ISLAMISM, CASTORIADIS AND AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT In the context of nationalizing, secularizing or Kemalist states, analyses of Islamist movements are often thrown back on notions of traditionalism or atavism. In a related vein, for certain social theorists writing on modernity, the uniqueness of the West is clarified through an imaginative [mis]interpretation of other cultures or civilizations. Too often, however, the apparent gains in Western self-insight reflect an ‘inability to constitute oneself without excluding the other’ (Cornelius Castoriadis). Ironically Castoriadis himself, in a project we might term an ethnography of the West (see his writings on ecology, capitalism, rationality, contemporary culture, racism, Greek philosophy/history, and the environment) is prone to the same vice, especially in his identification of the West as the sole autonomous society. This article argues that in the sharia institution of a legal autonomy, Islam and Islamism alike demonstrate an affinity with modernity as defined by Castoriadis. In the light of this Islamist autonomy, it concludes that Castoriadis’ vision of modernity as a struggle between opposed imaginaries of autonomy and rational mastery needs reformulating.

KEYWORDS autonomy • Castoriadis • Islamism • Kemalism • modernity

The 1998 Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam, edited by Georg Stauth, is titled Islam – Motor or Challenge of Modernity. The collection, as the title suggests, circles around the oft-claimed tension between Western modernity, however conceived, and Islamizing social movements in Muslim-majority societies, whose pedigree vis-à-vis this modernity is perceived as radically uncertain. Doubts over the contours of this relationship are not new of course, despite the more recent fear of Islamic fundamentalism, marvellously
resuscitated by the revolution against the Shah in Iran. Generations of Muslims themselves have felt that the ambiguities of lived experience are illuminated by the articulation of a conflict, however evaluated, between Western modernity and Islam. Nor of course is this dissonance confined to Islamic encounters with the modern. Arnason writes that for Japan there is a ‘long and massive – even if very heterogeneous – record of cultural and ideological responses that indicate a tension-ridden relationship to modernity and an ambiguous attitude to its challenges’ (1987: 6). Yet lest we think that this is endemic to what Chatterjee (1986) calls the ‘derivative discourse’ of post-colonial societies, we might also recall the periodic crises of meaning characterizing much Western 20th-century thought.

Still, why has this long historical conversation in Muslim-majority societies (and in Societies for the Study of the Orient) continued without apparent resolution? What enables the discourse of a contradiction between Islam and modernity – argued about in the Quran courses, mulled over in the kahvehane, yellowing in the columns of newspapers, parliamentary records and journals from the archipelago of Indonesia to the streets of Cairo – to proceed? And within the more general tendency of post-colonial states simultaneously to despise and lionize their own ‘traditions’, what is it that engenders the hostility, particularly from the side of secular civilizers in Kemalist states, to the idea of an ‘Islamic route’ to modernity?

A first step in delimiting this antagonism would be to ground it in the mode of modernity’s introduction to particular Muslim-majority societies. Yet disentangling and historicizing the varied institutionalization of modernity under the influence of different colonial and post-colonial regimes in different periods in different parts of the globe (for example see Rabinow, 1989 for Morocco and Algeria, or Mitchell, 1988 for Egypt) is an impossible task. We will take a shortcut then by provisionally following Sayyid (1997) in labelling as Kemalist the programmes of the various secularizing, modernizing or nationalist nation states that mediated independence in Muslim-majority societies in the wake of post-colonialism. Here, Kemalism as a Weberian ideal type denotes the mimetic project of both the new Turkish Republican elite and their admiring counterparts in other Muslim states to forcibly Westernize their citizens, on the assumption of the universality of European civilization. In the process Islam (state Islam excepted) is peculiarly politicized by its inscription as backward and particularistic, paving the way for an exacerbation of Islamist identity in response. True, it is often argued that no other post-colonial state in the Middle East or its peripheries (i.e. Algeria) has disestablished Islam in the same thorough way as the Turkish Jacobins.

But Kemalism as political project is founded on more than its constructed synonymity between civilization and the West. Privileging its disenfranchising of Islam overlooks its equally important homogenizing ethnic project and construction of a new national identity. Sayyid’s over-extension of the term to cover even the religious policies of the Saudi Arabian and
Malaysian states vis-à-vis Islam makes it lose its precision. Nevertheless, there is some gain in generalizing the political project known as Kemalism beyond its immediate context in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic. Primarily, Kemalism gives definition to the self-constitution of Islamist actors. Islamism, then, in countries that have been exposed to a Kemalist project, becomes a social movement for ‘the formation of the Muslim subject and agency which has been excluded from modernist [Western] definitions of civilization and history-making’ (Göle, 1996: 26).

Second, and just as significant, the perpetuation of a divide between Islam and modernity is facilitated by the radical but related ambiguity of the two terms. This ambiguity exists not merely in the vast controversy over the very definition of modernity – i.e. over what constitutes its essential characteristics – but also in how these different interpretations morally evaluate their visions. Behold Weber, against those who in his name would both simplify and eulogize modernity as the rise of science and ‘rationality’ – ‘specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved’ (1985: 182). In the clash of civilizations is such a potential nightmare worth defending? Yet even if a tentative definition of modernity’s key features could be agreed upon, Çağlar Keyder’s distinction between ‘modernization as a self-generating societal process’ (1997: 39) and its indigenous reconstruction by post-colonial state elites as nationalist projects of social engineering would need to be addressed.

