

A CALIPHATE OF IDEAS? ISLAMIC POLITICS IN DIALOGUE WITH CONTEMPORARY MARXISM

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Abstract: This article deconstructs the conceptual framework of the social theorist Salman Sayyid by critically examining his work on the political and hegemony in relation to the thought of the post-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau. Sayyid elaborates a theory of the political that necessitates a communal break with existing society, a move very similar to Laclau and post-Marxist thought more generally. In analyzing Sayyid's theories of the caliphate with Laclau's conception of hegemonic struggle, the author suggests that the construction of any caliphate should think about the question of solidarity with "pebs" or those discarded from the system of capitalism. The article concludes with an analysis of how Sayyid's theoretical praxis can be applied in American Muslim political activism through the concept of the counterpublic.

Keywords: Marxism, Post-Marxism, Hegemony Theory, Ernest Laclau, Salman Sayyid, Islamism, Islamicate, Counterpublic, Caliphate, Political Ontology

Power, Discourse, and Hegemony Theory

At the core of political theory is the question of power. A political theory not only provides an account of how power operates in a given society, and how power affects subjects and social relations, but a political theory ought to also address the more positive aspect of how power can achieve certain ends, such as justice or an ethical state among citizens. Is power something that must be eradicated, contained, modified, or managed? The political theorist is thus a philosopher and a strategist of power. Let's imagine for a moment that power is chiefly tied to a wider set of common values, languages, and cultures. Let's call this confluence of things a discourse.

Now imagine that a discourse shapes and exerts power on subjects by the degree to which it is able to compel adherence among various individuals and groups within a given society. A discourse provides a semblance of meaning and identity for subjects and power enters the picture when the discourse attempts to rival other discourses for a hegemonic position – multiple discourses within a society often contend for the hegemonic position. When a dominant discourse begins to lose its efficacy in compelling subjects to adhere to it, this discourse

collapses and a space is opened for other discourses to contend with one another to attain the hegemonic position.

This simple illustration of power, discourse, and hegemony helps to illustrate a theoretical framework that we will explore in this article by looking specifically at the discourse of Islamism and Islamic politics. Through an analysis and critique of the thought of a pre-eminent theorist of Islamism and hegemony theory, Salman Sayyid, I aim to shed light on a new direction in Islamic political thought that is in a critical dialogue with the wider field of Marxist thought and critical theory. I begin with a deconstruction of Sayyid's theoretical framework in contrast to the work of Ernesto Laclau, the late theorist of hegemony who deeply influenced Sayyid. My aim is to put Sayyid's theoretical framework in discussion with Laclau's theory of hegemony so as to open important questions about political strategy for building Muslim notions of the Islamicate. Importantly, Sayyid develops much of his political theory from left-Heideggerian thought and post-Marxist thought more broadly, but he does not allow these fields of thought to determine his theoretical conclusions.¹ Rather, Sayyid molds some of the core theoretical commitments of post-Marxist theory into his thinking of categories such as the political, the ethical, and justice. Thus, Sayyid's thought, aside from its own merits and contributions, opens a model for other interventions in Islamic thought that can bridge and form dialogues with post-Marxist thought and critical theory.

Additionally, it is worth noting how novel Sayyid's interventions are given that the wider field of Islamic thought is predominately concerned with interventions into liberal thought and have tended to ignore engagement with Marxist and even post-Marxist thought.² Perhaps Sayyid's engagement with post-Marxism will open a new path forward for Muslim intellectuals to engage in a field that presents models of ethics and justice that are more robustly engaged in political and revolutionary commitments than the usual interlocutors in liberalism and communitarianism.

The question that I will focus on in this article revolves around the concept of power and the persistence of power; how does a Muslim political or hegemonic struggle manage to develop a separate space of becoming and how precisely is power transformed in this space? What happens with power once the ontologically realized community comes into existence? Where does contention and hegemonic struggle go, or perhaps more importantly, what are other disenfranchised groups that are not Muslim to do in this space (of the caliphate), and how might they be considered active agents in such political struggles?

The core of Sayyid's thought revolves around a fascinating account of Muslim identity formation and politics in the contemporary world. In his earlier work, *A Fundamental Fear* (2004), Sayyid develops a theory of Muslim political subjectivity that we will draw on throughout this article. But we will primarily focus on his 2014 work *Recalling the Caliphate*, where he theorizes Muslim identity formation

as the basis by which an alternative version of the caliphate can be realized as a space of contention and disagreement, or hegemonic political struggle. This aspect of his thought presents an important theoretical contrast between his Islamic commitments and the post-Marxist and post-structuralist framework from which his thought heavily draws from.³ In Sayyid's thinking, the political is not subordinated to the ethical but is rather conceived as mediated by the ethical and the opening of a political struggle, or hegemony struggle more specifically, purports an ontological change in the identity formation of Muslims. But this ontological change is not construed as an end in itself and Sayyid thus offers an important contrast to contemporary Islamic politics in this way. It is this mediation of politics with the ethical wherein Sayyid posits a form of ethical life that might constitute a break from the dominant culture, offering Muslims a fresh start and a new way of living.⁴ However, the technical and loaded philosophical term the "ontological" has to be unpacked and understood in relation to its sister concept the "ontic".

