ISLAMISM REVISITED: A LACANIAN DISCOURSE CRITIQUE

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Summary: The aim of this article is to highlight the relevance of Lacanian psychoanalysis for an understanding of Islamism, unfolding its discursive-ideological complexity. In an attempt to reply to Fethi Benslama's recent exploration of the function of the father in Islam, I suggest that Benslama's argument about the 'delusional' character of Islamism and the link he envisages between the emergence of Islamism and the crisis of 'traditional' authoritative systems, should be further investigated so as to avoid potential risks of essentialism. A different reading of Islamism is proposed, which valorizes 'creative' attempts by Islamist groups to re-organize the social imaginary within the realm of a symbolic economy, thereby positivising the desedimenting effects of the real in different ways. Notions such as capitonage, fantasy, desire, and jouissance are essential for us to understand how Islamist trajectories diversify as distinct discursive formations, thereby revealing the psychoanalytical significance of Islam as a master signifier.

Key words: Islam – Lacan – Discourse – Father - Master signifier – *Jouissance*

In recent years a number of studies have integrated a psychoanalytical account of the subject within the 'constructivist' interest in the formation of identity. For instance, in response to the 'modernist' attempt to describe how symbols, values and meanings are articulated in the 'construction' of national narratives, Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras have stressed the need to understand the psychoanalytical factors accounting for the salience, 'depth and longevity of national identifications' (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 147)[1].

Despite the increasing interest in psychoanalysis as a theoretical tool in the interpretation of political phenomena, this approach has remained substantially unexplored in the context of Islamic issues in general, and Islamism as a specific ideological formation. In addition, a longstanding suspicion of psychoanalysis has been manifest within Islamic settings. Much of the scepticism seems to derive from the common assumption that psychoanalysis propagates secularism. A case in point is Malik Babikir Badri, an Islamic therapist writing on the popular website *Islam Online*. According to him, while religion teaches that humans have souls, 'Freud demolished this conception and denied the existence of God, the soul, the here-after and human free will' (Badri 2002).

The precise aim of this article is to make the case for including psychoanalysis within the space of a social and political analysis of contemporary Islamist discourses, enriching the limited number of studies which have examined Islam from

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a psychoanalytic perspective (Benslama 2002; Žižek 2006a, 2006b; Hirt 1996; Pratt Ewing 1997; Jöttkandt and Copjec 2009). To do this, I will draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis to focus upon those factors that may enlighten our understanding of how Islamism is constructed as a complex discursive formation.

The broad argument underlying this article is that Islamism, as a discursive universe, is sustained by the master signifier 'Islam', which figures as the element around which a 'variety' of Islamist discourses are articulated. Looking beyond this semiotic and discursive stratum, the master signifier 'Islam' also retains a strong psychoanalytical focus, functioning as the *signifying image* of the subject upon which the self-representation of believers is constructed. This representation is essential for the diversification of the different modalities through which the cathectic investments of adherents are mobilized.

In the following pages, a psychoanalytical inquiry into Islamism will take as its point of departure Fethi Benslama's account of the function of the father in Islam (Benslama, 2010). I contend that Benslama's reading of Islamism should be further investigated so as to avoid potential risks of essentialism. Benslama asserts that Islamism constitutes a 'delusional' and 'melancholic' attempt to 'restore' the shield of religious illusion against the crisis of the traditional authoritative system. I will argue instead for the importance of highlighting the way in which a number of Islamist discourses, creatively, assertively or in a non-melancholic way, re-organize symbolic economy around the master signifier Islam, thereby reflecting the complexity of the Islamist discursive universe. The last part of the article will examine the different modalities through which several Islamist trajectories positivize the encounter with the real, mobilising *jouissance* for the purposes of the cathectic investment required to sustain each discursive-ideological configuration.

The Structuration of Islamist Discourses

Contemporary Islamism can be considered a revivalist trend whose constitutive features may be found in its intrinsic political 'projectuality' – that is, its tendency to translate its discursive universe into effective political projects. Islamism not only endeavours to 're-vive' religious feelings by ascribing them a substantial role in providing believers' lives with meaning and a sense of horizon. The peculiarity of this revivalist trend is that 'Islam' itself becomes the cornerstone of the political and social order.

A major question arises, however, when one starts tackling Islamism empirically. How to approach this complex universe made up of ideas, pamphlets, organisational and legislative provisions, as well as single adherents, social move-

ments, institutions, parties, etc.? The notion of 'discourse' offers here a useful analytical tool able to account for the inherent complexity of this religious and socio-political phenomenon.

In Ernesto Laclau's terms, a 'discourse' is a 'structured totality articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements', i.e. ideas as well as organisations, documents, etc. (Laclau 2006, p. 13). As he puts it elsewhere:

> the basic hypothesis of a discursive approach is that the very possibility of perception, thought and action depends on the structuration of a certain meaningful field which pre-exists any factual immediacy (Laclau 1993, p. 431).

To conceive of Islamism as a discourse is to uncover the structuring of the discursive field from which a range of social phenomena receive their particular meaning, and through which their very possibility is conferred. If we start with reference to 'Islam' itself, what does it then mean for Islamism to be considered as the discourse that primarily poses 'Islam' as the cornerstone of the political and social order?