In gesturing, then, to the duality of modernity as both a process of historical transformation and a ‘philosophical and civilizational ideal’ (Pippin, 1997: 1), I intend in this article to examine more closely the work of one particular influential thinker as an exemplar of a wider genre of arguments about Western modernity and the relation of Islamist politics to it. To do so I have chosen the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, born to Greek parents in Istanbul in 1922, the very year that war between Greece and the Turkish Nationalists swung dramatically in favour of the forces led by Mustafa Kemal with the taking and burning of the city of Smyrna (now modern day Izmir). Castoriadis’ work, described by Curtis in his Foreword to The Castoriadis Reader as a political ‘project of autonomy’, privileges issues of heteronomy and autonomy in his thinking about society. It also strongly demarcates the cultural specificity of the West, with which his work, directly or indirectly, is concerned.

In The Imaginary Institution of Society (1997d), as well as in other works, Castoriadis develops two intersecting terms, the radical and the social imaginary. And yet as Arnason has argued, his reflection upon them is dependent on a ‘specific precomprehension of modernity’ (Arnason, 1989: 323). For Castoriadis the social imaginary is not an image of something, but more the ontological cause of the ‘unceasing and essentially undetermined . . . creation of figures/forms/images on the basis of which alone there could ever be a question of anything. What we call ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are its works’ (1997d: 5). The social imaginary might be seen as a more particular
expression of the radical imaginary, responsible for the self-creation of any
given society through its instituting of values, symbols, even a certain world-
order. For Castoriadis, society's creation of its own existence is not a response
to any prior universal, ecological or functional need: society 'makes use in
each case of the rational lines of what is given, but arranges them according
to and subordinates them to significations which themselves do not belong
to the rational order . . . but to the imaginary' (1997d: 149).

Imaginary significations are constitutive then of all societies. An auton-
omous society by contrast is one that is ‘origin of the significations it creates
– of its institution – and it knows itself as such’ (my emphasis). Similarly, an
autonomous subject is one who ‘post[s] one’s own law for oneself’ (Casto-
riadis, 1997f: 328). Consequently for Castoriadis religion par excellence is the
imaginary institution that precludes society's knowledge of itself as self-
creation. This is because religion posits an extra-social source for its organi-
sation of society that occludes its own work. Islam, then, shares in this closure
of society to its own constitution of social existence, to its own creation of
laws and institutions. Yet in a broader sense all societies (bar two incomplete
but significant exceptions) are ‘religious’: appeals to laws of historical
development, notions of [human] nature or eternal psychical drives, utility,
biological needs and even rationality may play the same role as the postu-
late ‘God’ in covering over society’s self-institution.

These two incomplete exceptions are the city-states of ancient Greece
and Western modernity respectively, glossed occasionally by Castoriadis as
the Greco-Western institution of society. For Castoriadis the main importance
of the West, apart from the fact that the world has been unified by means of
its violence, is that it is the only society ‘to have put itself in question’ (1991:
200). Accordingly, his strong defense of Greco-Western modernity as the sole
autonomous society excludes by definition the possibility of Islamic or any
other instituted society’s autonomy, as well as their potential status as alterna-
tive, even mutated modernities. Indeed, Islam and Islamist movements
receive particularly unsympathetic mention in his writing: see for example
his lumping together of ‘two world wars, gas chambers, the Gulag, Pol Pot,

For Castoriadis, then, Islam and its magma of imaginary significations,
is characterized/caricatured by heteronomy, which the onset of the modern
ruptures, even explodes. Certainly, we might wish to query the association
commonly made between autonomy and Greco-Western modernity, even to
deconstruct such a narrative as modernity’s (or its analysts’) own self-consti-
tuting myth. More importantly for our purposes, however, if we can show
that Islamist movements too are animated by some ideal of autonomy, their
modernity, at least in Castoriadis’ terms, should be accepted. Indeed, in
the light of what I will argue is an expression of autonomy in Islamist
movements, the ambiguous nature of both Castoriadis’ ideal of autonomy and
of the ideal of autonomy per se is illumined. Contra Castoriadis, I hope to
demonstrate the modernity of Islamism, yet also to show that it is this very modernity that so often gives rise to apprehension about it.

II

How then might Islamist politics in Kemalist contexts be seen as producing social movements that institute autonomy, despite what Nafissi claims is their desire to introduce a law whose precepts are claimed as bestowed by God? We can fashion an answer by beginning with a brief general comment on the social imaginary. We will then proceed by thinking more specifically about the Islamist movement in Turkey. First we might note that in the very process of society’s self-constitution through its creation of imaginary significations, the institution of specific ‘ends’ or meanings that organize social life – whether these be autonomy, or the unlimited expansion of ‘rational’ mastery, or loving God and enjoying him forever etc. – are simultaneously posited as moral goods. To the extent that such significations produce virtuous subjects, i.e. subjects who give their assent to the form of the good proclaimed by the imaginary signification or ‘virtuosity’, they also produce the possibility of dissenting subjects. Castoriadis puts it another way, but immediately qualifies its implications: ‘since signification instaurates these questions [the why and the wherefore] as catholic and universal, it always runs the risk of them rebounding upon itself’ (1997f: 311). That is, against Castoriadis’ valorizing of the Greco-Western institution, in every imaginary institution of society an elementary potentiality of autonomy is created.

