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Islamism in the Shadow of Al-Qaeda

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► **To cite this version:**

François Burgat. Islamism in the Shadow of Al-Qaeda. University of Texas. University of Texas Press (Austin), pp.182, 2008, Political Science: Middle Eastern Studies. halshs-00349340

HAL Id: halshs-00349340

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00349340v1>

Submitted on 29 Dec 2008

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Islamism in the Shadow of Al-Qaeda

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Translating Burgat...

*Qu'il crève dans son bondissement par les choses
inouïes et innommables: viendront d'autres
horribles travailleurs...*

Arthur Rimbaud: 'Lettre du Voyant'

Toute « bonne » traduction doit abuser...

Jacques Derrida

There are major, necessary works of corrosive irony and human indignation, which use the tools of analysis and insider intelligence to go to the dark heart of their time, in this case, of our own, and the crisis we are living: I believe that *Islamism in the Shadow of Al-Qaeda* is one of them. Translating the book into English struck me early on as representing not only the task of taking over as neutrally as possible, let's say, a scientific text-book from language A to language B, but a quasi-literary task (the author is a writer), and quasi-political act of militancy and participative commitment (in the widest, non-partisan sense of these terms). This requires not only merely transposing a diluted digest of the author's thought, but to manifest something of his stylistic temperament and moral tone, in order to carry over from source to target the operative power of the original, i.e; its intellectual efficacy.

Translating Burgat has thus necessarily entailed leap-frogging several reassuring dichotomies: first and foremost, that of the gap between the 'two cultures'¹ (already much less prevalent in the social sciences in France), between the literary and the scientific – authors of french political science tend also to be real writers, in the strong, literary or philosophical sense of the term, and translating them requires a considerable, sometimes acrobatic effort of stylistic makeover, with the ever-present danger of 'falling between the two stools'; then, of the politically, or at least ethically committed and the scientific - the book is indeed in itself simultaneously an act of exceptional scientific and political courage. It not only convincingly establishes and scientifically underpins no small number of little known and still less widely accepted facts and analyses, but it succeeds in holding up to our contemporaries an unwelcome political and ethical mirror, showing what many of us would prefer not to know, and saying what many would no doubt prefer not to hear. It is thus characterized by an unusual dosage between analytical lucidity and a capacity for contained ethical indignation whose stylistic equivalent must emerge; finally, between the impersonally objective and the playfully complicit – the author uses a very savvy combination of rigorously formal scientific protocol and direct, at times almost familiar irony: as a committed writer, he likes to play in the political forecourt and uses a lot of lift and spin. As a redoubtable conceptual fencer, he uses a lot of parry and counter-thrust.

All the above naturally leads me on to a very brief sally into discussion of the theoretical options of translation itself. I believe that translation is a secondary form of authorship – any writer is a 'translator', any translator is a 'writer' - , but only in the sense and to the degree that a highly creative author in the source language

¹As recently again so usefully analysed in Immanuel Wallerstein, *European Universalism, The Rhetoric of Power*, The New Press, New York, London, 2006, pp.62-70.

requires an almost equal degree of creativity and authorship on the part of his or her translator, in order to get his or her work over into the target language with any chance of success (or degree of truth). Thus the criterion of success cannot only be verisimilitude – 'faithfulness' to the original, while merely avoiding the pitfalls of literalism – but must sometimes, in order to bring out its 'truth', go so far as to even accentuate certain stylistic traits remaining latent in the original source language, but which may be better manifested in the target. What I mean is that the twin concepts, accentuation and manifestation, well known to literary scholars and students and originally developed to address the theoretical problems of literary translation in authors such as Friedrich Hölderlin², must also apply to the translation of major works of the social sciences. Not in the sense of any spurious orthopedic 'rectification' or abusive 'substitution', the better to 'naturalize' the original, in the well-known french tradition of « *les belles infidèles* », fundamentally suspecting the original (not being in French, or in this case, English, so deemed to be lacking in 'universality') of being always susceptible of improvement. But rather in the sense that a translation only really kick-starts with the first 'fecund transgression' of the strict letter of the original by the translator, for the simple reason that this makes of the latter more than any translating machine could ever be, i.e. an 'author' who is welcoming the expressive potential of another writer into the virtualities of his own language: the latter will necessarily alter to some degree, or accentuate somewhat differently the expressive potential of the original, in the best of cases manifesting more powerfully some aspects or stylistic traits which in the source remained more subdued or implicit. The 'double sommersault' or 'swan dive' which the translator must necessarily make from the source to the target only authorizes him to relax his grip on the author's hand at the very last, when he is ready to fly with the momentum of his own stylistic free will, and then only just so far as to be able to faithfully reconnect with the same hand in the following split second. In other words, an act of translation is always a squaring of the circle, a series of asymmetrical compromises and arbitrations, more particularly as the expression in the two languages is never chronologically or contextually simultaneous, making pure or perfect bilingualism impossible. One is also constantly confronted with an exorbitant choice between being faithful to form or being faithful to meaning, accentuating one aspect or another: one must always attempt to sacrifice as little as possible of either, but some degree of inequitable loss in one or the other will also most often be inevitable. The translator's task is thus always a re-creation, more or less expressive according to his capacity to 'welcome' his understanding of the expressive potential of the original into the idiomatic and contextual virtualities of the other language, necessarily different from those of the original author.