In answer to this question, Bobby S. Sayyid assigned to Islam the discursive role of a *master signifier*. As Sayyid pointed out, it might be said that Islam functions as a central element in a plurality of discourses, i.e. *fiqh* (jurisprudence of Islamic law), Islamic theology, etc. (Sayyid 1997, p. 47). As the central element of a discourse, Islam assumes the universal function of the *nodal point* or *quilting point*, organising 'retroactively and prospectively' the range of signifiers that condense into that discourse (Lacan 1955–56/1993, p. 267). Such a mode of discursive organisation offers the illusion of a referent, temporarily freezing the fluctuation of signifiers and making a process of signification possible. A nodal point might also aspire to assume the universal position of a whole social and discursive system, conferring a fictional and provisional sense of closure to that system by way of a *unique signifying gesture*. This means suturing temporarily a definite social space, *representing* its discursive totality. The universal position that a nodal point covers here can best be grasped through the expression *master signifier*, which highlights the ability of the nodal point to 'order' a chain of signifiers, giving meaning to all the elements that compose it. This expression is particularly useful when considering the attempt of a nodal point to face a process of social and discursive desedimentation, representing the whole society, and therein allowing signification within its provisional frontiers. As Žižek puts it: 'Let us imagine a confused situation of social disintegration, in which the cohesive power of ideology loses its efficiency: in such a situation, the Master is the one who invents a new signifier, the famous 'quilting point,' which stabilizes the situation again and makes it readable' (Žižek 2006c, p. 37). In achieving this stabilization, the master signifier provides all identities circulating in that space with both a common discursive horizon and the *signifying image* upon which their self-representation is construct-

ed. Žižek defines the master-signifier as the sound – as Žižek says – that holds the community together; 'the Thing', which ontologically constitutes a community because subjects 'believe' in 'it' (Žižek 1990, p. 53). It is here that Islamism emerges as the discursive universe aimed at hegemonising a whole social horizon, transforming 'Islam' into the master signifier of the community.

A Psychoanalytical Reading of Islamist Articulations

In the light of a discourse-centred perspective, Islamism stands then as a unified yet 'complex' discursive universe. That is, one should acknowledge the 'plurality' of discursive manifestations in which the Islamist vision is expressed, each one aspiring to assume a universal position through a particular way of mobilising the master signifier 'Islam'. For each Islamist discourse, this means organising a particular manner of eliciting passions and identifications, thereby arousing a degree of affective investment. It is here that the analytical relationship between psychoanalysis and religion becomes crucial. By taking Freud's analysis of religion as a useful point of departure, I will now examine those psychoanalytical aspects that best sustain the force of the Islamist imaginary, allowing for a differentiation among key Islamist articulations.

According to Freud, religion grounds its 'inner force' and 'efficacy' in its capacity for illusion. Illusion is a force immanently related to desire and the actuality of imaginary formations (Freud 1927). It is the force of an energetic denial of reality through which a tutelary power modelled around the figure of the father is established to protect the subject from the anxiety of loss.

Freud's analysis of religion offers an interesting starting point from which to posit a Lacanian reading of Islamism. The Freudian illusion of a tutelary power of God at the base of religious representations promises to satisfy what Lacan described as the impossible task of fulfilling subjective lack. In this sense, the Islamist 'illusion' acts in the same way as any other discourse. Master signifiers always require the production of a specific idea of 'closure and fullness', functioning as '(impossible) ideals' around which a society is organized and centred (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 8). Given this impossibility, an inquiry into Islamist discourses should highlight the particular link established between their master signifier and the imaginary structure to which they refer. An examination should therefore be undertaken of the particular status that the figure of the father enjoys within religious representations, so as to address questions of origin and authority.

In the attempt to tackle such issues, Fethi Benslama has linked the emergence of Islamism to the progressive erosion of the traditional imaginary that followed

Islam's encounter with western modernity (Benslama 2002). Benslama identifies two major demands that his generation of Muslims articulated in the Tunisia of the 1960s. Firstly, the *desire of being another* – where 'the other' from the perspective of post-colonial populations was the West – materialising either in the direct replacement or in the re-articulation of Islamic tradition with modern language.

Secondly, Benslama recognizes an emerging demand for authenticity, or as he puts it, the *desperation of being a self*. What is advocated and asserted is a return to origin; that is, the attempt to restore the truth of Islamic law and tradition, thereby restoring the imaginary tutelary coordinates of religion:

> The torment of origin is a symptom of the undoing of the traditional solidarity between truth and law (*haqiqa* and *sharia*), leaving the subject with an excess of the real and *jouissance*, which horrifies him because he cannot find anything within his imaginary universe and antique symbolism to block its release. The appeal to origin reflects the hope of restoring the shield of religious illusion. (Benslama, 2002, p. 23).

In the above passage, the 'real' stands in opposition to the imaginary-symbolic as 'the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation' (Lacan 1966, p. 65). It is this mysterious, traumatic force, the 'nightmarish apparition' that always *exceeds* the symbolic of language, that reminds us of the very impossibility of mastering the constitutive lack of human experience (Žižek 2002, p. 19).

In addition, at the centre of Benslama's argument is the particular relation that the symbolic structure establishes with *jouissance*, the unlimited 'enjoyment' that we need to renounce once we enter the symbolic order. Here a basic distinction should be made between *jouissance* as the force sustaining the structure of desire and its symbolic economy (*phallic jouissance*) and *feminine jouissance*. On the one hand, *jouissance* stands as a 'painful pleasure' which is always excessive for the physical survival of the subject (Lacan, 1959–60, p. 184). This means that a homeostatic limit is imposed on bodily pleasure in order for it to be bearable to the subject, thus producing prohibition and the very desire to transgress it. *Jouissance* consequently appears as intimately related to the structure of human desire.

