

Islamism and Social Movement Theory

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ABSTRACT *There is a new, but still limited, realisation that the perspectives developed by the 'social movement theory' can be useful to illuminate aspects of Islamist movements. This is a welcome development. Yet it is also pertinent to point to some limitations of the prevailing social movement theories (those grounded in the technologically advanced and politically open societies) to account for the complexities of sociopolitical activism in contemporary Muslim societies, which are often characterised by political control and limited means for communicative action. The article argues for a more fluid and fragmented understanding of social movements, which may better explain the differentiated and changing disposition of such movements as Islamism. In this context, I propose the concept of 'imagined solidarities', which might help illustrate modes of solidarity building in such closed political settings as the contemporary Muslim Middle East.*

How can we write histories of Islamism? The prevailing accounts tend to make overarching generalisations about the nature and dynamics of Islamist movements. They tend to reify both Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political project by overlooking variations over time in religious perceptions, practice and institutions among different segments of the population within a given society and between different Muslim countries. A dynamic and changing view of the movements is often overshadowed by a static vision. Islamist movements are often presented as highly homogenous and coherent social units which are to be identified by the discourse of their ideologues. There is little interest in dissecting the movements to uncover their constituent layers and orientations. Thus, Anthony Parsons distinguishes the Islamic revolution from other revolutions by claiming that the 'bulk of the Shi'i population of Iran knew what they did not want (the continuation of Pahlavi rule) and what they did want (a government controlled by religious leadership, the historical guardians of the Islamic tradition)'.¹ Others make similar overarching conclusions.

Many narratives of Islamism either treat it simply in terms of religious revivalism, an expression of primordial loyalties, or as something peculiar and unique which cannot be analysed by the conventional social science

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perspectives. In fact, until recently Islamism had been excluded from the mode of inquiry developed by social movement theorists in the West. It is thus a credit to scholars who have lately attempted to bring Islamic activism into the realm of 'social movement theory', even though they tend largely to 'borrow' from rather than critically and productively engage with and thus contribute to social movement theories.² It is still debatable how far the prevailing social movement theories are able to account for the complexities of socio-religious movements in contemporary Muslim societies, in particular when these perspectives are rooted in the highly differentiated and politically open Western societies, presenting a highly structured and over-homogenising picture of social movements. In particular, to what extent can they help us understand the process of solidarity building in these politically closed and technologically limited settings? In view of both collective behaviour and resource mobilisation paradigms, collective identity in the sense of commonality and solidarity predates collective action. Social structure, in a sense, selects people with a common identity, bringing them together to act collectively. The collective behaviour approach extensively emphasises 'generalised belief' and 'shared values' as the central axis around which mobilisation takes place.³ Crowd theory, by proposing the notion of 'collective mind', offers perhaps an extreme version of the pre-existing identity and belongingness. Here actors simply submerge into the group, becoming identical with it.⁴ Implicit in this paradigm is the assumption that the sense of commonness gets formed spontaneously, motivated by a strong psychological impulse, often without the actors rationalising their orientations.

Operating in a structuralist paradigm, resource mobilisation theory, in line with other rationalist models, emphasises actors' rational motives for being part of a collective. Yet, like collective behaviour, it also presupposes the existence of somewhat 'metaphysical' commonness among social movement actors, with the difference that it bases this commonness on actors' understanding of their shared interests. Authors working in this model place particular emphasis on collectivities based upon complex and structured organisations in which movement leaders play a decisive role. Disarray or differences might appear, but these often result from external factors, for instance, 'repressive conditions'. Otherwise, cohesion, concerted ideas and actions are what in a sense define a movement.⁵

Perceived in this fashion, social movements come to characterise Bourdieu's 'real groupness', whose existence depends on its capacity to be *represented*, and to be identified by its leadership. The image of Marcos, the leader of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, or Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran as the embodiment of mass mobilisation, reflects a vision of social movement which dominates the narratives not only of the mass media but also of much scholarly work.

Based upon my understanding of socio-religious movements in the Middle East, this article discards monolithic and totalising narratives, because they ignore and even suppress other narratives which may come to give different understanding of things. To this end, I make the case for a more fluid and

fragmented vision of social movements, attempting to present an angle which might help account for complexities of such contemporary movements as Islamism. Methodologically this requires one to go beyond mere discourse, language and symbols, especially those of the leadership, taking both multiple discourses and meanings as tools for writing histories of such activities. Although such ‘culturalists’ as Jasper, Johnston and Klandermans, and notably Alberto Melucci, productively perceive social movements as resulting from processes of negotiation and communicative actions,⁶ nonetheless their models, like those of others, are rooted in and orientated towards the highly differentiated, technologically advanced, and politically open societies. Their ‘Westocentric’ orientation undermines their ability to account adequately for the dynamics of social activism in the societies of the global South. I suggest that the analysis of diverse activism in contemporary Muslim societies, for instance those associated with Islamism, can offer a useful empirical basis for rethinking the way in which we conceptualise social activism. To this end I introduce the concept of ‘imagined solidarity’, which I think might be useful to explain the way in which solidarities are formed and actions followed.⁷