Second, we might also ask about a more specific historically-determined autonomy, engendered not so much by the promise of the modern but by the ‘disappointment of tradition’. Here an autonomy engendered by ‘tradition’ is caused by the gap between the gendered scripts of love, honour, duty, shame etc. that condition a particular society and the frustration, even moral outrage, occasioned by incompetent, manipulative, or mad/bad husbands, fathers, brothers. We are signalling here towards a more ethnographically oriented theory of autonomy, caused in part by the social signification of self-willed and voluntary submission as an honourable act, and its degradation by the ingratitude or dishonour of superiors who exploit such modesty. In her work on women’s biography in India, Das suggests that ‘one produces oneself as a subject by the reflexive awareness of being subjugated to the tyranny of stories to which one owes little allegiance’ (1994: 61, emphasis in original). True, partial reflexive awareness may offer limited scope for autonomous action – again, an ethnographic account might tease out the constraints. But the impassive face of resignation presented to the world in order to avoid the humiliation of a public unveiling of one’s weakness should not be equated with an unambiguous resignation to the codes of honour and shame that institute the social. Indeed, Scott (1990) makes the point that it is precisely because the patriarch suspects the integrity of the obedience
exacted from the weak that he often accuses them of deceit and untrustworthiness, of mockery and provocation, in their performance of the rituals of submission. In short, the autonomy engendered by the 'disappointment of tradition' allows for an intimation of the self as separate from a fragile social order. Indeed, if this were not the case it would be difficult to explain how subjects, given the opportunities that the contingencies of life sometimes bring, are able to contrive at their own liberty. This against Castoriadis' formal equation between the imaginary institution of society and the individuals it 'fabricates', in which the fantasy of heteronomy as the individual's subsumption within society's closure of meaning is implied.

In brief, Castoriadis, despite his stress on the creativity of the social imaginary, overstates the coherence and hold social imaginary significations have on the world they institute and on the subjects they fabricate. This is a general point for all instituting societies. More particularly we have argued that the disappointment of tradition oftentimes leads to an intimation of autonomy – that is, to a sense of the arbitrariness of social conventions – as well. This is ironic, as the supposed re-traditionalizing impulse, and hence the drive towards closure often attributed to Islamist movements, is usually ascribed first to the disenchantment of tradition and then to a disillusionment with the modernity that replaces it (i.e. Gülalp, 1997; Touraine, 1995). But let us now think more particularly about how Islamist subjects in Turkey might be animated by an ideal of autonomy.

III

What particular reasons are there for arguing that Islamism as a movement institutes autonomy? We might hazard an answer by first returning to Castoriadis’ homology between autonomous society (however partial) and its new anthropological type. For each, the lucid recognition of their own self-institution is paramount. This translates of course as a potential for conflict between self-instituting society in its election of its laws, norms and values, and those of the subject similarly explicitly positing her own law for herself (not to mention between those autonomous subjects themselves). To what extent should the subject acquiesce, even if in dispute with them, in the particular significations created by society in its explicit self-institution, before her own autonomy is threatened? For Castoriadis the possibility of genuine participation provides the key:

I may be able to recognize the laws that have been enacted as my laws, even when I am not in agreement with their content, because I had the effective possibility of participating in the formation of what becomes the common opinion of the collectivity. (1997a: 122)

In such a situation, the autonomous subject, though not in agreement with their content, acquiesces to the laws formulated by the collective. The
heart of the matter is whether such acquiescence or self-limitation is consciously willed, not unconsciously driven.

If we apply this distinction to the making of an Islamist social movement we realize that becoming Islamist in a Kemalist context entails a lucid critique of the perceived heteronomous nature of both ‘traditional’ Islam and the statist Islam of Kemalist polities. That is, Islamism opposes Muslim ignorance and superstition as much as it derides the possibility of people’s genuine participation in the instituting of law in Kemalist republics. In this context becoming an Islamist involves a consciously willed conformity to a law formulated outside oneself; in this case not to the law of the reforming bureaucracy, nor of the majority, but of Allah.

Yet Castoriadis would object and say that what is important is not a chosen and voluntary self-limitation per se, or even the opportunity to choose one’s Gods: it is the discussability of the law itself. True, the outcome of such discussion will mean voluntary submission for a dissenting minority, but the very fact of the law’s mutability is the guarantor of its provisional status. The Islamist’s conscious submission to the sharia by contrast does not imply the relativizing of the law, as its content is in principle non-negotiable. In sum, self-limitation is vital in order to acquiesce to the law of others. But equally vital is the justification for acquiescence: the opportunity to be fully involved in the law-instituting process. The pre-condition of involvement is legal mutability. The key question becomes then, is Islamic law immutable, as the critique of fundamentalism so often asserts?

Here we come to the crux of the problem. To what extent is Islamic Law or the sharia a list of commandments, to which the believer, having once accepted its transcendental origin, can only submit? Is Castoriadis correct when he remarks that in Islamic religion there is a ‘proclamation of mental and psychic slavery’? (1981: 21). Or is the sharia capable of ‘fabricating’ autonomous subjects, unintentionally through the ‘disappointment of tradition’ for those dominated by its gendered ordering of an ideal world, but more importantly through a space it institutes for reflection on the critical applicability of its pronouncements?

To begin with, we need to remember that the sharia is not a single legal system but a plurality or partnership of related but distinct traditions of jurisprudence. Consequently Hanefi, Safi, Alevi, Maliki etc. legal traditions may sometimes contradict each other, may even reject the conclusions of the ulama of rival traditions. ‘It is meritorious to make an interpretation, even if wrong. But for those who perceive rightly there is even more merit,’ reports a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. ‘Difference of opinion in my community is a [manifestation of divine] mercy’ says another (Messick, 1996: 269). ‘The sharia is never closed,’ says Olivier Roy, ‘for it is based not on a core of concepts, but rather on an ensemble of precepts which is at times general, at times precise, and which expands to include the totality of human acts through induction, analogy, extension, commentary, and interpretation’
Similarly, given the lack of any Appellate Tribunal, any church courts, any Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the *fetva* (legal opinion) of individual courts or jurists can always be annulled by subsequent judgements. When in 1920 the Istanbul Seyhülislam pronounced in a *fetva* that Mustafa Kemal was a rebel, Mustafa Kemal organized a retaliatory *fetva* from the Ankara Münifi declaring the Istanbul government traitors in return (Zürcher, 1995: 222).