But in seminar XX Lacan identifies another form of *jouissance* that is not phallic, and which escapes localisation, symbolisation, knowledge, and desire. It figures as a bodily substance which relates to the body proper as singular experience, and which cannot be shared or limited: it is 'the substance of the body, on the condition that it is defined only as that which enjoys itself (*se jouit*)' (Lacan, 1972, p.23). This type of *jouissance* should be conceived as an 'other *jouissance*' or 'feminine *jouissance*' which escapes the symbolic function epitomized by the phallus and figures as an excessive and singular *jouissance* of the Other. By examining mystical figures such as Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa, Lacan paradigmatically relates such feminine *jouissance* to God.

From this perspective, it is justifiable to claim that Islam initially preserved the 'real' excess of God as feminine *jouissance*. In this way, God was maintained in the domain of the impossible-real, the *jouissance* of the Other beyond the symbolic function of the father. In contrast, Judaism and Christianity can be described as early attempts to progressively subsume this impossibility within the stabilising frontiers of symbolisation. 'God' was linked to a paternal and familial logic to the extent that Judaism could be defined as the 'religion of the Father', and Christianity as the 'religion of the Son' (Hirt 1984, p. 11).

This patriarchal order found institutional representation in the genealogical lineage of Abraham's son Isaac, who was born of the marriage between Abraham and his wife Sarah the Hebrew, and was allowed to claim full inheritance of Abraham (*Genesis* 21:10–12; *Gal* 4:30). In the Bible, it is Isaac whom God chooses to establish the Covenant with Abraham's descendants, and who gives birth to Jewish genealogy (*Genesis* 17:19–21). The relation with Isaac that God institutionalizes with the Covenant and through circumcision and obedience to the Law, allows the Jews to assume Abraham as the symbolic father of the community (*Name-of-the-Father*). Hence Abraham, thanks to the relation with his son Isaac, becomes the 'phallic solution of the paternal symbolic authority, of the official symbolic lineage' (Žižek 2006a). In Judaism and Christianity, the relation between man and God reflects a paternal logic of filiation. The impossibility that God expresses thus becomes an impossible-real to be subjected to symbolic appropriation.

In contrast, Islamic tradition celebrates the link with Ishmael, the son that Abraham procreated with Sarah's Egyptian servant Hagar. Following a request from Sarah, Abraham 'abandoned' Hagar and her son Ishmael in the desert, thereby thwarting this son's right of inheritance. Although God promised Hagar to make Ishmael the founder of a great nation (a promise that Muslims see realized with Muhammad's foundation of the Islamic community), Ishmael's abandonment and exclusion from Abraham's inheritance creates an obstacle to Abraham's symbolic role as a father. A biological dimension alone remains to link Ishmael with Abraham, who is now reduced to the role of biological procreator. What needs to be emphasized, therefore, is the original absence of the function of the father in Islam, best exemplified by Ishmael's biblical 'abandonment' in the desert. A similar destiny is reserved for the founder of Islam, Muhammad, who was an 'orphan'. In contrast, a central role in Islam is originally played by female figures such as Hagar, the non-Hebrew.

In Benslama's recently translated essay, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* (2002), Hagar epitomizes the ancestral mother of Islam, the 'female foreigner' who made the Islamic community possible by giving birth to Ishmael. In Islamic tradition, Hagar incarnates pure feminine *jouissance* both because she has knowl-

edge of otherness (Other *jouissance*) and fully expresses bodily substance. Paul, for instance, recalls that Hagar can see and speak with God without dying. She knows him, names him, and, bodily speaking, expresses a perverse, seductive and fertile force, allowing progeny beyond symbolic castration and so accessing 'that which is hidden' (*ibid*, p. 111).

Therefore, in the face of the phallic function ascribed to Abraham, which grounds the god-father relationship at the core of Jewish and Christian symbolism, Islam was grounded in the excessive force epitomized by the Other *jouissance* of Hagar in her direct relation to God. God is therefore retained in the domain of the Impossible, since no phallic solution existed to organize the relation between man and God on the grounds of paternal symbolic authority. The Koran claims that Allah is not the father, for the uniqueness of God excludes any notion of divine procreation, filiation and genealogy, even symbolically:

> Say: He is God, (the) One; the Self-Sufficient Master, Whom all creatures need; He has begotten no one, nor is He begotten; and there is no one comparable to Him. (*Qur'an* 112:1).

With the passing of time, however, God's sovereignty was gradually transposed into a symbolic representation aimed at doubling God's absolute identity in the dual relation between the Man-Father and the son. In this regard, Benslama notes that although Islam was initially exposed to the generative and excessive energy of Other *jouissance*, the subversive power of femininity became increasingly subordinated to an ethical, juridical and theological order (Law and truth) structured through a phallic organisation of the signifying universe. This passage entailed the 'obliteration of the ancestral mother' and her reduction to a mere intermediary serving as the 'physical conduit for routing the form of the father to that of the son' (Benslama 2002, p. 109). The eradication of the ancestral mother was the attempt to master the excessive power of feminine *jouissance* by reducing Other *jouissance* to the symbolic economy of sexual enjoyment. A system of laws was then established on the basis of male sovereignty.