Representing Islamism

Islamism has seen many kinds of representations. The numerous terms used to describe the phenomenon point to its complexity. The term ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ has now been superseded by others, including ‘Islamic movements’, ‘political Islam’, ‘Islamic activism’, ‘Islamic revivalism’ or ‘resurgence’, and ‘new religious politics’. The term ‘Islamism’ is only the latest invention. The notion of ‘fundamentalism’ emphasises the scripturist essentialism, pointing to the traditionalism of the movements. In a different version, it points, in Gellner’s view, to a belief in the exclusive possession of a unique truth.⁸ While Martin Riesebrodt’s careful redefinition, ‘radical traditionalism’ wants to rescue the term,⁹ Keddie proposes ‘new religious politics’ as an alternative to ‘fundamentalism’, because ‘it is neutral, making clear both the political content of the movements, and their contemporary nature’.¹⁰ ‘Revivalism’ or ‘resurgence’ emphasise the religious at the expense of the political content of these movements. In turn, ‘political Islam’ places emphasis on their political nature. This is cast off by some scholars (as well as Islamists themselves) who argue that, given the overarching state control over people’s lives, almost every Islamic practice (in the family, school, and the like) becomes political. So, the term ‘political Islam’ is simply irrelevant.¹¹ The convergence of Ernest Gellner, suggesting Islam as being ‘the state from the very start’,¹² and many Islamists is ironic and understandable. Finally, ‘Islamic activism’ is intended to account for the inclusion of various types of activities, political, social and cultural, that emerge under the rubric of Islamic movement. The concept, however, lacks specificity to point to the recent upsurge of action.

Notwithstanding their differences, these terms point to aspects of ‘religious activism’. By ‘activism’, I mean *extra-ordinary*, extra-usual practices which

aim, collectively or individually, institutionally or informally, to cause social change. When those practices cease to become extra-ordinary, when they become usual practices of every day life, they no longer constitute 'activism'. So, in a sense, the above terms refer to a phenomenon which is equivalent to active religiosity. It is commonly agreed that most Egyptians, both Muslim and Christian, are pious. But theirs is a passive piety. That is, as believers they go along ordinarily practising their religion. However, active piety refers to those who not only practice their religion, but also preach it, wanting others to think and practise like them. It is this extra-ordinary religiosity which is often involved in missionary orientation and intolerance. Islamic activism, therefore, is about this extra-ordinary religiosity of the Muslim population in modern times. It may be involved explicitly in politics, which I would call 'Islamism', or restricted to 'apolitical' but active piety, as exemplified in trends and movements which centre on individual self-enhancement and identity.

Beyond the perspectives of the Islamist ideologues, in general, two types of interpretations have attempted to explain the spread of religious politics in modern times. The 'modernist' interpretations portray Islamism as reactive movements carried by traditional people, the intellectuals, and the urban poor, against Western-style modernisation. These movements are said to be anti-democratic and regressive by character. On the right, the 'clash of civilizations', proposed by Bernard Lewis and popularised by Samuel Huntington, manifests the framework within which the 'anti-modern' character of such movements in their encounter with the Western modernity is assessed.¹³ On the left, one can point to Albert Melucci and Alain Touraine, among others, who express concern about religious revivalism. 'Regressive utopianism' and 'anti-movement' are how they refer to religious, including the Islamic, movements. According to Melucci a religious movement 'defines its identity in terms of the past drawing on a totalizing myth of rebirth which is often at least quasi-religious in content'. 'Totalizing monism', he declares, 'is the central distinguishing feature of regressive Utopianism'. In turn, Touraine's normative notion of social movements as 'positive' and 'progressive' leads to the characterisation of Islamism as 'anti-movement'.¹⁴

The second type of interpretations view Islamism as the manifestation of, and a reaction to, postmodernity. In this framework the movements represent a quest for difference, cultural autonomy, alternative polity and morality vs the universalising secular modernity. Foucault described the Iranian revolution as the 'first post-modern revolution of our time', as the 'spirit of a world without spirit'.¹⁵ For Giddens it signalled 'the crisis of modernity'.¹⁶ Castells formulated it in terms of the 'exclusion of the excluders by the excluded', and for Esposito it signified a 'quest for identity, authenticity, and community, and a desire to establish meaning and order in both personal life and society'.¹⁷ On the other hand, Islamism in this approach manifests a search for certainty in this uncertain world, attempts to 'restore to the "post-modern" world meaning, an ethic and an order which, it is claimed, have vanished in the collapse of all its certainties'.¹⁸ Burgat and

Dowell, among others, go further to describe Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa as the third (after political and economic) phase of anti-colonial struggles—discursive struggles against Western modernity, struggles for cultural identity and independence.¹⁹

There seems to be a good deal of plausibility in such representations. The global conditions in which most of these movements emerged and the discourses of such Islamist leaders as Abul-ala Mawdudi, Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Shariati, Musa Sadre, Sayed Qutb, Rachid Qanoushi, and others attest to this tendency. Mawdudi's concept of *Jahiliya*, a society characterised by the worship of man by man and the sovereignty of man over man, had been taken up by Sayyed Qutb in Egypt, Abdul Salaam Yassin in Morocco and Ali Shariati in Iran, among others, in order to lash out at Western liberalism, secular nationalism and imperialism, which come, in Yassin's view, in the name of enlightenment, reform, nationalism and rationality.²⁰ Shariat's notion of 'return to self' reflected Islamists' choice of Islam as an indigenous and all-embracing human alternative. While Mawdudi proposed some kind of 'Islamic cosmopolitanism' to be governed by 'theo-democracy' or a 'divine democratic government', Shariati offered 'divine classless society', and Sayyed Qutb, Islamic state and economy. Ayatollah Khomeini called for 'Islamic government' but went along with an Islamic Republic.²¹

