalism as rapacious and avaricious. Even the social dislocation of capitalism’s “creative destruction,” which has begun to turn some Western conservatives into critics of capitalism, does not really concern Ennasri: the preservation of the moral order is his sole driver.

It is ironic, then, that although Ennasri is so staunchly opposed capitalism as a vector of immorality, some of his declarations are in line with the *capitalist spirit* or *new capitalist spirit*. He encourages the social promotion of his coreligionists and looks favorably on holidays in the sun, and on school and academic and economic success — once they are pegged to community and religious concerns, an Islamic covering for a Protestant ethic.

Omnipresent on social media, he does not hesitate to publicly showcase “brothers” and “sisters” who count in “the community.” As a general rule, the people featured on his profiles are those who have succeeded socially and economically. Over the last five years, several messages posted on Ennasri’s official page attest to this. For example, in 2014, he chose to launch a special post every Friday under the heading “Space for Others”. In his words, the post promoted “good

³⁴ Ennasri, 2016, pages 197-8.

things happening in the community” or Muslims who found favor with him. Put simply, he promoted educated coreligionists if possible, who were succeeding in their studies and wanted to succeed professionally in circles that appear to be economically and socially advantageous.³⁵

Ennasri’s promotion of Muslims who fit the archetype he approved was also a means for him to hone his own brand and his skills as a mediating agent for Muslim “talent”, who listen to and take their lead from him. By complimenting others, he self-promotes. A few examples:

- On 2 January 2015,³⁶ he posted messages, in which all the profiles presented are those of people who, objectively, are to some extent culturally and socially ascending or deserving.
- On 13 November 2016, in the name of the Islamic Shatibi Center in Stains, of which he is a senior executive, he announced the opening of registrations for a trip to Malaysia planned for 2-13 April 2017, to “experience unforgettable moments”, although the trip was not necessarily accessible to all.

Next to a photo showing fine sand, turquoise waters, and boats, is written: “From 1690 euros, from April 2-13, 2017, 4-star hotel with breakfast, half-board on the island, admissions, local guide, internal transfers.”³⁷ Once on site, Ennasri did not hesitate to take selfies on the beach and post them on his official page.³⁸

It should be said that Ennasri is quite particular about *which* learning centers he encourages Muslims to go to. It is to Qatar University that Ennasri directs Muslims in France to apply for a scholarship to complete “training” in the Arabic language, to learn about “Arab and Islamic culture”. He underlines some of the conditions for prospective students: “accommodation in quality university dorms ..., wireless Internet, game room, gym, library, computer room, pool, transport to and from campus, allowance, excursions”.³⁹ In sum, the complete package is there: teaching, a Muslim-majority country, relaxation, and well-being.

³⁵ Nabil Ennasri, Facebook post, 7 November 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/EnnasriNabil/posts/648395095277013>

³⁶ Nabil Ennasri, Facebook post, 2 January 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/EnnasriNabil/photos/a.301901003259759.72453.298996480216878/678981728885016>

³⁷ Nabil Ennasri, Facebook post, 13 November 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/EnnasriNabil/posts/1076499525799899>

³⁸ Nabil Ennasri, Facebook post, 4 April 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/EnnasriNabil/posts/1211023905680793>

³⁹ “Qatar University Offers Scholarships to Learn Arabic”, *L’Observatoire du Qatar*, 1 February 2015, <https://www.observatoireduqatar.com/actualites-du-qatar/item/298-l-universite-du-qatar-propose-une-bourse-d-etude-pour-apprendre-l-arabe>

These ways of viewing success have not failed to provoke reactions, sometimes negative, in the French militant field that clads itself in the fight against racism, Islamophobia, the liberal market economy, and sex discrimination.

In an extremely critical column, “*Un Islam bon chic bon genre*”⁴⁰ (*A Preppy Islam*), published on French philosopher Pierre Tevanian’s site, Faysal Riad virulently attacks Ennasri, highlighting his very liberal economic attitudes and highly “reactionary” moral perspective, given his fixation on the “moral order”:

Ignoring the burden of social reproduction, it is thus Muslim surgeons, executives and other elected representatives with a higher education qualification who find favor with the priest-prosecutor. It is always the most talented who are judged to be “good Muslims” by this man who grants himself non-existent rights in the religion he claims to serve. As we have also noted — and will come back to it: the chosen ones in his heart are all male. As for the masses, on the other hand, this man only speaks of them like a gigantic group of swine who do not know how to behave, whose greatest crime is throwing waste paper on the group and taking pleasure in “juvenile” behavior.