But, in this reading, elusive female power resists phallic symbolisation and the symbolic mission of eradication never succeeds in mastering this excessive force. The 'spectre of the woman' that was obliterated has haunted Islamic thought up to the present day. The encounter with modernity and the challenge to traditional imaginary enacted a new, horrifying exposure to the excess of Other *jouissance*, thereby unleashing the 'traumatic-subversive-creative-explosive power of feminine subjectivity' (Žižek 2006a). For Benslama, Islamism figures as the symptom of 'the profound disturbance in the ever precarious relation between the real and symbolic structures', a disturbance Islamists have tried to solve with their '*delusional appeal to origin*' (Benslama 2002, p. 214).

The Decline of the Oedipus

Benslama's account of a dislocation of the traditional symbolic authority of the father which modernity would produce, thereby engendering a horrifying release of the real, strongly resonates with a recent debate about a paradigmatic change that is occurring in our contemporary era (Tort 2007). Here, the idea is that post-modernity, rather than modernity, would be responsible for what has been called the 'decline of the Oedipus, when the paradigmatic mode of subjectivity is no longer the subject integrated into the paternal Law through symbolic castration' (Žižek 2000, p. 248).

Naturally, a major consequence of this view is the crisis of desire. Once castration is suspended, 'desire' ceases to be a key manifestation of the subject of the unconscious, and is faced with a sort of 'nihilistic obliteration' which gives rise to the birth of a new type a subject: the 'Man without Unconscious' (Recalcati 2010, p. X). In his recent essay on the clinics of new symptoms, Lacanian theorist Massimo Recalcati, sees anorexia, panic disorders and somatisation as the signs of a potential abrogation of the unconscious. Two increasingly widespread tendencies would be indicative of such an abrogation: 'a narcissistic reinforcement of the ego, producing *solid identifications*, which petrify sterilely subjective identity' [emphasis mine]; and an 'urgent need to enjoy, which bypasses any principle of symbolic mediation so as to stand as an absolute as well as deadly injunction' (*ibid.*).

In this scenario, religious fundamentalist attachment to integrity and purity is thus interpreted as a mode of *solid* identification, chasing the paranoiac dream of an uncorrupted and uncontaminated self protected against the threats of otherness. The risk here is that the complexity of the Islamist galaxy is reduced to a pure, nostalgic fundamentalist manifestation, acting from beyond the death of desire. Benslama's reading of Islamism seems to embrace such a possibility, depicting Islamism as the ultimate attempt to 'restore' the shield of illusion in a time when the 'traditional' symbolic authority of the father has been disrupted by the exposure to modernity and the release of *jouissance*. Thus, a traditionalist and nostalgic character is ascribed to Islamism, which is exemplified by its '*desperate* appeal to origin'. Needless to say, this can result in the deployment of 'neo-orientalist' forms of essentialism about Islamism (Almond 2007). 'Traditionalist' and 'nostalgic' attitudes are thus emphasized, while compromising and creative engagements with modernity are neglected, thereby promoting modernist depictions of 'political Islamism' as 'nothing but one of the subjectivated names of today's obscurantism' (Badiou 2006, p. 68).

Against this backdrop, I contend that a variety of approaches mark the discursive responses that the Islamist galaxy actualizes when confronting social

desedimentation and symbolic instability. I argue that Islamism does not manifest itself as an undifferentiated demand for authenticity, unwilling to find compromise with modernity.

By emphasising the multiplicity of the discursive variants informing the Islamist galaxy, Benslama's contribution could be enriched with a higher degree of complexity. From this perspective, the decline of the Oedipus might be associated with the desedimenting effects of globalisation and the emergence of postmodernity as a discursive horizon challenging the role of logocentric modern representations (Mura 2012b). Whether this decline is acknowledged or not, however, very much depends on which horizon (e.g., tradition, modernity, postmodernity) we use to 'read' social reality and the type of discourse we are considering. Žižek, for instance, emphasizes the contemporary overlapping of modernity and postmodernity, desire and perversion, rather than their mutual replacement: e.g., the modern discourse of democracy, which manifests a hysterical structure and values the central function of desire on the one hand, and the post-modern discourse of late capitalism, with its perverse injunction to enjoy, on the other (Žižek 2000, p. 248).

From this perspective, there is nothing particularly epochal on the current trouble of the symbolic that Benslama describes, for the 'symbolic' is always in trouble and disturbed by contingent events that challenge temporary fixation of meanings, enacting new hegemonic competitions among discourses. While 'events' such as colonialism or globalisation produce violent reconfigurations of our imaginaries, engendering what Benslama sees as the 'undoing of the traditional solidarity between truth and law (*haqiqa* and *sharia*)', the encounter with the real that such events entail might not necessarily produce the 'torment of origin' or the 'horrifying', 'delusional', 'desperate' attitude that Benslama suggests for Islamists. Indeed, by trying to exploit the desedimenting process of social and discursive dislocation, Islamism functions in the same way as any other discursive formation, re-signifying the social universe through hegemonic conflict. Therefore, to use the 'creative' and 'traumatic' force of the real to reconfigure the borders of symbolic organisation entails stabilising a situation of social disintegration, by assuming 'a new master signifier which makes that situation 'readable'' (Žižek 2006c, p. 37).

