CHAPTER TWO

REPRESENTATION AND SELF-REPRESENTATION OF RADICAL ISLAMISM IN THE UK: THROUGH THE MIRRORING LENS OF THE POLITICAL SELF

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This chapter examines how the practices of representation and self-representation of a ‘radical Islamist’ party in the UK (Hizb ut-Tahrir) mirror one another. The mirroring process engenders a form of political fetishism that disempowers the party, which continues to lack political relevance and is persistently portrayed by government and the mainstream media as a security threat. The chapter analyses the self-representation of Hizb ut-Tahrir on the basis of interviews and personal discussions that I conducted with leaders and members of the party, while the analysis of its representation to the outside world draws upon the party’s public discourse, including articles, papers and news stories produced by leading media institutions, eminent scholars and policymakers dealing with the phenomenon of radical Islamism in the UK. The chapter posits that essentialist representations of Islam and Islamism deriving from the dominant Culturalist/Orientalist paradigm (Said 1978, 202–5) are mirrored in how radical Islamist parties represent themselves. This mirroring effect consists of interpretative categories imposed from above being unconsciously internalised from below, with both Culturalists/Orientalists and radical Islamists proposing an inverted image of what occurs in reality.

After two years of fieldwork, it became evident to me that the leaders and members of Hizb ut-Tahrir had become infatuated with power and with having the upper hand, whether over their ‘enemies’ and political antagonists or over their acolytes. This finding debunks the myth of a future Islamist government where the ‘spiritual’ would prevail over the ‘political’. This somewhat schizophrenic attitude can be explained through the dynamic of political fetishism, which is also found in the dominant Culturalist/Orientalist paradigm’s interpretative categories of ‘religious fundamentalism’ and ‘terrorism’. This fetishism ultimately obscures the political motives that may underlie religious beliefs and terrorism, thereby stripping Islamist parties of political legitimacy while at
the same time perpetuating the perceived security threat. In this way, the UK government’s unwillingness to engage in dialogue with radical Islamists is itself a paradoxical threat to national security. Analysing the practices of (self-)representation within a framework of political fetishism entails examining the construction of a dominant regime of representation (i.e. policy-makers, the media, academics) and possible counter-strategies adopted by the dominated (i.e. radical Islamists). Dissecting this process is not only important for gaining a better understanding of the discourses and practices of radical Islamist groups in the UK. It is also offers valuable insights into these groups’ power relations with government.

1. An Ethnography of Radical Islamism

Throughout two years of fieldwork (2005–2007) spent among radical Islamist parties, mostly in London, I interviewed leaders and party members of Hizb ut-Tahrir at a time when they were publicly accused of supporting terrorism and of being ‘fundamentalists’. My main concern when I embarked upon this fieldwork was that experience is not the linchpin or axiom of explanation. Instead, it is what we want and what we need to explain that comes first. This kind of approach does not undermine politics by denying the existence of the subjects under analysis. It does, however, interrogate the processes whereby subjects are created and it attempts to chart power relations, taking account of the struggles that imbue and mobilise them. Such an approach powerfully refigures history, the experience of carrying out the research itself, and the researcher’s role within it. In other words, the researcher also becomes the subject and the object of the inquiry.

I began conducting my fieldwork with Islamists by questioning the extent to which it mattered whether the researcher was a man, a woman, white, black, straight, gay, a believer, atheist or agnostic. I found that the question of where the researcher is situated, who she is, how she is defined in relation to others, what the political effects of her history may be, seemed never really to enter the discussion. Nevertheless, in conducting my research I considered it essential to raise important questions about discourse, about difference and subjectivity, about what counts as experience, and about who gets to determine this. For this reason, it became essential to reflect upon the fact that I was a non-Muslim woman interviewing Muslim men who saw their political future in Islam; Islamists.