I do not wish to discuss or dispute the validity of these non-native interpretations of Islamism here.²² In many ways they offer important vantage points from which to view the phenomenon. My main purpose, rather, is to pose a methodological question about how these authors have come to such conclusions. I would like to suggest that a number of taken-for-granted assumptions inform the analyses and ultimately the methodologies of such interpreters. To begin with, there is a strong tendency for the commentators to rely overwhelmingly on symbols, language and ideology. Indeed, discourse analysis of texts, words and symbols can account for the prevailing methodological orientation to discover the nature of the Islamist movements. And much of the 'fundamentalism' arguments obtain their raw materials from these sorts of data. In a methodological statement, Manuel Castells emphasises that social movements should be seen by their 'own discourse'.²³ 'When presenting and analyzing the movements, I will follow very closely their own *words*, not just ideas, as recorded in documents on which I have worked', since, as Castells argues, the identity of movements is spoken by those who 'speak it'.²⁴ Castell's method usefully transcends the structuralist position (to which he once adhered) of deducing the movements' nature from the class location of actors, by looking, instead, at what they actually say they want. However, discourse analysis of this sort has its own drawbacks, raising some difficult questions. Given the fragmented nature of contemporary movements, who speaks for the movements? The ideologues, leaders, the multiple layers of constituencies? Most accounts are limited by relying exclusively on the language of the ideologues. The other problem is how to discern what the speakers mean by what they utter, in particular at times of transition and uncertainty when words can assume multiple

meanings. These issues and questions constituted the core of the debate between British historians Gareth Stedman Jones and John Foster in the early 1980s on the nature of 19th century Chartist movement.²⁵ While some (neo)Marxian interpretations focus, instead of discourse, on the material processes which generate conditions for the emergence of Islamism, their concept of social movements often remains overarching.²⁶

On the other hand, it is only the perspective and discourse articulated by leaders which inform the major bulk of the analyses. Examining the authority of the Islamist leader in Morocco, a political scientist refers to Abd al-Salam Yassin as 'one voice that effectively articulates the Islamic discontent'.²⁷ Here, one detects the strong influence of Weberian elitist views regarding social change. For Weber the activities of groups derive primarily from their adherence to a particular belief system. Ideas and symbols, therefore, play a fundamental role in social change; and groups are activated principally by charismatic leaders who are able to galvanise people committed to a particular idea. However, Weber's concept of charisma, as Melucci notes, implies a notion of an anonymous crowd vulnerable to irrational impulse instigated by the emotional guidance of leaders.²⁸

In short, most commentators tend to assume a unitary image of social movements as homogeneous and harmonious entities, ones which are identified with and represented primarily by leaders. In this view the leadership manifests the personification of the emotion, energy and desire of the participants. The expressed ideas of the leaders are assumed to be internalised by the 'constituencies', thus making up the ideology of the movement. Interestingly, such an approach converges fairly well with that of the movements' leaders themselves who often insist on presenting a coherent picture of their movements. In the view of Abdullh Nouri, a reformist Interior Minister of Iran, 'A leader of a revolution is one with whom the revolution is identified; without whom revolutionary movement and its victory is unimaginable; he is the creator of revolution'.²⁹ In a critical tone Ayatollah Khameneii, the current supreme jurist of Iran, rejects the claims of those analysts who suggest that the Iranian people during the Islamic revolution were not sure what they wanted. 'At that time, people did know exactly what they wanted', he emphasises, 'and so do they at the present. They wanted the implementation of Islamic values in society, which constitute the basis of the Islamic system'.³⁰ Indeed, a major task of a leader is to ensure and even impose unity and homogeneity. The public and with them the interpreters often hear the voice of the leadership at the cost of those of the rest, the 'hidden transcripts'. Finally, authors often study movements in static form, in a frozen structure and discourse, rather than in practice, in constant shift and motion.

It is clear that these assumptions, which have influenced the historiographies of Islamism, are based upon a problematic reading of social movements in general and the Islamist movements in particular. The empirical realities of Islamism demand that we adopt a more complex and multifaceted approach to prepare our narratives. Thus to study the Islamic education movement, one must go beyond simple content analysis of Islamic

textbooks, but rather take account of how these texts are transmitted, how they are perceived, what classroom dynamics are like, and what happens to teachers and pupils outside schools. Such an approach considers social movements as dynamic entities, as fluid and fragmented collectives, transcending merely discursive representation by focusing instead on power and practice.

Islamism is very dynamic

Social movements are in reality highly dynamic entities, being in constant flow and motion. Like EP Thompson's notion of social class, a social movement is not just a thing; it is primarily a process, and should be studied as a historical phenomenon in a span of time.³¹ A narrative of a movement, which perceives it as a process, offers a more comprehensive idea about its particular character. One cannot discern much about Iranian Islamism, for instance, if one does not recognise its historical dynamics. As I have discussed elsewhere, most scholars writing on post-revolutionary Iran have over-estimated the strength of Islamism before the revolution.³² In fact, when compared with Egypt, there was not a strong Islamist movement in Iran. Indeed, an Islamic movement was in the making when it was interrupted by an Islamic revolution. Thus, a nascent movement (articulated largely around the writings of Ali Shariati and some clerical figures) was in a sense transformed by becoming a state form. One could argue then that, in comparison with Egypt, the lack of a strong Islamist social movement in Iran contributed to the occurrence of an Islamic revolution (led by the radical clergy and carried out by the popular mobilisation of various sectors of the population). The Islamisation process was augmented largely after the revolution by the Islamic state from above. In contrast, the relative success of a strong Islamist movement in Egypt contributed to its 'reformist' outcome, and thus prevented the incidence of an Islamic revolution of the Iranian type.³³

Considering social movements in motion is a crucial issue. For it emphasises that the concerns, focus and even the direction of movements may change over time as a result of both internal and, especially, external factors. Factors such as the demonstration effect, repression, internal rifts and a change in economic or political conditions are likely to influence the direction of social movements. These observations in some ways reflect Tarrow's notion of 'cycles of protest' as the process in which protest actions create opportunities for new movement organisations to appear, eventually entailing reform or suppression.³⁴ Yet I like to emphasise the contradictory dynamics of social movements in this respect. It is true that social movements encourage further waves of collective action, yet, by doing so, they also undermine opportunities for the late comers. They may do so by reforming material conditions, by institutionalisation, and also by making their opponents more vigilant.