I propose that instead of seeing Islamism as a form of solid identification marking the death of desire and the nostalgic attempt to 'restore' the illusion of religion, Islamist discourses should be read as distinct attempts to confront desedimentation creatively – in other words, as different ways of mobilising the productive force of the real within the realm of a symbolic economy. Central to this approach is the idea that Islamism does not necessarily attempt to 'restore' symbolic economy on the ground of anti-imperialist acts of resistance advocating pre-

colonial 'authenticity'. Even in the early history of Islamist movements, groups such as the Muslim Brothers simply strived to re-articulate or re-invent symbolic coordinates by adopting the very 'modern' language of the colonialist (Lia, 1998; Mura, 2012a). Far from displaying melancholic or rigid attitudes towards change, many groups continue to preserve the central function of desire, 'positivizing' the very encounter with the real that Benslama preserves as horrifying.

Given the limits of this article, it is not possible to describe in detail how such a process occurs for each Islamist discourse. Nonetheless, in the following pages, I explore briefly a few examples of the way in which such a positivisation of the real can occur, giving a taste of how some Islamist discourses resort to a creative mobilisation of *jouissance*.

Fantasy, Desire, *jouissance* and the Discourses of Islam

As I mentioned above, any evaluation of the way in which Islamism organizes the relations among fantasy, desire and *jouissance* should stress the *positive* determination of the real. This is a notion of *jouissance* which allows the real to be manifested. The real here is not only the negative and traumatic moment of disruption of the symbolic, but the excessive energy that emanates from the very *idealisation* of a fulfilment of the lack (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004). It discloses a paradoxical situation by demonstrating the inability of the symbolic to master social lack while enacting, at the same time, the very illusion of a final fulfilment.

It is here that fantasy and desire best reveal their potential for the cathectic investment of Islamist 'illusions'. Faced with the loss of *jouissance* that the subject experiences, desire represents a relation to lack that promises to recapture the object sacrificed. Lacan deploys the notion of *object petit a* to conceive of the unattainable object which 'causes' and sets desire in motion through the representation of partial objects. As a cause-object of desire, *object petit a* represents a desirous and phantasmatic feature that can reside in any object. From this perspective, it functions as a sort of formal frame through which desire maintains ontological consistency despite the positive object that is encountered. At a deeper level, however, *object petit a* mediates between desire and enjoyment, functioning as a stand in for the real within any symbolic representation. Here, *object petit a* can be seen as 'an empty space on which the subject projects the fantasies that support his desire, a surplus of the real that propels us to narrate again and again our first traumatic encounter with *jouissance*' (Žižek 1991, p. 133). The *object petit a* reflects, then, the residual accumulation of a form of enjoyment in the symbolic, which fantasy strives to mobilize bringing it within acceptable limits (that is, tempering its excessive force by translating it into bodily pleasure). From this per-

spective, fantasy stands as the 'little scenario of imaginarily fixed signifiers circling around the ultimate object of desire' (Kesel 2009, p. 31). It is the fundamental relation between the master signifier and the *object petit a* that needs to be uncovered so as to explain the ability of Islamist articulations to stimulate, produce and appropriate the cathectic investments of a discourse.

By examining a wide variety of case studies, Yannis Stavrakakis has highlighted this ability of desire and fantasy to unleash libidinal investment, which could be seen in terms of an 'enjoyment structured in fantasies' (Stavrakakis 2006, p. 200). From this perspective, any discourse (nationalism, socialism, etc.) presents its master signifier (the Nation, The Socialist Society, etc.) as an 'empty signifier' that symbolizes both the essential lack and the *exciting* promise of its fulfilment. It is this very excitement that discourses try to capture and mobilize for political purposes, and that reveals the positive characterisation of the real. In the discursive universe of Islamism, 'Islam' incarnates the object somehow 'lacking': all problems deriving from its very loss, its being 'missing', and this lack being conceived of as an intimate deprivation.

A common characteristic of Islamic revivalist groups is the claim that 'Islam', their empty signifier, is absent in the every-day life of regular Muslims, because it is 'lying dormant within their souls' (al-Banna 1935). This 'absence' is then taken as the primary cause of social injustice and individual malaise. The negative absence of the 'object' is, at the same time, positivized by fantasy. Once 'Islam' returns fully through the 'Islamisation of society' in the fantasy of a harmonious and balanced state, all problems will be solved. It is at this point that fantasy projects the possibility of solution by promising a 'revival' of Islam and the perspective of a peaceful settlement of all human problems: hence, the very popular Islamist slogan: *Islam is the solution*. But what makes fantasy 'appealing' is that something exceeds the order of language in which fantasy and desire are inscribed and connects the symbolic with the real as the pre-symbolic energy of the subject.

Since fantasy works through visualisation, each discursive articulation will display the partial object of desire differently. The fantasy of a Muslim society, for example, very often takes the form either of a *stylisation of the Past* or a *utopian visualisation of the Future*. Although these tendencies are common to all Islamist discourses, each articulation tends to emphasize one tendency more than the other. In any case, they reveal different attempts to face both the encounter with the real that social and discursive desedimentation has enacted (either as an effect of colonialism or globalisation) and the endeavour to capture and mobilize *jouissance* in order to sustain their ideological platform.