The *sharia* then in Roy’s suggestive phrase is an ‘autonomous, infinite commentary’ and its two distinguishing features, ‘no institutional closure, [and] no conceptual closure’ (Roy, 1994: 10) make heteronomy impossible. Indeed, the logic of the *sharia*, with its minimal number of clear interdictions, and maximal scope for the interpretative extension of key precepts to particular situations, means that any freezing of the ulama’s ‘arbitrary’ decisions arises not so much from the essential characteristics of the *sharia*, but from the historic institutionalizing of a particular legal tradition or method of exegesis or from the hegemony of a particular interpretation. Whether this lack of institutional and conceptual closure ironically encourages modern Islamist states (Saudi Arabia?) or groups to force such closure is another question. Paradoxically, the provisionality of law-making allows some Islamist groups to interpret the Quran as affirming a radical negation of human autonomy.

Contrary then to Castoriadis’ accusation of the immutability of the law of God, the majority of strictures governing the believer’s conduct is in both theory and practice debatable and hence revisable. ‘In the gap between divine plan and human understanding lies the perennially fertile space of critique, the locus of an entire politics articulated in the idiom of the *sharia*’ (Messick, 1996: 17; see also Al-Azmeh, 1993: 10ff). This is the space in which Islamic modernism, for example, or Islamist feminism reverberates. For some Islamic feminists the principles of the *sharia* are not unjust; the problem is the way they have been historically inscribed in the inherently disputable commentaries on the one true Text (Quran). Yet even the conviction of the binding truthfulness of the Quran does not relieve the lawyer from the task of textual discrimination: indeed, many Islamic scholars do not rule out the possibility that certain parts of the Quran are more central than others (Goldziher, 1981: 12ff).

More interestingly, the accepted practice of suspending the application of a verse from the Quran – the principle of *naskh* – in favour of verses subsequently revealed means disputation over the utilization of textual abrogation is ongoing. ‘It is as if the abrogated verses were abrogated in accordance with the needs of the time,’ writes the late jurist Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, ‘and postponed until their appropriate time comes. When it does, they become the suitable and operative verses and are implemented, while those that were implemented in the seventh century become abrogated’ (in An Na’im, 1990: 60–61). In other words, even verses of the Quran may be repealed in favour of others. Recognition in Islamic jurisprudence of the
derivativeness of the practical law and hence its intrinsic mutability entitles the individual to say aloud, ‘Is this law just?’ This contra Castoriadis’ insistence that the question can only be asked by the societies of Western Europe (Castoriadis, 1997b: 18). In brief, it is not fatal for Islamic autonomy that the law is understood, in theory, as given externally. What is important is the fact of its requiring interpretation. The external foundation of the law might be accepted in principle: the live debate is over what it is that one accepts. In this debate the practical law is understood as humanly legislated (self-given) and its lucid critique a legal requirement.

In a different but related vein we might note too that much orientalist commentary on the practice of Islamic law condemns not the slavish legality of the qadi (judge) but his apparent inordinate discretion. Thus Goldziher criticizes the ‘mental gymnastics of [ulema] casuistry’ for proving ‘detrimen-tal to the inwardness of religion’, an inwardness linked for him to humble devotion to the word of God, not to the ingenious interpretations of the ‘quibbling religious lawyers’ (1981: 63ff). Weber, too, appeared to favour such an interpretation, when he coined the term kadijustiz: here Islamic law’s distinguishing insufficiency is its ‘judicial legitimacy in which judges never refer to a settled group of norms or rules but are simply licensed to decide each case according to what they see as its individual merits’ (Rosen, 1989: 59). In this reading irresponsible autonomy (judicial activism), not unquestionable conformity or inability to ask whether the law is just, characterizes Islamic legal practice.

Indeed, one wonders whether the tension between a law divinely relayed and its mutability by human legal innovation constitutes an internal reason for the ongoing felt contradiction between Islam and modernity: this new conflict enters an already politicized and in principle unfore closable space. To put it polemically, the distinction institutes a form of public sphere for those recognized as qualified to participate in it. (Castoriadis, typically, sees philosophy not only in Islam but also in India, China and in Buddhism as concealed within its own self-enclosed agora [cf. Castoriadis, 1997c: 111]). It was precisely this unfinished character of sharia jurisprudence that drew the ire of legal reformers in the Ottoman Tanzimat (modernization): the 1869 Ottoman committee charged with drafting a short and perusable civil code described the sharia as an ‘ocean without shores’ (Messick, 1996: 54). In his stark contrast between autonomous and heteronomous societies it is ironic but not surprising that Castoriadis is blind to the modernist rationalization of sharia law as an expression of expanding rational mastery over and against an existing autonomy.

IV

If the working principles of Islamic jurisprudence create some form of public space, the key question circles around who is qualified to participate
in this interpreting and legislating of law. That is, is legal autonomy and an Islamic public sphere reserved only for the ulama? In this section I want to anticipate an objection to my bird’s-eye sketch of the historic and geographic anarchy of legal methods, jurisprudence (fikir) schools, fetva pronouncements, textual interpretations and sciences of hadith found scattered across Muslim-majority societies. The objection might run along the lines that although the provisionality of law sounds fine in theory, in practice Islamic jurisprudence is always historically mediated through particular hegemonic local, national or imperial centres who actively propagate their brand of Islam not as interpretation but as Islam per se. We will then ask a similar question of contemporary Islamizing movements: do they not seek to curtail autonomy, conflating their humanly produced and elaborated sharia with the divine sharia? Or do Islamist movements allow for the role of creativity – for that is what interpretation is – in their call for the reinvigorating or transformation of the sharia?

