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The Re-Invention of Populism: Islamist Responses to Capitalist Development in the Contemporary Maghreb

Like many other parts of the erstwhile Third World, the Maghreb region of northwest Africa has lived under a general socio-economic and political crisis since the early 1980s. The three major states of the western-most reaches of the Arab world – Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia – have witnessed profound socio-economic and political upheavals (in Algeria amounting to a civil war in all but name), which have tested the resolve of both state and society for over a generation. One of the most powerful responses to this general crisis has come in the guise of Islamism. As will be indicated below, the notion of ‘Islamism’ is an abbreviated and generic term covering a variegated phenomenon, which nonetheless encapsulates the appropriation of the precepts and civilisational markers of Islam for the purposes of political action and mobilisation.

The resurgence of Islamism as a sociopolitical force in the Maghreb poses a number of conceptual and practical challenges to any analysis of the phenomenon, ranging from the validity of existing social-scientific categories to the perils of empirical fieldwork. But it places a particular strain on Marxist
categories of analysis and communist politics. For the resurgence of political Islam in the Maghreb cannot easily be read off as the expression of class antagonism, nor as the result of crises of underconsumption, nor, indeed, as a simple conservative reaction to such a predicament. As I shall argue below, an explanation of Islamic revivalism certainly includes some of these causal factors, but it also requires an emphasis on the role of various mediating structures, most notably the postcolonial state and the international capitalist system, in the crystallisation of this phenomenon. Maghrebi Islamism re-emerged as a significant sociopolitical force in the 1980s and 1990s chiefly as a result of the internationally-mediated crisis of the postcolonial régimes, and their accompanying re-alignment within the global capitalist economy. Whilst there are clearly very complex local dynamics in the unfolding of this crisis, and the sociopolitical responses it has elicited, this contribution will focus particularly on the international sources of the Islamist ascendancy, associating it to the particular – and differentiated – development of capitalism in the region before and after political independence.

This emphasis on the international context of Islamic revivalism in the Maghreb is warranted for two basic reasons. First, because it feeds into the contemporary debates surrounding transnational Islamism and the ‘war on terror’. As we shall see below, the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa experienced the ravages of Islamist violence (and the accompanying backlash of the state security forces) long before the 11 September 2001 attacks on mainland USA. The contours of the current global confrontation between liberal states and the global jihadists can be traced back to the antagonism between postcolonial states and Islamist insurgents since the late 1970s in the ‘arc of crisis’ stretching from Central and Western Asia to the Maghreb. Historical materialists can make a significant contribution to these debates by underlining both the particular historical trajectory of such a confrontation and by analysing the dynamics of concrete social formations which often engender these transnational antagonisms. What follows in this article is an attempt to do just that.

But there is a second and perhaps less obvious reason for underscoring the international dimensions of Islamist responses to capitalist crisis in the Maghreb. And that is to re-introduce into Marxist vocabulary the disused concept of ‘populism’ as a means of analysing in comparative perspective very specific forms of sociopolitical response to capitalist crisis. These responses, like that of Islamism in the Maghreb, are specific in that they invoke an undifferentiated