Translating Burgat, I have thus tried to be sensitive to the English language's capacity to welcome his unique combination of passionate eloquence and shrewd analytical clarity – perhaps I have even tended, two years and the growing revelations of a deepening crisis further, to somewhat accentuate the original's ring of moral indignation. Of course, some small part of this 'accentuated' indignation may also be my own; as a translator, I am ready to assume that, running the risk that it may or may not – but I hope it does at least to some degree – 'manifest' what with time has emerged for me as a sort of extra dimension to the book - which, of course, remains primarily a doughty academic work of historical research, and political and

²See Antoine Berman, *Hölderlin: la traduction comme accentuation et manifestation*, in *Detours D'écriture*, numéro hors série, Sillages, Paris, 1987, pp. 91-106.

sociological analysis. By that I mean its growing status as a critical masterpiece, placing it in the category of the great works of political and ethical surgery. While translating, I have thus grown increasingly aware of its capacity to analytically confront and denounce the monstrous outgrowths of the terminally sick world-system we are living in - its unflinching propensity to take a scalpel to the heart of darkness of contemporary western policy-making, particularly in the case of the so-called 'Greater' Middle East. One may or may not venture to disagree with one or another aspect of its macroscopic historical framework – to some the 'three temporalities' of Islamism, however convincingly argued, may seem too linear a set of categories, or perhaps somewhat over-determined by the author's North-African and Yemeni experiences, not sufficiently taking into account the global crisis of liberalism and the disruption of western-powered modernity at the end of the Cold War. But one cannot contest its impassioned lucidity, its political and moral courage: its unique capacity to mobilize strong realism without lapsing at any point into cynicism. One knows that it is bitter, but indispensable medicine, and that it ought to be read again and again by all those directly concerned – that means not only by the 'decision-makers', but by you and me – if only to realize to what a degree 'Man's inhumanity to man' is globally back among us and at the basis of so many of the contemporary world's worst bifurcations.

From time to time such works see the light of day – works recognizable by their enduring youthfulness, high mental energy and indefatigable will to engage with the complexities of human reality, however hostile or perverse, through the rigours of real knowledge, analysis and painstaking erudition, because of an impassioned belief that that reality can somehow still be confronted (or should ethically and politically be transformed), thanks to the sole weapons of reason. Such works, whether in the realm of symbolic, artistic production, or as here, of political thought and the social sciences, pay us the compliment of treating us as adults and pulling no punches; they are almost immediately recognizable by their directness of diction and by the implacable, committed style of their arguments. Neither a monument of vain erudition narcissistically turned towards the flattering mirrors of peer review, nor again an alluringly commodified invitation to the virtual worlds of paranoia – Burgat's book has nothing to peddle, no conspiracy theory beyond the clinical laying bare of the direst distortions of modern history itself, the discomforts of (an often ugly) reality, of which we all partake, and from which it proposes no easy evasion. This patiently constructed refusal to give way to the generalised 'flight from reality' is, of course, by no means a symptom that its author has espoused some particularly virulent strain of nihilism, but on the contrary the sign that he has not relinquished all hope in the human. His book, for all its specialized knowledge, transgresses the limits of its allotted academic constituency to speak directly to people (citizens), and proves that there is no absolutely watertight frontier between scientific analysis and ethical or political commitment, only the firewalls of argumentative rigour. My chief hope here is that something of this hidden, but very definitely present ethical dimension – its sombre, at times Dantean, or at least Swiftian undertone – comes out from time to time in my own commitment to the urgent task of welcoming this important book into English.