More importantly, social movements, aside from affecting others, may also change their own pace and direction. The very dynamics of the movements

may alter the conditions which gave rise to their emergence in the first place. The success of movements to meet all or part of the concerns of their constituencies often leads to a change in strategy and tactics, or to their 'dilution'. This is so not simply because certain external forces (such as the demonstration effect, social control or international factors) influence them. Equally important is the internal dynamics of movements themselves. Social movements transform their own environment, their relationships with surrounding social and political forces and institutions, society, their constituency, and the state, which in turn affects their own existence. This, I would suggest, provides a clue to the slowdown of political Islam in Egypt in the late 1990s and in particular to the 'failure' of Islamism in that country to launch an Islamic revolution in the Iranian sense. The downturn of political Islam in Egypt (including among radical groups as well as the Muslim Brotherhood) is attributable not only to the regime's often repressive counter-attacks through legislation or in the streets. It also has to do with a decline in its popular support: the partial success of the movement in general in 'Islamising' Egyptian society allowed many people to believe that things could change for the better within the context of the existing arrangements, without altering the political system. Providing a social safety net through Islamic welfare associations, and creating a moral community (in associations, mosques, alternative dress code, schooling, health centres, even Islamic weddings) where believers felt safe and secure from 'cultural invasion' and 'moral decadence' were some of these accomplishments.³⁵

Much of the writing on social movement dynamics analyses it almost entirely in terms of the effect the external factors have on a social movement, notably the structure of political opportunity. Gamson views the movement outcome in terms of either receiving new advantages or gaining acceptance.³⁶ Tarrow sees movement outcome, its decline for instance, primarily in terms only of the structure of political opportunity. 'It is the changing structure of opportunity emerging from a protest cycle that determines who wins and who loses, and when struggle will lead to reform', he argues.³⁷ They rarely look at the impact of a movement itself on changing its own constituency and environment, or at the fact that movement dynamics also changes social opportunity. This is because the prevailing tradition of social movement theory looks at it in terms of the collectivity of contenders who challenge *political power*. Therefore, movements are considered successful when they 'challenge' and bring 'disruption' against the state.³⁸ To be sure challenging political power is crucial. However, I am suggesting that social movements may also succeed in terms of changing civil societies, behaviour, attitudes, cultural symbols and value systems which, in the long run, may confront political power, as in the US women's movement.

These observations are directly related to the continuity, success or failure of social movements. The weakening of or even a halt in a social movement activity does not necessarily mean its failure, if all or part of its objectives are met. For instance, the unemployed movement in post-revolutionary Iran was seriously undermined, that is, it became diluted, not only because of external

pressure but partly because it was to a large extent successful in fulfilling some of the demands of the jobless population.³⁹

Islamism is differentiated

There is a strong tendency in the dominant interpretations to deduce the character of Islamist movements from 'Islam', which they often regard as a fixed and unique doctrine. Interestingly but not surprisingly, such a totalising depiction by 'outsiders' is shared by most Islamist leaders themselves. The proposition of the idea of a unitary Muslim *umma* in modern times by such Islamists as Mawdudi, Abdul-Salam Yassin or the Iranian traditional Islamists, in a sense, ignores the influence of national cultures on the perception and practice of Islam across different national boundaries.⁴⁰ By now it has been established that there is not one but many Islams.

It is crucial to note that the term 'Islamism' is often taken to describe not the same but many different things in different national settings, of which only a few maybe characterised in terms of social movements. In the Iranian context the term refers to the revolutionary movement of 1979 and subsequently to the Islamic state. During the country's civil war the Lebanese Hizbullah was indeed a quasi-state in its Islamisation policies. Turkish Islamists were organised in legal political parties (Rifah and the Virtue Party). The term 'Islamism' has also been associated with guerrilla organisations (eg militant Islamist groups in Egypt such as El-Jihad or al-Gamma'a al-Islmiyya) as well as with certain clerical groupings (eg the Iranian radical *ulema*, or Jebhat Ulema in Egypt). It was mainly in Egypt that a pervasive Islamic social movement developed to demand and to some extent bring about change in various aspects of social and cultural life.

Yet the Egyptian Islamic movement was not as uniform as it appeared or is described. It is indeed a question of theory and methodology as to what we mean exactly when we speak of the Egyptian Islamism. Do we mean the radical Islamists who had taken up armed struggle against the tourist industry, foreign visitors and the state? The reformist and moderate Muslim Brothers who disagreed with the radicals on violent confrontation against the state? The segment of the state-controlled al-Azhar clergy (the Ulema Front, for instance) who have shown a religious conservatism equal to that of the Muslim Brotherhood on such issues as books and publications, gender, cultural matters and artistic creation? Are we referring to the massive Islamic welfare associations, many of them linked to mosques, but with little relationship to 'political Islam'? What about the upsurge in the 1990s of religious conservatism in certain state institutions such as the courts, entertainment industry, media, book publishers and universities? Or the expanding 'evening gatherings' (*halaqat*) for religious education and socialisation among women with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds—women who seem to have little interest in political and social matters that other Islamic activists espouse, but appear to seek personal piety and virtue? Where to place certain religious intellectual currents and personalities such as Mustafa Mahmoud, Salim el-Awa, Hasan Hanafi or Mohammad Emara?