Yet to answer the question too parochially is misleading: the historical diversity of official and unofficial Islamic authority simply means that institutions and strategies for reading and interpreting are not universal across Muslim societies. Nevertheless, perhaps we can hazard three generalizations. First, women are not permitted to become jurists or to legislate, although like all believers they are enjoined to study the Koran and fikir (An-Na’im, 1990: 95, 99). They are permitted to become teachers and scholars, and hence to participate (in absentia) in the unfinished process of textual production and interpretation. But they are not allowed to preside over the official institution of sharia courts. (Even in the contemporary Turkish Republic, women, although studying at the university theological schools, are unable to become hodjas in the mosque.) At a minimum, then, women are denied full opportunity to master sharia jurisprudence: historically, restrictions on their movement and religious performance in the public sphere meant that they were unable to travel to study at the feet of teachers or at medrese of particular note. Despite the textual open-endedness of the sharia, women, in Castoriadis’ terms, do not have the effective possibility of participating in the instituting of laws according to which they live.

Second, although of course historically the majority of Muslims were illiterate – and in non-Arabic-speaking areas, were unable to understand holy writ when read aloud – the Quran, sharia manuals, and even the commentaries were taught to be memorized and recited. ‘Recite in the name of your Lord who created – created man from clots of blood. Recite!’ says the first revelation of God to Muhammad. But memorization included not just the original source but textual additions, omissions and alternative formulations. In this way, the mechanics of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ were literally built into the texts. Obviously this does not alleviate the excluding effects of illiteracy, but for those who have completed medrese education some
knowledge of interpretive principles or method – even if only for sorting out authentic from inauthentic badīb – is assumed.

Third, шaria jurisprudence has always co-existed uneasily with local practices and ethics, variously labelled folk, illiterate, or rural Islam and sometimes, though this is not quite the same, women’s Islam (Bringa, 1995: 229). This co-existence has coincided with the antagonistic reciprocity between urban/religious centres and rural peripheries. Yet the legal school(s) of hegemonic urban centres themselves have been internally divided into various streams, with an attendant relativizing of their claims. Indeed for Schacht, the diversity of legal opinions between different jurists of the same school – all regarded as valid and legitimate – means that the Muslim may choose according to his or her own individual conscience (Schacht, 1964: 68). Not surprisingly, a thorough attempt at religious standardization has only become possible with the rise of territorially sovereign nation states (see Tapper and Tapper, 1991, for the decrease in saint cults in republican Turkey). Pre-modern ‘Muslim states, however autocratic in theory, in practice had to accommodate themselves to the local autonomy of self-administering tribes’ (Gellner, 1992: 9).

To return to the first of our questions, who then is able to participate in the public space fashioned around the making of law? In brief, autonomy, or the ability to call into question the established legal interpretation (ijtiḥād) is reserved for those (males) who can master the law. However, charismatic women bodjus can also deliver a fetva, albeit generally limited to issues pertaining to the domestic sphere, or on questions of female decorum vis-à-vis men. This limitation of the right of ijtiḥād does not preclude the possibility that knowledge of the provisionality of the law’s pronouncements, especially fetva, is widespread within Muslim society. Even ‘bodja-hopping’, the serial visiting to those bodjus reputed to be powerful in treating illness, possession, fertility and marriage problems, implies a certain doubting faith in the prescriptions handed down with the amulets and the quotations from the Quran. Islamic law is institutionally open to critique, but closed to the performative autonomy of women in the public sphere.

And what of contemporary Islamist movements themselves in Kemalist contexts? To what extent do they acknowledge the plurality of Islamic law in their calls for шaria, and educate their discerning members (including women) to be informed participants in the proposed instituting of laws that bind them? I will offer three emblematic examples from my fieldwork in Istanbul to illustrate the contestation over Islamic authority in everyday Turkish life. In the final section we will focus on the autonomy or otherwise of the imagined collective Islamist subject.

First, in 1997, the Diyanet Bakanlıği (Religious Affairs Bureau) brought down a fetva, declaring that the eating of prawns was caiz (legal). An Islamist friend joked how disappointed he was: ‘What a shame, I’ll have to stop eating them now.’ The implication was of course that if the Diyanet Bakanlıği gave
permission for their consumption it must be wrong. (Not that he could afford to buy them either way.)

Again, staying at a friend’s house during Ramadan and rising before dawn to eat sahur, I noticed his bodja mother calmly continuing to eat after the dawn call-to-prayer sounded from the loudspeakers of the nearby mosque. ‘Don’t worry’, she said, ‘my fetva is more powerful than his. He started early so he can go back to bed.’

Last, sitting in the water shop of a bodja friend – he was the bodja at an historic Istanbul mosque, but with Turkey’s galloping inflation found it impossible to support his family on the salary of the Diyanet Bakanlığı – I witnessed an old man come in and ask him a question. ‘If you are doing namaz [prayers] and somebody knocks on your door before you finish, do you have to start from the beginning if you get up to let them in?’ ‘Certainly’, replied the Hodja. ‘I’m in debt [to Allah],’ said the old man.