So-called *salafi* trajectories (the word refers literally to the 'pious ancestors'), for instance, focus on the 'Golden Age' of early Islam when the Islamic community was incarnated by the image of the Prophet and his Companions. The

exaltation of 'origin' that Benslama envisages reflects here the idyllic view of Islamic past. The powerful nostalgia at work here precludes any possibility of developing a utopian project, for nothing in the future will ever reach the ultimate perfection of the Islamic golden age. As mentioned earlier, this attitude has often been considered to be somehow intrinsic to fundamentalist and Islamist tendencies within the Sunni galaxy. Benslama, for instance, argues that, aside from terror, 'melancholy becomes the only stance to assume while waiting for the last judgment. The Islamist movement should be considered as a reversal of messianism: antimessianism as despair over time' (Benslama, 2002, p. 28). In contrast, the messianic expectation of Shiite factions is said to entail a more open attitude towards utopian prospects, projecting the ideal of the Islamic community directly into the future. As can be seen from these two contrasting attitudes, Islamist articulations are highly differentiated in the way that they fantasize about the Islamic community, and engage with notions of origin and change.

It is certainly true that some articulations among the Sunni universe reveal nostalgia for the past. This is observable in those groups that privilege a literalist reading of holy texts, with a strict adherence to the timeless model of early Islam. Conservative trajectories such as the Taliban and the Tablighi, for instance, channel the libidinal investment of adherents towards a representation of the Islamic society where the idealized image of the past is even translated into the concrete adoption of a strict code of mimetic dressing and behaviour. Selfhood is reduced to a homogeneous kit of norms and codes that, being deculturized and based only on the tenets of Islam, can be deployed in every cultural and geographical environment in a similar way. In referring to these groups, French sociologist Olivier Roy uses the illuminating concept of 'neo-fundamentalism' (Roy 2004).

However, other Sunni trajectories adopt a more 'creative' and 'optimistic' attitude towards the future, creatively adding new elements to the depiction of the Islamic society. Their advocacy of 'origin' is here instrumental to political and social change, rather than reflecting the nostalgic aspiration to access the past. This is particularly evident in those groups where a more reformist attitude is at work. The past here becomes a pool from which resources can be drawn to sanction a future promise. Groups such as the Muslim Brothers or Hamas, for instance, have largely drawn upon early experiences of the Islamic community, such as the *shura* (consultation) or the *waqf* (religious endowments), to legitimize parliamentary practices or Islamize a modern concept of national territory (Mandaville 2011).

Other articulations may instead reveal a utopian attitude. Although the past stands as a glorious image of greatness and civilisation, an assertive focus on change marks the Islamic call. This tendency characterizes, for instance, the assertive transterritorial militancy of Qutb's *Milestones,* where Islamic society is described as 'not just an entity of the past, to be studied in history' but 'a demand

of the present and a hope of the future' (Qutb 1964, p. 103). If Qutb's optimistic slant may here cover a rhetorical function in the face of his generally more pessimistic evaluation of the present, other articulations reveal an unequivocal demand for change that strongly contrasts with the image of Islamism as a movement irremediably condemned to the melancholy of the past.

A case in point is Shabbir Akhtar's advocacy of an Islamic 'theology of liberation', calling for the enfranchisement of the Muslim masses in a politics that can raise them up from poverty, oppression and injustice in a similar way to the political experience of Christian priests in Latin America. While the political dimension of Islam constitutes the premises of such a stance, what is set in motion here is a direct reference to Qutb's activism. Far from denoting a melancholic attitude, cathectic investment is here explicitly directed towards the aim of conquering power for political and emancipatory purposes.

> Our pursuit of power is as natural and instinctive as the sex drive. The real question concerns its regulation. For all ideologies survive by courtesy of power. That is why there is a fraud, if a pious one, in the claim that authentically religious ambition can […] afford to disown 'the things of Caesar' (Akhtar 1991, p. 84).

Finally, within a 'transterritorial' horizon, other articulations turn their focus away from the past and direct their imaginative effort towards the visualisation of a substantially new future object of desire, a new Islamic era. This horizon is well illustrated in those discourses that fantasize about the emergence of a new *e-ummah* transcending geographical and physical frontiers, (hence their potential qualification as trans-territorial).

It should be noted that, besides the articulation of the signifier 'Islamic society', which is taken here to incarnate the empty signifier Islam as such, another key signifier in this type of discourses is 'virtuality'. This term can be used with a different connotation to that of its usual sense. A common attitude among conservative groups resonating with the more radical aspects of Qutb's vision, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *al-Muhajiroun* for instance, is to consider the ignorance of divine guidance (*jahiliyyah*) as embracing all contemporary societies. Hence the ummah is assumed as a 'virtual' object; that is, as a mental promise.

'Virtuality' implies the idea that something is missing from the physical reality of the subject. The 'virtual' functions as a phantasmic projection of reality based on a notion of *absence*. An essential element for this kind of discourse is the 'normative self', the so-called 'true believer', with his/her quest for salvation. The *virtual ummah* of 'true believers' is neither an entity to be maintained, nor a goal to be realized in a material world where unbelievers seem to dominate, regardless of whether they call themselves Muslims or otherwise. As the official website of Hizb ut-Tahrir puts it, the 'Islamic world' is currently steeped in the dimension of *kufr* (here standing for *unbelief*), which means that the ummah is transposed to an

ideal plane: 'With regard to determining whether a household is Islamic or not, this is not dependent on whether its inhabitants are Muslims or not, but rather on what is implemented in terms of rules […] The fact that the current existing states in the Islamic world are states of *kufr* is evident and does not require explanation' (Hizb-ut-Tahrir, n.d.). The *ummah* here works therefore as a pure ideal, the articulation of a notion of 'beyond' (thereafter) upon which to fantasize so as to stimulate affective attachment and political mobilisation.