Acknowledgements

My special gratitude and lasting recognition are first and foremost due to Alix Philippon, without whose constant inspirational energy, advice, ready hand and vivifying companionship – albeit thousands of miles distant – the completion of this translation, under the prevailing circumstances, would almost certainly never have been feasible. My heartfelt thanks are also due to Ciaràn Carey for his prompt, selfless generosity as reader and corrector, and having at times set his own shoulder to the wheel. It would also be unjust not to add the gratitude due to Pascal Ménoret for his timely aid in referential research, and to Jim Burr for his patient, friendly stewardship of the editorial process.

Innisfree, 15. 08. 07.

Introduction

“No, when all is said, I would far rather see the Muslim Brothers co-opted by the Egyptian military, with the latter retaining the lion’s share of power, than contemplate their winning free elections, then setting up someone like Tariq Ramadan as Minister of Culture. [...] Therefore I support maintaining the most enlightened—or even not enlightened at all—dictatorships possible in Egypt and in Saudi Arabia rather than the implementation, in these regions of the world, of democratic principles which, for the time being, would only entail chaos and violence.”

Alexandre Adler, French essayist, 2004³

“We all remember the man who had seen the man who saw the man... who had seen the bear who ate the postman, and who had not been scared. A small portion of the glory of the last is inherited by the former. In this case, it is the toxic fragrance which hangs round whoever knows a person whose friend sometimes says nice things about someone who had one day inadvertently shaken the hand of one of Tariq Ramadan’s close friends. It has become like a by-word for whoever wants to denounce any political initiative, stance on some issue, network or periodical, trend, or even slogan... ramadanism, ramadanian, ramadanising. Needless to add anything. [...] And it is not only for those who have engaged in criticizing his work that the mere name of the intellectual from Geneva thus bears the semblance of an insult or a provocation. No. It is among the ranks of such as take ignorance for a virtue—or for the necessary consequence of militant contempt.”

Laurent Lévy, French antiracist activist, 2005⁴

“Bin Laden has been precise in telling America the reasons he is waging war on us. None of the reasons have anything to do with our freedom, liberty, and democracy, but have everything to do with U.S. policies and actions in the Muslim world..”

Michael Scheuer, former CIA agent, 2004⁵

At the core of the severe misunderstanding which is fueling the ongoing tensions between Europe, the United States and the Muslim world, there resides a difficulty shared by the West as a whole : that of undertaking a rational and well thought-out assessment, first of the political, secondly of the intellectual and ethical roles of the various trends of “Political Islam” or “Radical Islamism”, too frequently considered as just so many stumbling-blocks on the road to consensual modernity and the peaceful coexistence of all the world’s tribes.

Since the epoch-making antiterrorist summit at Charm el-Cheikh in March 1996, the United States, Europe and Israel, but also Arab

³ *Le Figaro* newspaper, September 6, 2004

⁴ *Socialisme international*, Spring 2005.

⁵ Michael SCHEUER, *Imperial Hubris. Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*, Brassey’s Inc., Washington DC, 2004 (before resigning from the CIA, Scheuer used the pen-name “Anonymous”).

authoritarian regimes and a fraction of Arab intellectual elites, have adopted a language and a strategy on the issue which are curiously similar. Less than ten years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the spectre of “Islamic Fundamentalism” has well and truly become the global Public Enemy N°1.

“If they were not infiltrated by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s fundamentalists”, approximately suggests the rhetoric of today’s powerful, “would the Iraqis be refusing the democratic transition which George Bush has so generously come to bestow on them?”. “If the militants of the Hamas and other Jihadis hadn’t corrupted the minds of their fellow citizens, would the Chechens and Palestinians be continuing to sulkily reject the offers of peace made by Vladimir Putin or Ariel Sharon?”. If one were to finally manage to ban Tariq Ramadan from expressing himself in public, would that not put an end, not only to those feminine veils which so disfigure the modernist alleys of the French Republic, but also to the criminal “gang-bangs”, and why not, to all the insecurity currently reigning in the high-rise stairwells of the suburbs? In short, if Ibn Taymiyya (in the 14th century Near East) or Sayyid Qutb (in Egypt in the nineteen fifties) hadn’t “invented” “Radical Islamism”, would the whole world not be wallowing in that democratic felicity – secular, modern and consensual – which today seems so far out of reach?