I regard the entirety of these diverse and dispersed emotions, ideas and activities, what Meyer Zald would probably call the social movement 'sector', as constituting the Egyptian Islamic movement of the past two decades. These activities, actors and constituencies were quite different in character and function, and detached from one another, although they often followed each other's news and influenced one another. Yet what made them a part of this pervasive social movement was their salience at a particular historical juncture (roughly the 1980s and 1990s), sharing general religious language and codes, advocating Islam as part of public life, and expressing a desire for some sort of religio-political change. However, the actors' biographies, socioeconomic milieu, image of their society, and the kind of change they pursued seemed to diverge. While the core of the movement was Islamist, that is, it sought some kind of Islamic state, the margins exhibited greater ambiguity in what they aspired to.

In general contemporary social movements by their very nature carry a multiplicity of discourses espoused by diverse fragments and constituencies, although they may be dominated by one. Shaped in a complex set of concentric circles (like the whole set of circled waves on a calm water surface), social movements possess various layers of activism and constituency (leaders, cadres, members, sympathizers, free riders, and so on) who are likely to exhibit different perceptions about the aims and objectives of their activities. At the same time, social movements usually possess an 'animating effect' in that they inspire and unintentionally activate fragmented sentiments, sympathies and collectives outside, often on the periphery, of social movement organisations, usually with little or no structural linkage between them. The 'animation' results, on the one hand, from demonstrating the vulnerability of adversaries, and showing how things can be done. On the other hand, it is caused by the outrage of people outside the movement at the adversaries' (regimes') repressive measures, which they may consider morally unacceptable. Thus, in the mid-1990s some schoolgirls in Egypt took on wearing the *hijab* (veil) not in a slow conversion process, but as a reaction to the government's decision to ban veiling in schools for fear of 'Islamic fundamentalism' there.⁴¹

Thus, numerous kinds of actors, such as women's groups, cultural actors, writers, journalists, workers, students and religious groups, tend to emerge on the periphery of social movement organizations (SMOs) with little or no networking among them, or between them and the SMOs. Where opportunity allows, these actors may express views on prevalent issues, yet they may not necessarily internalise the aims and objectives of the movement leadership or each other. This characterised the diverse constituencies of Iran's Reform Movement (*Jonbesh-e Eslah-talabi*) under President Muhammad Khatami since 1997. All the segments of the Reform Movement spoke of 'reform', perhaps, in the same fashion that the participants in the Islamic revolution of 1979 talked about 'revolution'. Both in 1997 and 1979, however, the movements were infused with fragmentation and unarticulated discord, with each segment often espousing different projections about 'reform' and change'. However, for the reason I shall discuss below, while

disagreements were more transparent in the 1990s Reform Movement, they were largely hidden during the revolution.

Imagined solidarities

If, as shown above, the Islamist movements are internally fluid, fragmented and differentiated, then what binds these fragments together? What makes them a *movement* defined as a co-operative unit, in terms of the *collective* activities of many people to bring about social change? After all, unity of purpose and action is the hallmark, indeed a defining feature, of a social movement. And 'shared' interests and values are invariably proposed to account for the elements which bring actors together for a united purpose. In what way, then, is commonality assured, consensus built and solidarity achieved among differentiated actors? I would like to propose that consensus may be achieved not simply by actors' real understanding of their shared interests, but also by their *imagining* commonality with others—by imagined solidarities.

To illustrate, let me begin with the other end of commonality and unity, by asking why people disagree and disunite. I suggest that dissension and discord among individuals may originate from at least two sources: divergence of interests and/or in interpretations. Along with Isaac Balbus, I take the idea of 'interests' to mean having a 'stake' in something, or 'being affected' by something.⁴² Of course, interests are not only material or economic; we may also speak of political, social or moral (eg honour) interests. Some interests are objective, that is, they exist beyond our awareness and perceptions, as in the example of everyone having an interest in clean air irrespective of whether one is aware of it or not. However, 'interests' attached to social, political and economic realms often have 'subjective' bases in that they are socially or culturally constructed. It is in this sense that sociologist Nicos Poulantzas, among others, has argued that interests do not exist beyond our consciousness, but they are in fact part of it. Reconciling 'objective' and 'subjective' interests remains a theoretical problem. Yet, irrespective of one's position on this, the fact remains that difference in interests accounts for the major source of discord and dissension between individuals.

Apart from interests, social movement actors may also disagree because they hold different perceptions, interpretations of things. The question of why people understand things differently is a complex one. But this may lie in individuals' distinct experiences, their specific 'biographies' (according to Japsen), or their 'inner complexity' (in Melucci's terminology).⁴³ Prejudice, or blind attitudes for or against certain values, represents the extreme moment of divergent perceptions. It is crucial to emphasise, however, that perceptions and interpretations should not be seen as being totally independent variables. People's distinct 'interests' may, and often do, influence and even shape the way they look at and interpret the world. So the concept of 'interests' is indeed a significant variable, despite the fact that currently it is often dismissed as either insignificant or unproblematic.