In other cases, *presence* rather than absence can be valorized, and virtuality can be conceived of as a sort of 'illusion of presence' that reproduces physical reality through artificial and mechanical simulation. *Virtual communities* require the disappearance of the very difference

> between 'true life' and its mechanical simulation; between objective reality and our false (illusory) perception of it; between my fleeting affects, feelings, attitudes, and so on, and the remaining hard core of my Self (Žižek 1997, p. 133).

In this scenario, there are Islamist trajectories that translate the virtual ummah into a positive and feasible project. Complex networks of websites, chat forums, newsletters, blogs, bulletin boards etc., give voice to an extraordinary exchange of opinions and information about every aspect of a Muslim's life, paving the way for the establishment of new forms of community ties. Here, the 'desirability' and 'visibility' of a new 'virtual' infrastructural space overcome the practical obstacles posed by the territorial displacement of globalisation, working as an immediate plan of action. It is within this context that different kinds of contemporary phenomena such as *Muxlim* can be observed (Teti and Mura 2009). *Muxlim* – a virtual world made of digital towns, cities, buildings, parks, etc. – providing an Islamic alterative to secular British or US virtual-world developers (e.g., Second Life) and allowing Muslim 'virtual citizens' to create a new virtual community through the interaction of movable avatars.

Novelties of this kind, however, require some emphasis being placed on the imaginary that virtual reality sets in motion. André Nusselder notices that virtual reality best exemplifies the phantasmically-mediated process leading to identity formation. Virtual reality enables the avatar to offer a consistent self-image of the user producing the same effects of fascination that the virtual 'image' of a mirror engenders in the uncoordinated and fragmented body of an infant (Nusselder 2009, p.144). This is pivotal to understanding the fascination that the virtual *ummah* elicits from those Muslims who are more absorbed in the virtual reality, and more drawn to exploring the potential of virtual worlds and communities. The libidinal force of this kind of fascination lies in the ability of virtual reality to capture the user in the phantasmic projection of its imaginary universe. The tension that characterizes the relation between ideal images and the real is replaced here by a narcissistic stupor and total absorption in the unity of the virtual image. The Muslim

fantasy about an 'un-fragmented' *ummah* becomes here the microworld where the new cyber-self experiences the dream of absolute unity and the ultimate aspiration to overcome traditional divisions within the *ummah*.

The attempt on behalf of fantasy and desire to capture and mobilize cathectic investment can be observed from other perspectives. As Stavrakakis puts it:

> apart from the promise of fantasy, what sustains desire, what drives our identification acts, are at least two further dimensions: our ability to go through limit-experiences related to a *jouissance* of the body, and the fact that desiring itself entails a *jouissance* of its own — an enjoyment beyond the anticipation of fantasmatic fullness (Stavrakakis 2005, p. 69).

Enjoyment, in fact, may intervene on another level, as a *partial experience* through which 'desire' is enjoyed. This requires some form of anticipation of the joy that is promised with the future achievement of the desired object. More precisely, it is this anticipation that sustains the promise of the object. In the Islamist context, for instance, Islamist articulation presents a rich and highly diversified portfolio of 'experiences'. These experiences stimulate an enjoyment of the body, undertaking the essential function of sustaining desire by offering morsels of anticipation of the promised object.

From religious collective festivities in the case of Ramadan, to the partial integration of some of the 'ecstatic' rituals of Sufism, and collective funeral processions that are often charged with political significance, as in the case of the killing of 'martyrs', religious and cultural celebrations offer important venues to mobilize enjoyment among groups (Pratt Ewing 1997). In emphasising the affinity between nationalist movements and groups such as *Hamas*, *Hizbollah* or, earlier, the *Muslim Brotherhood*, scholars have often highlighted the importance given here to hymns and paramilitary parades (Lia 1998; Kepel 2002; Ruthven 2004). All these celebrations fortify the sense of cohesion of their adherents providing them with a certain release of enjoyment which functions precisely as a form of partial experience.

Similarly, more 'conservative' trends may attempt to anticipate some of the benefits that are promised in the ideal of an *ummah* of true believers. It is within this context that the creation of 'Islamic neighbourhoods' should be interpreted. I refer here to local communities of 'true believers' whose substantial 'insulation' from the rest of the world keeps them apart from impiety and corruption and in doing so, offers them a foretaste of the kingdom of virtue and salvation they aspire to. Another interesting phenomenon is the creation of 'Islamic' tourist facilities (holiday villages, hotels, and so on) where the true believer can 'enjoy' the benefits of a holiday reflecting their ideal of a pure 'Islamic' life.

> As a conservative religious concept, it [Islamic Tourism] aims at the adjustment of the tourist industries to the fundamental interpretations of Islam, including gen-

> der-segregated and alcohol-free venues as well as 'Islamically' financed and organized tourism (Dabrowska 2004).

Other discourses might involve an enjoyment of experience drawing upon a plurality of more 'ludic events'; from the actual gathering of believers in the virtual world of *Muxlim* to the artistic 'events' of transterritorial cultural phenomena such as Islam-Punk and Islam hip hop. Hip hop may be regarded as one of the most important forms of protest against social and political discrimination. Spreading beyond its original African-American context, Muslim rappers have been using music to spread the faith, bridging the gaps between Muslim communities, and creating a global 'hip hop *ummah'* (Alim 2005). 'Islamic Punk' is another trend encompassing punk, hard rock, and hip hop influences. A wide range of intellectual activities and music groups inspired by Islamic punk have given rise to several forums, blogs and Islam-punk virtual communities (Teti and Mura 2009).