The recent upsurge of the “Al-Qaeda generation” has further fraught with passion our interpretations of the phenomenon. There is obviously to be no question here of minimising the necessary arraignment of the latter’s terrorist undertakings. Our goal is to show how the reading which is usually made of its exterior manifestations is too unilateral, simplistic

and over-emotional to be rational, hence *effective* in bringing it to an end. And that, by the erection of so many walls where we should, in fact, be building new bridges, we are accelerating and not winding down, the radicalisation which currently threatens to engulf us.

The Trap of our Categories

Our knowledge and the rational management of our relationship with the “Islamists” are above all adversely affected by the extreme fragility of the categories we have set up to represent them. The way of thinking of analysts, strategists and other “experts” is today confined, ever more self-evidently, within the bald assessment (optimistic for some, pessimistic or realistic to others) of the performances and future prospects respectively of the Islamist terrorists and those who, in Washington, Paris, Algiers or Riyadh, devote quite as all-consuming a zeal to combating them.

The logic of criminal indictment has irresistibly trampled that of evaluation and analysis. The democracies and other defenders of “Freedom” or “Tolerance”, as we have relentlessly been told since 9/11 2001, are allegedly confronted with the terrorist threat of Muslim “fundamentalism”. Is this really what it is all about ? The following pages are an open invitation to call into question the political and ideological foundations of a world-wide quasi-unanimity concerning the “global war against terror⁶”. Also to take the full measure of the disastrous consequences which its zealous adepts are busy compounding : the generalisation and radicalisation of the very revolt which they tell us it is their profession to “eradicate”.

⁶ Since June 2005, Condoleeza Rice’s advisers have suggested the adoption of a new terminology : it is advised that “Save” (*Struggle Against Violent Extremism*) should from now on replace “Gwot” (*Global War On Terror*), as launched after 9/11.

Is the violence to which the West is being confronted merely “ideological” and “religious” ? Do we always take the time to discern the essential difference between religious sectarianism and political counter-violence, even if they are both sometimes inextricably intertwined, without however ever completely merging into one ? Was the theology of war elaborated by Sayyid Qutb, while in the tender care of Nasser’s torturers, condemnable though it may be, truly the “root cause” of Islamist radicalisation, or merely the vocabulary of a revolt whose motives are strikingly more down-to-earth ?

The Western Powers today claim they are “morally assaulted” by the “hatred of democracy and freedom” which allegedly increasingly grips their aggressors as, head over heels, the latter “free-fall into Radical Islam”. But this anti-western revolt might be much better understood as highlighting a relatively predictable reaction to the unilateralism, selfishness and iniquity of policies implemented, directly or indirectly through the intermediary of pet dictators, in a whole region of the world. In the vanguard of the “Imperial West” – a role in which it first caught up with, then overtook colonial Europe and Russia - the United States is today harvesting the sour grapes of perfectly irresponsible policies which it has been implementing for several decades in the Third World in general and in the Muslim World in particular : in these countries, the thousands of victims of such policies, just as innocent as those of the World Trade Centre, and our decades-long unswerving support for tyrannical dictatorships have fostered in their populations a sentiment of deep despair, favourable to the most extreme forms of revolt.

Beyond the question of an “Islamist” form of violence, it is easy to see that what is at stake is our difficulty in taking on board the very banal resurgence of an Islamic political lexicon in societies of Muslim culture, plus the sheer fact that a non-western culture should dare aspire to erode the age-old western monopoly of the expression of the universal. Caught in the crossfire between the “negative intellectuals” of late denounced in France by Pierre Bourdieu for their involvement in the dirty work of the Algerian Junta⁷, and today’s “facade or stooge intellectual” from the South, dissimulating from the western public – whom he either wishes to woo or manipulate – the real condition of societies whose sole ambassador he nevertheless purports to be, does the social science-based mediation of the world of the Other still have any chance to play its role ?

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the international community – in fact as mustered under the hegemony of the US superpower – has aspired to promote within the Arab World a set of “cultural” and “educative” reforms concerning which it may legitimately be wondered whether they do not rather serve to criminalize the forms of resistance to that world’s own malfunctions than to bring to light any realistic and equitable solution to the latter. Facing the current disruptions of a balanced order of the world, is the temptation to criminalize all forms of critical introspection really the best of options with a view to preventing future confrontation ?