Legitimate religious authority in contemporary Istanbul, then, if these naive vignettes are anything to go by, is both weak and fragmented. For self-conscious sympathizers of the Islamist critique of the Turkish Republic, the bureaucrat-bodjas in the state’s Diyanet Bakanlığı are religious wolves in sheep’s clothing. For the less well-educated women religious experts in every suburb who read the Koran in Ramadan, at circumcisions or at funeral anniversaries etc., the official bodjas may be rivals for the spoils that flow from the performance of religious ceremonies. For worshippers at the mosques, on the other hand, the bodjas are legitimate sources of knowledge concerning the techniques of everyday religious practice. Plainly, laicism’s vivifying of Islam to support the Republican state is not universally accepted. Indeed, argument over the demands of Islam means both Islamists and secularists possess a vocabulary with which to critique the law-making efforts of the other. Castoriadis’ claim that all societies bar the Greco-Western are ignorant of their own social-historical being – ‘everything happens as if society were unable to recognize itself as making itself’ (Castoriadis, 1997d: 213) – hardly applies to a context where dual sets of competing imaginary significations (and the third and fourth ways that mediate between them) square off to each other. Contemporary Islamism exists in a context of multiple and contested ‘unifying principles’ with a related self-consciousness over one’s commitment to them.

V

In this final section we will examine the relation between Islamism and autonomy not in terms of the varying ability of individual Islamist subjects to explicitly determine new Islamic rules, principles and meanings in a Kemalist context, but in terms of the desired autonomy of the collective Islamist subject. To put it slightly differently, how is the ‘self’ in Islamist self-determination extended to encompass a corporate identity? (Ambrose, 1998b)
As we have seen, the relationship between the autonomy of the individual and of the collective is a key issue for Castoriadis. By contrast, Nietzsche’s transvaluation of values, to take a different formulation of autonomy, is a vision of self-legislation seemingly hostile in its very bones to the idea of collective autonomy. For Nietzsche, idealism and metaphysics are contemptible precisely because they project human-created values outside of humanity to some transcendental realm. The death of God is the realization that the conferral of values comes from the creature, including the idea of Creator. The vista unveiled by this news is both liberating and demoralizing: liberating for the strong who can identify with the activity of conferring and creating values, demoralizing for the weak who cannot do without treasure in heaven, nor stare down the meaninglessness of creaturely finitude (Ambrose, 1998a). Autonomy as self-overcoming through transvaluation, as the ceaseless positing and destroying of values, is what constitutes both the self and act of the Übermensch. ‘It is a measure of the degree of strength of will to what extent one can do without meanings in things, to what extent one can endure to live in a meaningless world’ (Nietzsche, 1968: 318). The autonomy of the collective, on the other hand, can have no permanent basis for constitution: its banding together according to a contingent willed value and disbanding as that value is simultaneously undone [transvalued] means its existence and autonomy is fleeting. A Nietzschean collective Islamist subject could only be seen in its self-dissolution, an exploding firework whose mark is traced across the sky as it fades away.

And yet in a Kemalist context is an Islamist Übermensch such a foreign idea? What of Islamism’s project to create a purified political subject, a new creation cut free from the superstitious ‘folk beliefs’ of traditional Islam, from a contaminating West and the compromising encumbrances of any particular ethnic background? Here Islamist autonomy is won through a ‘self-extinguishing creative act’ (Ambrose, 1998a), callousness towards one’s old identity, and a willful embracing of a new identity which brooks no rival loyalties. Indeed the archetypal expression of such a creative but self-destroying act is of course the suicide bomber, who like Nietzsche’s ideal philosopher becomes in himself ‘a terrible explosive, endangering everything’ (Nietzsche, 1989: 281). To be sure, Turkey’s Islamist movement, unlike those in some other places, until very recently had not produced such a prodigy. Yet there is something of this willed ‘self-execution’ (Ambrose, 1998a) in the claim of Islamist writer Nihat Nasir that

apart from my Islamic identity I do not in the slightest degree find as a pretext for praise or pride any value in being a Turk or a Kurd, a Laz, an Arab, a Circassian, Cossack or indeed any ethnicity, and I openly deride and condemn anyone who does. Even if I have to stand alone, I announce that I give no importance to anything except being a Muslim. (Yeni Safak, 17 November, 1996)

Here the writer’s fantasy of his self-projection as a singular subject detached

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from history or culture is palpable, as is the rejection of his embeddedness in his own particular context.

But can his autonomy as a ‘singular subject [not] slide over into a collective one’ (Ambrose, 2003), the autonomy of the Islamist movement purging itself from ethnic/nationalist or Western contaminants? Can the self denoted in the demand for self-determination not swell to encompass the ummah? Here the effect is the same: creative self-extinguishment issues in the autonomy of a new ‘communal-particular subject’ (Ambrose, 2003), which cannot abide any plurality in its professed unity. In this regard Islamism as utopia is engaged in a search for purity, as any degree of hybridity necessitates a counter-movement toward disentanglement (Ambrose, 2003). This drive towards purity is simultaneously a plea for autonomy, as the sought-after and divinely inspired order legislates only according to its own imaginary significations and principles, and not those of the West. As long as the Westernization of the Muslim is pursued by the institutions producing secularism in Kemalist polities – the education system, universities, Palace of Justice, media technologies, the sports stadium etc. – the Nietzschean moment of oppositionary collective Islamist autonomy is willed again and again.

Thus in the name of a more inclusive or authentic social contract Islamism might reject notions of a collective national identity as the basis for state sovereignty in Muslim lands, but it can hardly give up on the ideal or imaginary signification of autonomy and sovereignty per se. Ironically, however, neither can it attain its own purity, at least not while the modern signification of autonomy itself remains an explicit goal. Indeed in desiring to be free from Kemalist law and hence to become a law unto itself, Islamism’s rootedness in modernity is revealed. Autonomy here is activated in the form of both an individual and collective subject (Ambrose, 1998b) – the ruled making the rules that will rule them, as the agitating spirit of autonomy urges. For as people become voluntarist, not traditional Muslims, the Islamic law instituted by their struggle is presented as their own self-legislation.