Scholars who have discussed the issue of 'interests' often point to the conceptual difficulties relating to the contradiction between 'objective' and 'subjective', or 'individual' and 'group' interests. For them people's total interests seem either to converge, in which case they facilitate collective action, or to diverge, which impedes it. In other words, individuals are seen as either carrying *aggregate* common interests or as lacking them.⁴⁴ There seems to be nothing in between. But in reality, individuals often carry various fields of interests in various domains of life—at the individual, family or national levels, in economic, political, intellectual or moral terrains. Groups' interests may converge in some domains but diverge and contradict in others. I would suggest that participants in a social movement often espouse not totally shared, but '*partially* shared' interests. Unlike the 19th century working class movements which enjoyed, according to Laclau and Mouffe, the 'synchronic unity of subject positions' (that is, convergence of total interests), participants in the contemporary social movements come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and do not in that sense form a coherent unit.⁴⁵ Yet certain fields of their interests and values may converge over a particular issue or grievance. And it is these 'partially shared' interests or values (in addition to other requisites) that ensure collectivity.⁴⁶ Egyptian Islamism exhibited such a convergence, based upon 'partially shared' interests and values on the part of its diverse constituencies, including the modern middle classes, some businessmen, the farmers of Upper Egypt, students, youth and women, who all seemed to be interested in some kind of change. The same was true of the Hizbullah movement, a Shi'i Muslim political group, in Lebanon before the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. Some Christians and Sunni Muslims, in addition to Shi'ites, supported (financially and otherwise) Hizbullah's resistance efforts in the south against the Israeli occupation, but refused to support the movement's Islamisation programme.⁴⁷ Sharing partial interests also characterised Iran's Reform Movement of the late 1990s. This movement consisted of a broad coalition of some 18 political groupings, professional associations, student organisations, women's groups and intellectual figures with diverse ideological–religious tendencies ranging from socially conservative clerics, to moderates, liberals and secularists. Included among them were the Moshareket Front, a pro-Khatami clerical association (Majma's Rouhanioun Mobarez), students' Daftar-e Tahkim Vahadat, the Workers' Party and the Hambastegui Party. They all seemed to agree on the movement's general ideals: an emphasis on democracy, the rule of law, civil society and tolerance.

But do these social movement participants rationally and squarely identify their partial commonalities and then decide to act together? This is certainly the case with deliberate coalition building, as in Iran's Reform Movement. The incidence of coalition building is not uncommon. United fronts typify the organisational form of such deliberate but *ad hoc* alliances. Here, the parties, aware of their differences, come to work together on certain perceived common objectives. Beyond this, 'frame alignment', or consensus mobilisation, represents another common strategy. Through frame alignment

social movement organisations attempt to reach out to people with similar grievances, to clarify ambiguities and to make larger recruits.⁴⁸ Although the concept seems to have been over-stretched from its original meaning to include ‘any and all cultural dimensions of social movements’, nevertheless it signifies ‘conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’.⁴⁹

Like coalition building, the concept of framing also points to *deliberate* measures by *movement leaders* to fashion consensus (in both cognitive and normative terms) by utilising existing resources, techniques, means of communication and networking. Thus, Islamist leaders in the Middle East frame their movements in mainly religious terms utilising Islamic codes and concepts as well as resources, such as concepts of *shahada* (martyrdom), the sovereignty of God, *haram/halal* (religiously forbidden or allowed), or the use of mosques, ceremonies, or *zakat* committees for mobilisation purposes. In Iran leaders of the Reform Movement used the language of democracy, accountability, transparency and tolerance. This is not to say that leaders fake religiosity or democratic tendencies, although some might indeed use moral issues for political purposes.⁵⁰ Rather, the point is to emphasise their conscious use of religious or democratic symbols and resources for the cause of mobilisation.

Both in coalition building and in frame alignment the focus is thus on deliberate initiatives that originate from social movement leaders aiming at building or broadening consensus. However, the receiving end of the process, the constituencies, are often ignored. How do *they* perceive the deployed symbols and messages? Do these messages actually reach the people? What I am trying to underline is that an effective framing strategy would require, first, a political opportunity to allow effective communication and, second, the means to carry out such communication. It seems that these types of opportunities and resources (such as a structured organisation, efficient means of social contact like private TV channels, a high literacy rate, lack of censorship, fax, phone, internet, and so on) are more pertinent to the Western, indeed American, model of social movements. It is not surprising that studying organisation, resources and opportunity constitutes the major preoccupation of the Western social movement paradigms, notably American social movement theory. Here social movement organisations appear like business enterprises, with an emphasis on a clear-cut division of labour, professionalisation, strategic planning, fund raising and an infrastructure of communication and networking.⁵¹ These resources are invaluable in constructing, identifying and extending points of commonality and thus solidarity, not to mention maintaining and sustaining collective action. But what about those conditions and countries where such opportunities and resources for dialogue, debate, dissent and clarifying fields of common interests and differences are absent or inadequate?

Restricted political opportunity (because of repression) and lack of resources are likely to limit the effectiveness of consensus mobilisation. This might explain why frame alignment in countries like Iran until recently and