Another important area of analysis of the way in which enjoyment is mobilized within the realm of a symbolic economy can be located in what Žižek calls the *theft of enjoyment*, which involves the constitution of an enemy here taken to represent the principal obstacle to the realisation of the promise. As Žižek puts it:

> We always impute to the 'other' an excessive enjoyment; s/he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment (Žižek 1990, p. 54).

While fantasy and desire elicit the 'partial' satisfaction of an illusory fullness, such a narrative is disrupted by the emergence of a paranoiac's fantasy in which aggressiveness and violence find their place. As a result, enjoyment irrupts in the obscene construction of the Other as a

> traumatic Intruder, someone whose different way of life (or, rather, way of *jouissance* materialized in its social practices and rituals) disturbs us, throw off the rails the balance of our way of life. (Žižek 2006b).

There is therefore a common tendency among more nationalized trajectories *à la* Muslim Brotherhood to project a modern binary scheme when defining the 'other' that hampers the full realisation of Islam. This can be seen in the adoption of an Occidentalist narrative through which a *negative dialectic* is enacted. Islam here becomes the place of 'glory and fortitude, truth, strength, blessing, integrity, stability, virtue, and nobility' as against 'the path of Europe', which is replete with 'enticement and glamour, pleasures and luxuries, laxity and license, and comforts that captivate the soul' (al-Banna 1936).

In following a classic orientalist pattern, the enemy is maintained as a 'necessary' outside against which the specificity of a Muslim-Self can be construed. The same dialectical mindset that informed the colonial discourse is therefore reproduced, even though this mindset is now reversed through an anti-imperialist perspective.

On the other hand, contemporary transterritorial trajectories within the Islamist universe appear to reflect a classical post-modern tendency to become disentangled from binary representations. That is not to deny that some sort of radical contra-position is performed in the visualisation of the enemy. When considering conservative movements such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *al-Muhajiroun*, for instance, it is true that these groups rely on the ultimate distinction between true believers and non-true believers.

Nonetheless, the realm of the enemy (*jahiliyyah*) is considered to be a dominant space that leaves no margins for the affirmation of any individual self. Although a clash of civilisation seems to inform the opposition between the Islamic vanguard of God and the global realm of unbelievers, these two terms are not posed on the same plane. While the enemy maintains absolute control over social reality, the realisation of a pious self will necessarily be achieved as a virtual accomplishment in the hereafter. As Roy puts it when describing neo-fundamentalism: 'glancing over his shoulder the *mujahid* sees nothing but *kafir* (unbelievers) in the lands that he is supposed to protect. […] They are besieged in a fortress they do not inhabit' (Roy 2004, p. 288). The outside does not defer to an inside, and the self will not defer to an immediate other. The very construction of the enemy requires that any antagonism be transposed upon a plane of virtuality and transcendence.

Less conservative tendencies tend instead to celebrate pluralism and diversity, dispersing the enemy in a multiplicity of instances. The enemy can be variously located in the form of religious dogmatism or capitalist materialism. A phenomenon such as Islamic punk, for instance, is said by Michael Muhammad Knight – a Muslim convert whose novel, *The Taqwacores,* represents a manifesto for the Muslim punk movement – to unite Islam and punk within a holistic philosophy of life 'smashing' any kind of 'idols', materialism and religious orthodoxy included (Muhammad Knight 2004). If enjoyment here is stolen or prevented by the very existence of an enemy, the thief does not assume the form of an absolute opposite, an irreducible 'antagonist' against which the specificity of a Muslim selfhood can be delineated. Rather, the representation of the enemy seems to be informed by the very definition of an 'agonistic' frame. Here aggression is dispersed into a plurality of competing and diverging moments which define the condition of possibility for the theft of enjoyment.

Conclusion

In this article, I have framed the theoretical terrain upon which a psychoanalytical perspective could be posited in the analysis of contemporary Islamist dis-

courses. In the first part, I highlighted the contribution that the Lacanian conceptualisation of *capitonage* offers to the study of Islamism.

I then focused on a psychoanalytical inquiry into Islamism and how it impinges upon problems of 'origin', 'authority' and 'truth'. By taking Benslama's investigation of Islam as a point of departure, I broadened the approach to emphasize the complexity involved in an inquiry into Islamism that touches upon the different imaginaries produced by distinct discursive articulations. By doing this, I drew attention to the essentialist risk of over-emphasising the 'delusional' character of Islamism, and of disregarding its internal differences. I then proceeded to highlight the way in which some Islamist discourses creatively respond to social desedimentation, thereby reconfiguring the symbolic through a positivisation of the real. This approach served as a superior means of differentiating the way in which Islamism organizes and mobilizes fantasy, desire and enjoyment, thereby sustaining the function of the master signifier Islam.

Naturally the hegemonic ability of a discourse to suture social space – allowing its master signifier to become universal for a given time – offers no criteria of progressive assurance. It could be a conservative tendency that occupies the hegemonic position of a universal discourse. By exploring the way in which fantasies circulate around the object of Islam and the Islamic community, however, I showed that new discourses have been emerging in the last decades. These discourses challenge the depiction of Islamist militants as radical and 'melancholic' extremists. More assertive, optimistic, innovative, and sometimes anti-dogmatic political tendencies have arisen, enriching the discursive complexity of Islamism.

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