In contrast to Nietzsche, Castoriadis does not pit the heroic collective or individual subject against the [Kemalist] mass but rather ties the autonomy of the individual and the society together. For him an individual can only be autonomous in an autonomous society, a society that renders its self-instituted laws explicit and hence transforms the inertia of the already instituted according to its own elected desires. Individual autonomy is collective autonomy writ small. On the other hand, Castoriadis might not reject the idea of a fleeting but recurring Nietzschean oppositional collective subject out of hand – historically and sociologically from where do altered significations or new imagined institutions for societies arise? Accordingly, he may not reject the limited autonomy of a creative individual either: somewhere he remarks that the constellation of significations constituting Christianity was invented
by the apostle Paul. Sociological and historical elucidation of the creation and development of new social-historical forms by the radical imaginary can be ‘personalized’ to encompass those constituted by their carrying of those forms (cf. Castoriadis, 1997b: 16 and the emergence of the protobourgeoisie in the 12th century).

But where Nietzsche and Castoriadis uncontrovertibly diverge is in Castoriadis’ conviction that ‘the project of autonomy is quite literally also a project of self-limitation’ (1997a: 95). Unlike the autonomy unto death of the Nietzschean subject – ‘the great human being is a finale, one who ‘flows out . . . overflows . . . uses himself up’ (1976: 548) – the autonomous agency of the Castoriadian society is self-restraining. This restraint has two sides:

the limitation by the society on what it considers unacceptable wishes, tendencies, acts etc. of this or that part of its members; but also the self-limitation of society itself in the regulating and governing of society, in the legislation which it exercises over its members. (Castoriadis, 1981: 19)

Though not specified here, the autonomous individual too must be self-limiting. The individual, if given the real possibility of participating in the instituting of the law, will call that law her own even if in disagreement with it.

We can read then what Castoriadis thinks about a self-extinguishing Islamist suicide bomber (cf. his ‘religious fanatic who drives an explosives-filled truck against an embassy’s gates’ 1990: 84). And yet if by definition Castoriadis refuses to consider the self-execution of an Islamist bomber to be an act of autonomy, what of the suicide of Socrates? Says Castoriadis:

To be a subject is to cathect one’s own identity . . . . It is for this reason that Socrates accepts to die – and it is for this reason that, in dying he saves himself too. He saves himself for himself: he saves his image, this being the triumphant return of self-finality in the disappearance of its ‘subject’. (1989: 39)

Is there a self-restraint in the suicide of Castoriadis’ Socrates? Or rather is there a mastering of the subject thus constituted in this very act? Does ‘choosing the hour, manner and purpose of one’s death’ (Ambrose, 2003) prove one’s autonomy, or on the contrary reveal one’s inspiration by the ideal of rational mastery? For the pursuit of rational mastery implies not merely the reduction of the world or nature to an object of control, but the reduction of the self as well: in calculating one’s own suicide even death is secured as an object of mastery. Still, we should not overdraw the parallel between Socrates and the Islamist suicide: Socrates does not harm others in his choosing to submit to the laws of the city.

Nevertheless, regardless of how one interprets Socrates’ death or that of the suicide bomber’s, the answer is irrelevant for the question of Islamism’s modernity. For Castoriadis the conflicting projects of autonomy (democracy) and of the unlimited expansion of ‘rational’ mastery (capitalism) are the core constituting imaginary significations of modernity. Whether Islamist suicide is oriented, then, to autonomy or to mastery, and whether it entails an actual
death or a metaphorical one in the passing away of the old self and the birth
of the new, its animation by modernity’s central significations is not in doubt.
But the fact that the act is open to a dual interpretation suggests that the sig-
nification of autonomy is not implacably opposed to that of rational mastery
as Castoriadis maintains, but shares some of the same ideals (see also
Arnason, 2001). If in one manifestation autonomy is confined to the lucid
process of creative positing, in another it becomes instead a spur to unmedi-
ated (self-)mastery. In other words, self-limitation requires self-control, which
requires rational mastery over the self.

For Castoriadis, by contrast, the dual institutions of modernity are irre-
ducible to each other. The case of their seeming correspondence in, say,
Soviet-type societies means instead that the project of autonomy has been
stained, contaminated or perverted by the project of rational mastery (cf. Cas-
toriadis, 1997e: 95). The solution is to purify the ideal, to disentangle it from
promising assimilation with an imaginary that attempts to reduce the
world to an object of rational mastery (Ambrose, 1998b). And yet, as we have
seen, the appeal to purity moves in an opposite direction to self-
limitation. To what extent can the plea for self-limitation withstand the demand
of autonomy that one makes one’s law for oneself? Rather than accede to self-
limits, the logic of autonomy pushes inexorably towards the abolition of any
constraints on its realization, whether they be inscribed as tradition, custom,
society (as instituted heteronomy), or even willed self-limits. In sum, in place
of Castoriadis’ conception of modernity as a dual institution we might posit a
duality or an internal bifurcation in the imaginary signification of autonomy
itself, the imaginary signification narrated as the constituting value, in both its
oppressive and liberating moments, of the institution of modernity.

Where does this leave us with Islamism? We have seen, contra Castori-
adis and his accusations of heteronomy, that Islam institutes an arena for the
lucid self-institution of law (i.e. fikir) within the constraints of the basic
precepts of the sharia. How important this constraint is remains a disputed
question. Nevertheless, I would argue the necessity of legal interpretation
means the practice of legislating and law reform is more significant than the
formal conviction that the principles of the law are externally derived. The
practical autonomy instituted through such a process suggests minimally that
Castoriadis’ definition of social heteronomy is untenable. It also suggests his
ideal of autonomy itself is overly promethean.11 Second, we have seen too
how within these parameters a political constraint is at work: the educational
institutions created to institute, judicate and reform the law are not open to
the equal participation of all members of the body politic or ummah but, just
as in ancient Greece, are practically closed to women.