⁴⁰ Faysal Riad, “Un Islam Bon Chic Bon Genre?”, *Les Mots sont Importants*, 4 April 2020, footnote 6, <http://lmsi.net/Un-Islam-Bon-Chic-Bon-Genre#nb6>

Abdelaziz Chaambi: From the Extreme Left to a Politicized Islam

It is many decades since Abdelaziz Chaambi decided to fight against all forms of economic and social exploitation, and also against any kind of cultural hegemony, notwithstanding his firm belief that Islam is superior to all other religious, spiritual or philosophical traditions. He was partially socialized in post-1956 Tunisia, controlled by a secularizing autocracy, more precisely between 1957 and 1970, in a politicized family environment. His father was a protagonist in the country's fight for independence and received "resistance fighters and their leader", a certain Tahar Lassoued, at the family home. The stories of struggle and familial proximity to these nationalist actors, along with the support for the Tunisian "labor movement", forged his political conscience.

As a young child, during his education at the Catholic French school Jeanne d'Arc in Tunis, Chaambi was confronted with class differences: he, who came from a working-class background, crossed paths with "sons of ambassadors, ministers, aid workers, celebrities of all types". Chaambi specifies that it was during this particular moment in time in his personal history that his "personality", "a spirit of revolt against injustice and those who dominate" was forged in his "heart", as he was "at the forefront to observe and experience the gulf and even the abyss that existed between 'them and us'", between the sons of rich Tunisians and the "little" people of the country to which he belonged.

In 1970, when he joined his father in France, he stood up for immigrant workers faced "with slum landlords, shady bosses or the neocolonial administration taking advantage of their lack of knowledge of the French language and their rights, and which only saw in them an exploitable workforce, at their every bidding".

He describes becoming involved with an extreme-Left group, *Lutte ouvrière* (LO [Workers' Struggle]), in 1976, after high school, as its militants told him about "workers' rights, colonialism, imperialism, and revolution"; precisely everything that he had personally experienced. He belonged to LO until 1979, the year he (re)discovered Islam, something he affirms was related to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, a seismic event that drew in multitudes across the Muslim world and whose ripple effects still reverberate even now, from individuals to geopolitics.⁴¹

⁴¹ Kim Ghattas, 2020. *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Simultaneously, Chaambi lost his eighteen-year-old brother, “assassinated in a racist attack in Chambéry”. Amid personal trauma and politico-religious turmoil, with the ideas now flowing across the world after the mullahs had control of a major Middle Eastern state to propagate their message, Chaambi turned to questions of the “meaning of life, its purposes and the hereafter”, and his *LO* comrades simply did not have adequate responses. From now on his revolutionary sensibility would take on a religious basis. In the early days, the Iranian regime was much less overtly sectarian than it is now: instead of reaching out on the basis of its version of Shi’ism, the Islamic Republic’s founder and first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, spoke of aligning with “the oppressed” (*mostazafin*) against “the oppressors” (*mostakberin*)—terms borrowed from Leftist-inclined Islamist intellectuals.⁴² For Chaambi, this language and conceptual framework was a good fit; from now on his was an Islamic anti-capitalist revolution against the powerful, infidel West.

Even though he does not really identify with Left or far-Left — they are too “Western-centered” for his liking — Chaambi nevertheless accepts that “the Left or extreme-Left tendency is a cultural and identity fact”, in the name of his filiation, that of a “worker’s son”, an “anticolonial and Muslim separatist committed to social justice”. Thus, for Chaambi there is no contradiction, but rather complementarity between a socio-economic, even political, attachment to Left-wing and extreme Left-wing ideals and belonging to Islam and to its ritual practices:

I am thus an heir with their habitus and their identitarian roots of which I am proud. It is therefore with this background that I became involved very early in defending poor, working, oppressed people and residents of working-class districts.⁴³

Chaambi explains that the leap into a rediscovered, engaged Islam did not constitute a radical break, but a spiritual extension, with his rejection of “capitalism and liberalism”:

My development in an Islam committed to social justice was not overshadowed by the negative gaze that I had on capitalism and liberalism. It just allowed me to adjust my perception of private property, means of production and sharing of wealth. I am no longer a follower of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but I am still concerned with the

⁴² Ervand Abrahamian, 1993. *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. California: University of California Press, p. 47.

⁴³ Riad, “Un Islam Bon Chic Bon Genre?”

sharing of wealth, social justice and equal access to social progress and well-being. When we see that the share of capital remuneration has become higher than the share of labor, that the CAC 40 is beating records, and that pension funds and banks are literally plundering the planet, we can only rise up and demand a bit of equity and justice, if not revolt against this state of affairs.