Egypt today is far less effective than that in the West. It is true, in most Middle Eastern countries, that Islamist movements have utilised mosques to assemble and communicate, cassettes to get messages across and agitate, and Islamic symbols to frame their ideas. However, while such opportunities and resources are just enough to deploy a general master frame, to offer a broad message (such as, '*Islam Huwa al-Hall*', 'Islam is the solution', or *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, the Islamic Republic), they are not enough to discuss details and clarify ambiguities. The result is that the diverse participants tend to converge on the generalities, but are left to *imagine* the specifics, to envision commonalities. I am, in short, proposing the possibility of projecting 'imagined solidarities' between heterogeneous social movement actors, in the same way that people of a territory imagine their communities as nations.⁵² An 'imagined solidarity' is, thus, one which is forged spontaneously among different actors who come to a consensus by imagining, subjectively constructing, common interests and shared values between themselves. But such imagining by the different fragments is by no means carried out in homogeneous fashion. Just as in the case of the nation which is imagined differently by 'its fragments',⁵³ social movements' actors also imagine common aims and objectives not in the same fashion, but differentially. Fragmented actors therefore render imagined solidarity, the social movement, a negotiated entity. Theirs is a contested imagining. Imagined solidarities are usually the characteristic of societies with an authoritarian polity, where the effective exchange of ideas and communicative action in the public sphere are lacking. This characterises the revolutionary movement, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Although the Iranian Revolution was led by radical clergy and liberal Islamic leaders, it was carried out by very diverse social groups, including the secular middle class, workers, students, urban lower classes, ethnic minorities and women. It became clear only later that different social clusters and constituencies had different purposes, prospects and expectations of the 'change'. Indeed, the differences and divergence came to the surface no more than few weeks after the regime change in April 1979. At the time when Ayatollah Khomeini, reacting to various economic demands made just after the revolution, commented that 'We have not made the revolution for cheap melons; we have made it for Islam', a factory worker reacted: 'They say we have not made revolution for economic betterment! What have we made it for, then? They say, for Islam! What does Islam mean then?'⁵⁴ In a letter to a daily in Tehran a young woman from a provincial village stated in July 1980:

[During the revolution], I used to think revolution meant clothing and covering bare feet of the poor. I thought it meant feeding the hungry. Now I know how optimistic I was... Because neither my bare feet are covered, nor my hunger is satisfied...⁵⁵

No other group felt the wide gap between their expectations of the revolution and its actual outcome more than the religious minorities and the secular unveiled women. They poured on to the streets en masse crying 'this is not

what we had expected', referring to the imposition of Islamic codes on public morality, women's appearance and family law.⁵⁶ The differences with the ethnic minorities ended in armed clashes in the provinces of Iranian Kurdistan, Turkman Sahra, and Khouzestan, a southern oil province populated mainly by people of Arab origin.⁵⁷ In short, the political repression under the Shah, the remarkable generality and ambiguity of the message of the revolutionary leaders, the speedy unfolding of events, and the lack of time and opportunity for debate and clarity caused the participants to 'imagine' a consensus of interests and values within the broad revolutionary movement.

Whereas generality, imagined solidarity and thus unity, are features of autocratic polities and movements, democratic conditions and movements often breed internal difference and dissent, since the availability of both means and opportunities allows for an open, clear and dissenting exchange of ideas. Consequently, people are allowed to see, reflect on and accord their individual interests and sentiments with those of the other actors. But, at the same time, the clarity of ideas also means the disclosure of differences and disagreements. Thus, unlike the revolutionary movement of 1979, the Reform Movement, which enjoyed adequate resources (a massive rise in literacy and relative freedom of the press and of assembly) and political opportunity (support from the Khatami government) was afflicted by difference and fragmentation. To bridge the divergent views in this broad fragmented movement, activists deliberately forged the Reformists' Front (Jebhe-ye Eslah-talaban) which came to represent the core organisation of the reform movement in Iran in the late 1990s.

Conclusion

Given the fragmented nature of contemporary social movements, including Islamism, a plausible narrative would take account of the heterogeneous layers of perceptions, discourses and practices within a given movement. A totalising discourse suppresses the variations in people's perceptions about change, diversity is screened, conflicts belittled, and instead a grand united language is emphasised. This suppression of difference by the dominant voice of the leadership—or opposition for that matter—usually works against the concern of the ordinary, the powerless, the poor, minorities, women and other subaltern elements. Writing a history of social movements by taking account of the multiple discourses is by no means an easy task. Not long ago a breed of historians entertained the idea that the 'subaltern can write its own history' without needing the professionals. They were prepared to drop the 'privileged' position of the historian *vis à vis* their subjects. The idea was that narration, or the stories of the subjects, is as historically valid as the narratives, or historiographies, of historians. There were even those who wondered if academic historians kill history. However intriguing these propositions may be, they do not seem to salvage much. Serious questions still remain. How can we get the stories of the ordinary people when many of them cannot read or write, when they are not easily accessible, are suspicious,

do not understand our elitist language? These technical difficulties apart, the crucial challenge is how to construct a narrative of a social movement when its constituent multiple narratives diverge from or contradict each other? This seems to suggest at least that depending merely on 'discourse' may not take us very far, and that we need to bring context, structure and practice into play. But this is easier said than done.