Breaking the deadlock of “The Global War on Terror”

This book's purpose is to find ways to break out of that deadlock. Almost twenty years after concluding a long spell of fieldwork in the Maghreb,

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, « L'intellectuel négatif », *Liber*, Paris, January 1998.

by a first blueprint of an “instructions manual” for the intellectual and political implementation of the “Islamist” bogey-man in my *Islamism in the Maghreb*, and ten years since having concluded, in *Face to face with Political Islam*⁸, a five year stay in the Machrek which widened the underpinnings for my initial analysis and sharpened the focus of its terms, I am here reverting to this strife-torn issue which has been eating away at the very tissue of the relationship between the West and a Muslim world which has now become part and parcel of itself. Empowered by a six year stay in Yemen, my approach henceforth integrates something of what the Arabic Peninsula, where the imprint of colonialism has been less direct than elsewhere in the Arab world, can today impart, and which nonetheless represents – as the events of 9/11 have shown - an essential field of study if one is to get an overview of Islamism as an object of research.

The successive re-editions of *Face to Face with Islamism* (the latest in 2002) have enabled me to undertake a constant updating of the intellectual or political dynamics sanctioned or accelerated by the 9/11 attacks. This third reversion to the object of Islamism not only intends to metabolise new factual data, but aims at correlating a double historical perspective: on the one hand, of course, the original statement of my hypotheses elaborated in the mid nineteen eighties, on the other, my ensuing observations on “Islamist” behaviour patterns which the passage of time has progressively enabled me to flesh out.

These hypotheses, set forth in my previous books –to which I refer for their explicit, initial formulation - have persistently remained at the core of my present reasoning. In order to confront them both with my later

⁸ François BURGAT, *L'islamisme au Maghreb : la voix du Sud*, Karthala, Paris, 1988 (and Payot, Paris, 1995) ; *L'islamisme en face*, La Découverte, Paris, 2002 (3rd Edition).

fieldwork and the test of time, I will attempt to use them as underpinning without however repeating anything more than their substance. Even though they have now been brilliantly clarified and substantiated by younger fellow-researchers –to whom this book owes a lot- it may be said that they remain still far enough removed from having become commonplace for it to be worthwhile to recall their framework.

In space and time, we will see that it is only the multiplication of such points of observation which will enable us to circumvent the discourse of received wisdom and impassioned conviction on which western strategies currently repose – purblind and hence dangerously counter-productive – in the name of our terror-fraught “global war against terror”.

In this book, I first and foremost wish to recall the necessary distinction between an essential phenomenon of identity, a resurgence of the popularity of something we will here call “Muslim-speak”, and the manifold ways in which its supporters have put this “rehabilitated” lexicon to use in political and social life (chapter 1). In order to reconfigure Islamist mobilization within contexts which, in the space of one century, have vastly evolved, I next propose to clearly distinguish the three main sequences during which (before and after the waves of Independence) the latter became widespread (chapter 2). We will then explore the tensions between national specificities and the phenomenon of trans-nationalisation, tensions whose examination will hopefully procure us a better understanding both of the great diversity of the Islamist field and of the forces which have come to shape its dynamics (chapter 3 to 5). Chapter 6 duly operates a more precise deconstruction of the mechanics of radicalisation at the start of the emergence of Al-

Qaeda within this field, whose “sectarian” and “political” dimensions urgently need to be distinguished. Chapter 7 scrutinises the trajectories of four individuals who are among the most emblematic of this radical configuration, from the ideologue Sayyid Qutb to Mohamed Atta, the pilot who carried out the 9/11 attacks.

In order to reach an understanding of why emotion often tends to deprive the analysis of its much-vaunted rationality, chapter 8 recalls that the obstacles which the interpretation of the Islamist phenomenon must overcome are not only linked to fears and misunderstandings inherited from the western colonial past: they are also deliberately “exploited” today by all those who have a vested interest in discrediting the forms of resistance encapsulated in the Islamist lexicon. Finally, in chapter 9, are reviewed the contradictions of the unilateralism of the western “response” following 9/11, as well as the counter-productive effects of the security culture which is currently developing to the detriment of what should be a truly effective political response to the still pending threats which “radical Islamism” – along with many other actors on the international scene - holds in store for world peace.