Without going so far as to expropriate the wealthy, who are not all dominant speculators and other financial capitalists, I would be keen to apply a fair tax, proportional to the ever-growing percentages of their margins and benefits, to them.⁴⁴

He admits that he was inculcated with his critical economic view during his years of activism with *LO*. He gradually tried to reconcile a philosophical and political heritage, the fruit of his past engagement in Tunisia and in France's radical extreme-Left, with a vision of Islam in part learnt from the works of historical Muslim Brothers like Sayyid Qutb. According to Chaambi, an "institutionalization" of the *zakat* (alms tax), which figures as one of the five pillars of Islam, would, in the name of a global Islam or "Islamic solution," be an ideal means to effectively reduce "many problems in France and the world". Without citing the classics of fundamentalism by name, he espouses some of their views:

As a Muslim, I dream of seeing the application of the *zakat* (alms or compulsory tax of 2.5%), which each person must pay on any sum saved throughout a year. I believe that this type of generalized tax would resolve many problems in France and in the world.⁴⁵

The conception of Islam that he develops is inseparably associated with social struggles, otherwise it risks being in contradiction with the teachings of the Islamic religion. Islam, according to him, can by no means be reduced to the life of the spirit or rites; Islam commands Muslims of real faith to commit to serving humans and humanity in order to respond to divine orders.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Chaambi thus reinvests most of Islam's doctrines in view of his own experience of social struggle and his religious socialization with more content than Western concepts of "religion" allow. And he does not limit his political and spiritual engagement to solely benefit Muslims:

If we reduce Islam to rites or to an endogenous spirituality, we cut off its purposes, which are social justice, peace, the preservation and protection of life and nature, and development towards well-being, towards altruism and fraternity between humans. Once we examine each of Islam's pillars, we discover in them a social dimension and a link with other humans. The goal of the profession of faith is to remind humans that they have a commitment toward their Creator and a debt regarding His creature and that His adoration depends on our capacity and willingness to serve His creature.

The five daily prayers are as much general assemblies or neighborhood committees in each city or village, in which we measure the social temperature and speak of difficulties and recommend solutions.⁴⁶

Chaambi intervenes in Muslim mosques and associations, without limiting his action to the denominational or religious space. For him, anti-capitalism is more an experience, a concrete action demanded by an Islam that is in his conception concerned with social justice and the economic equality of all humans as intrinsic parts of its doctrine. Islam is, therefore, much more than alternative economic theorizations founded on a particular ideological corpus. The consistency of his ideological convictions is visible in the successive associations that he has founded, co-founded, organized or co-organized, such as the *Collectif des Musulmans de France* (CMF [Collective of French Muslims]), the *collectif DiverCité* (DiverCity collective), the *Forum Social des Quartiers Populaires* (FSQP [Social Forum of Working Class Neighborhoods]), the *Forum Social Européen et Maghrébin* (European and Maghrebi social forum) that later became the autonomous *Force Citoyenne Populaire* (Popular Citizen Force) party, *Coordination contre le Racisme et l'Islamophobie* (CRI [Coordination against Racism and Islamophobia]), through which Chaambi wished to play the card of integrating profiles and actors situated elsewhere than in the Muslim sphere.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

It is possible to draw several lessons from the writings of the four Muslim figures examined in this report on the relationship between Islam and capitalism.

Firstly, the original theoreticians of political Islam, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, without openly calling themselves *capitalists*, were *de facto* so in some respects; the culture of fundamentalist Islam is, consequently, wholly compatible with liberal market dynamics.

Secondly, regarding the four cases of Muslim militants under scrutiny here, it appears that none of them, whether they are organic, autonomous, or dissident neo-Muslim Brothers, approve or support the capitalist order. In the vast majority of cases, the words or arguments used against economic neo-liberalism or capitalism are eminently pejorative, even radical; they are either opposed to the socio-economic and religious disorder the effects of capitalism generate, or opposed to the moral perils it fosters.

Thirdly, despite the negative attitude of the four Islamists here examined regarding capitalism, it does not prevent several of them from maintaining a *capitalist spirit* or *new capitalist spirit* that is never really accepted as such. The ideal, perhaps better say idealized, religious norm, supported by Islamic references, persists in their rhetoric, even as it frequently acts to rationalize working within the current capitalist order.

Above all, none of them, even those who are the most resolutely engaged against capitalism, is truly able to offer a convincing alternative. The solutions to capitalism proposed by the neo-Muslim Brotherhood are more situational than truly structural, in the final analysts they are more individualistic than collective, bearing the stamp of the liberalism they hate.