Notes

- 1 Anthony Parsons, 'The Iranian Revolution', *Middle East Review*, Spring 1988, pp 3–9.
- 2 A very useful recent publication is Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.
- 3 Niel Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior*, New York: Free Press, 1963; and R Turner & L Killian, *Collective Behavior*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1987.
- 4 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, New York: Viking, 1960.
- 5 Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, London: Addison-Wesley, 1978; and Meyer Zald & D McCarthy (eds), *Social Movements in an Organizational Society*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1987.
- 6 James Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; Hank Johnston & Bert Klandermans (eds), *Social Movements and Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995; and Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 7 Elsewhere I have attempted to conceptualise what, for instance, youth and women's movements mean in the context of contemporary Muslim societies. See Asef Bayat, *Post-Islamism: Social Movements, Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming.
- 8 E Gellner, *Post-Modernism, Reason and Religion*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- 9 M Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.
- 10 Keddie, 'New Religious Politics: Where, When and Why Fundamentalism Appear?' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40, 1998.
- 11 Charles Hirschkind, 'What is Political Islam?', *Middle East Report*, No. 205, October–December 1997, pp 12–14.
- 12 Gellner, p 9.
- 13 Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*; Bernard Lewis, 'Roots of Muslim rage', *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1990; and Lewis, *What Went Wrong*, London: Phoenix, 2002.
- 14 Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, p 104; A Touraine, *The Return of the Actor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p 64. See also Touraine, 'Do social movements exist?', paper presented to the World Congress of Sociology, Montreal, 26 July–1 August 1988.
- 15 M. Foucault, 'An interview with Michele Foucault', *Akhtar*, 4, 1987, p 43.
- 16 A Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Society*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987, p 50.
- 17 Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p 9; and John Esposito, 'Religion and political affairs: political challenges', *SATS Review: A Journal for International Affairs*, 18(2), 1998, p 20.
- 18 Gille Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, State College, PA: Penn State Press, 1994, p 3.
- 19 Francois Burgat & William Dowell, *The Islamic Movements in North Africa*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- 20 Emad Eldin Shahin, 'Secularism and nationalism: the political discourse of Abd al-Salam Yassin', in John Ruedy (ed), *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1994, pp 167–186.
- 21 Here I have cited only sources in English which are accessible to non-native readers. See Ali Shariati, 'Return to self', in John Donohue & John Esposito (eds), *Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, pp 305–307; Abul-ala Mawdudi, 'Nationalism and Islam', in Donohue & Esposito, *Islam in Transition*, pp 94–97; 1983, p 54; Abdulaziz Sachedina, 'Ali Shariati: ideologue of the Iranian Revolution', in John Esposito (ed), *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp 191–214; and Yvonne Haddad, 'Sayyid Qutb: ideologue of Islamic revival', in Esposito, *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, pp 67–98.
- 22 I would like, however, to point to a curious convergence between the often totalising discourse of the Islamists and the post-structuralist framework of these authors. This probably results from their 'essentialism of difference', a notion which says that, whatever they are, Islamists are different from the West.
- 23 See Castells, *The Power of Identity*, p 71.

- 24 *Ibid* (emphasis in original).
- 25 Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; and John Foster, 'The declassing of language', *New Left Review*, 150, 1985.
- 26 For instance, Castells' account of Islamism and the Chiapas movement is informed by this type of envisioning.
- 27 Shahin, 'Secularism and nationalism', p 169.
- 28 See Melucci, *Challenging Codes*, p 336.
- 29 Abdullah Nouri, *Shoukaran-e Eslaah* (Proceedings of Nouri's Trial), Tehran: Tarh-e Nou, 1378/1999, pp 51–52.
- 30 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Friday sermon, May 2000, available at <http://www.iran-emrooz.de/khabar/khamenei.html#top>.
- 31 EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Penguin, 1963.
- 32 See Asef Bayat, 'Revolution without movement, movement without revolution: Islamic activism in Iran and Egypt', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42(1), 1998, pp 136–169.
- 33 *Ibid*.
- 34 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- 36 See Bayat, 'Revolution without movement'.
- 36 Ganson, *Strategy of Social Protest*, 1990, ch 1.
- 37 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p 177.
- 38 *Ibid*, ch 10.
- 39 Asef Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, London: Zed Books, 1997.
- 40 See Abul-ala Mawdudi, 'Political theory of Islam', in Donohue & Esposito, *Islam in Transition*, pp 252–260. For Abdul-Salam Yassin, see Shahin, 'Secularism and nationalism', 1994, p 173.
- 41 Linda Herrera, 'The sanctity of the school: new Islamic education in modern Egypt', PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2000.
- 42 Issac Balbus, 'The concept of interest in pluralist and Marxist analysis', in I Katznelson, G Adams, P Brenner & A Wolfe (eds), *The Politics and Society Reader*, New York: David McKay, 1973.
- 43 Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*; and Melucci, *Challenging Codes*.
- 44 See, for example, Balbus, 'Concept of interest', 1973; and Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*.
- 45 Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 1985.
- 46 This perception of fragmented interests is a useful way to assess the position of women under the Islamic Republic of Iran today. Are they oppressed or empowered? The answer is both, depending on what domains and interests one is speaking about. For instance, women are more literate, assertive and publicly active, but their individual freedom and modes of expression are more limited.
- 47 I am grateful to Emma Naughton for bringing the case of Hizbullah to my attention.
- 48 D Snow, EB Rochford, SK Worden & RD Benford, 'Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation', *American Sociological Review*, 51, 1986, pp 464–481.
- 49 D McAdam, J McCarthy & M Zald (eds), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p 6
- 50 An example is Hizb al-Amal in Egypt, which slandered the allegedly immoral novel, *A Banquet for Seaweeds*, by the Syrian author, Haydar Haydar, to instigate religious outrage among ordinary Muslims. The conservative Islamists in Iran also apply similar methods of characterising the discourse and behaviour of their adversaries as un-Islamic. For instance, in their struggle against the reform government of President Khatami, they have ruled that dialogue with the USA is *haram*, or religiously forbidden. See *Iran Farda*, 44, July 1998, p 29.
- 51 Hanspeter Kriesi, 'The organizational structure of new social movements in a political context', in McAdam *et al*, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*.
- 52 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1983.
- 53 Asef Bayat, 'Does class ever opt out of the nation? Notes on identity politics in Iran', in Willem Schendel & Eric Zurcher (eds), *Opting Out of the Nation: Identity Politics in Central, South and West Asia*, London: IB Tauris, 2000; and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- 54 Bayat, *Workers and Revolution*, p 48.
- 55 *Ayandegan*, 24 Tir 1358, cited in *Nimeye Digar*, No. 11, 1990, pp 114–115.
- 56 For some useful documentation on women's activism during the revolution and in the aftermath, see *Nimeye Digar*, 10, 1989 and 11, 1990. These are special issues on women's experiences during the revolution.
- 57 Indeed, one should look at these ethnic movements with the same de-totalising scrutiny as at the revolution itself.