Contemporary Islamism is another question: the high proportion of
women activists demonstrates a concern to educate women to critique
the discourse of femininity in ‘traditional’ Islam as much as in Kemalism.
Indeed, competing positions within the Islamist movement are rife – witness
the debate in Turkey over whether Islamist women students sacked from university for veiling should leave the political struggle for their reinstatement to males. ‘Muslim women’s cihat [holy war] is in the home’, claimed one particular writer (Düzda˘g, 1995: 51), as female Islamist students chanted in the streets. The differentiation in political practice between Islamists themselves means Islamism needs to be ethnographically studied rather than philosophically derided (i.e. Castoriadis).

As much, then, as the ambiguity between Islam and modernity alluded to in the title of the Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam may be attributed to the heteronomy of Islamism, it may alternatively be related to its inspiration by the internally riven ideal of autonomy itself. Islamist movements that appeal to the value of authenticity, to the purification of Muslim populations from heteronomous elements that compromise the ‘collective-particular’s’ electing of its own values and norms, are as modern in their quest for self-determination as rival Kemalist nationalisms. And just as the nation provides education to enlighten those who are not fully cognizant of their unique status, so too does the community organizing itself in the name of the imagined ummah. This education may extend to a censoring of the superstitious ‘folk beliefs’ of peripheral or heterodox Islam. It may also seek to manipulate, even delegitimize, the plea for self-determination of Muslim ethnic minorities already suffering under the assimilationist project of nationalist secular regimes (see Houston, 2001, for the situation of Kurdish Muslims in Turkey). Indeed, perhaps it is the very extent to which Islamism and its proverbial bomber is dominated by the modern imaginary signification of autonomy – and not by other values like reciprocity, self-sacrifice, justice, love – that influences its inability to limit itself. In this case the issue is not the inability of Islamists to put into question the existing law – i.e. their absence of autonomy/modernity – but what it is that a self-instituting Islamist movement or society should legislate.

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Notes
1. This article is based on fieldwork funded by a Commonwealth of Australia scholarship and carried out in Istanbul between the years 1995 and 1996 and for a shorter period in 1998. Section V was written in close consultation with Charlie Ambrose, and is an application of his rich ideas to Islamist politics. In particular, my focus and use of Nietzsche in relation to Castoriadis, my description of the affinity between autonomy and purity, and the tracing of a homology between individual and communal autonomy derive from his work. More
specific debts are acknowledged in the text. Needless to say, Ambrose is not responsible for my rendering of his work.

2. See Fluehr-Loban (1992) for details on the sudden increase in publications on Islam post the Iranian revolution.

3. For example, one of the main themes of the Ottoman journal *Islam Mecmuasi* was the enslaving of Muslims by superstition and autocracy (see Arai, 1992: 83ff). In the light of the perceived rationality and order of the West, a significant few writers were inspired to despise prevailing Islamic institutions and habits. Countering this proto-Republican stream were writers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Said Nursi, whose admiration of selected aspects of the West sought a renaissance of Islam to prove its essentially rational world-view etc. For them the rise of secularism was a reflection of the *intrinsically* corruptibility and oppressiveness of Christianity and its priests, in contrast to the *contingent* degeneration of contemporary Islam.

4. One common response by ‘late-comers’ to the problem of modernization is to seek the reform or abolition of local traditions or customs that are posited as retarding development. Thus Mori Arinori, minister of education in Japan’s first cabinet government, proposed that the state should get rid of Japanese and replace it with English. Arnason comments that to the best of his knowledge ‘there is no other example of a nationalist reformer advocating the abolition of his own language’ (1987: 7). The Kemalists in Turkey, however, abolished the Arabic script overnight in 1928, as well as initiating the linguistic engineering of the incredible ‘word collection mobilization campaign’ in an effort to purge the language of all Arabic and Persian ‘loan’ words.


6. ‘Islamism’ in multicultural Western societies (where Muslims are a minority) has of course a different set of concerns and causes. See Berns McGowan (1999) for a recent comparison of Somali refugees and their varying revitalization of Islam in London and Toronto respectively.

7. As seen in his neo-Weberian argument that contemporary Islamism everywhere seeks to apply codes and practices based upon the *Sharia* (Nafissi, 1998).

8. Spellberg (1994) notes that neither Aisha, third and most beloved wife of the Prophet, nor her father, the ‘usurper’ Abu Bakr, are accepted as authoritative transmitters of *hadith* by Shi’i Muslims.

9. Of course, the same critique might be made of the experience of law making in the West; and Castoriadis himself has claimed that since roughly 1950 the West too has ‘ceased to put itself truly into question’ (1995: 99). The key difference, however, is this: autonomy, although ultimately a revolutionary project, is for Castoriadis a realistic possibility only for the West.

10. Contrary to Gellner’s claim (1992) that ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ represents the
universalization of high Islam, high Islam is often nationalized or Kemalized and becomes that against which Islamist movements define themselves.

11. The existence of an ‘indigenous’ autonomy in Islamic societies can be generalized, at least as an anthropological or ethnographic possibility to be investigated, to other societies as well. Rather than conceiving of heteronomy and autonomy as characterizing two types of societies – non-modern and modern – it is equally possible to assume forms of both operant in each and every society. We might still want to see autonomy as an elaborated ideal in the West, but this is not to negate its presence as a social practice or reality in other societies. True, we can think about its varying influence in different contexts, but this does not require us to make ontological distinctions between societies that constitute them as radically anterior to each other.

References