Over the long course of his writings, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger developed a theory of ontological difference to account for the realization of being. What he named ontic expressions of being are expressions tied to a *particular* project such as the nation, the economy, or the group, whereas ontological expressions of collective being open the very field of finite and particular expressions of being to a more open ground of a more fuller and substantial realization. But in Heidegger's thought, the grounding function that realizes the ontological operates on an abyss. In other words, there is no stable ground to gain universalized access to the essence of being. According to Heidegger, and quite paradoxically, what permits an opening or a disclosure of the ground of the ontological is the ground's very absence of being.⁵ Sayyid adapts this theory of ontological difference to criticize Islamic political projects that fail to realize the ontological and instead privilege the ontic. Sayyid places the Islamicate over Islam as the privileged signifier of truth production, that is of the ontological, as it remains the space where thought can affect and alter the ontic most adequately.⁶

Sayyid's notion of Islam in distinction to the Islamicate is a key conceptual distinction that must be clarified. For Sayyid, Islam is a quilting point that gives Muslims a name and unifies a discursive formation. This means that there is no one feature of Islam that can exhaust what Islam means, i.e., "Islam is what the ummah understands it to be at any one time".⁷ The Islamicate is an outcome of a political process, whereas Islam is not the founding process of a political movement, and Sayyid defines the political in a way close to Carl Schmitt's definition, as a condition that "erupts when the distinction between friend and enemies takes hold".⁸ The political is what erupts and emerges when there are tears in the social fabric that cannot be stitched together. It is the notion of the Islamicate, over that of Islam, that is so central for Sayyid as this conception serves as a rebuttal to Islamist

attempts to ground a Muslim polity or even caliphate on the signifier of Islam. Such attempts err in the way they seek to elevate the signifier of “Islam” in an apolitical and overly moral and legalistic way (Islamic liberation theology) or in a way that connects Islam to a particular ontic expression such as “Islamic economics” or the “Islamic state”. Thus, the Islamicate is meant to think of the caliphate as a more heterogenous and overlapping series of social, ethical, and moral forms of becoming that combines transformations in the spheres of culture, state and economy.

It should be noted that Sayyid is not claiming that power will disappear entirely in his notion of the caliphate, for that would suggest an essentialist or even a foundationalist political theory. But we will argue that Sayyid does not provide a clear analysis of the modes of economic production or a theory for how the classic Marxist problem of “base–superstructure” fits into his model of hegemony struggle and the caliphate. Related to the question of how the caliphate is to confront and transcend capitalism and its processes of domination is the question of how political hegemony is to incorporate what Laclau calls the plebs, or those discarded by the system of global capitalism. Before we turn to these questions, we must understand Sayyid’s conception of postmodernism and Muslim subjectivity.

Postmodernism: The Collapse of Western Universalism and Islamism

As a term, postmodernism, is thrown around so frequently and applied so widely that it often loses coherence.⁹ Sayyid, pulling from hegemony theory, provides a cogent account of postmodernism that links the phenomenon to the emergence of Islamism. In Sayyid’s framework, Islamism is a political movement that follows the collapse of the discourse of what he names “Western universalism” – a discourse of Western liberalism as well as Christianity fused into a wider semblance of values, culture and so on.¹⁰ Although it is not clearly periodized,¹¹ Islamism emerges in the context of this collapse of Western universalism where no single dominant discourse is capable of reigning primary or supreme, including what Sayyid calls the discourse of “Westernese”. There is rather a multiplicity of vying and competing discourses that may aim for a totalization of their core orientation and principles but fail to achieve any such hegemony.¹² Thus postmodernism names the process of the collapse of a formerly universal Western hegemony, wherein what *was* hegemonically Western has *now* become a discourse that no longer compels its wide adoption by the larger public in the West.¹³ As Sayyid notes,

The contest between Islamists and their enemies is not a conflict between fundamentalists and liberals, but a contest between a Western project and a Muslim project to write itself into the future.¹⁴

Importantly, with this model of hegemony in mind, neither the West nor the Orient (or Islamic discourse more generally) are immutable systems of universalism in and of themselves; the only constant or immutable space in this context is the “political frontier” or space of hegemonic contention between competing universals. The main claim here is that as long as Western exceptionalism has a place for determining universality it requires a frontier to define this universality from; and that frontier is Islam. Therefore, Sayyid is not claiming that there are a number of rival competing universals; he is more boldly claiming that Islamism is in fact a primary political rival to a failing Westernese discourse. The other claim being made here is that Islamism is a political response to the blocking or foreclosure of political expression and determination that Western hegemony holds globally. This contention has effects on everyday Muslim identity and subjectivity in the world in that it makes the *a priori* position of Muslims immediately politicized. In some areas of his work, he presents the policies of the War on Terror as concrete examples of the collapse of Westernese and its reactionary tendencies to discipline Muslim subjectivity by preventing Muslims from rivaling it.¹⁵

This framework of thinking about universality must be understood in reference to a particular theory of the political as a sphere of contention and conflict. This way of thinking the political emerges from the thought of Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. The political, for Schmitt, is a sphere of difference opened by a rupture or split in ordinary political existence. As we mentioned above, this opening is dependent upon the creation of the friend and enemy distinction or the emergence of the state to draw a line of contention between multiple groups. The political is thus activated when the friend and enemy distinction emerges. The wider field of hegemony theory adopts Schmitt’s idea of the friend and enemy distinction and applies it to a thinking of politics that is quite different than Schmitt’s more directly fascist politics, i.e., hegemony theory uses this concept to understanding not to further pacify the friend and enemy distinctions among groups, but to think positive forms of political antagonisms that are opened by it.¹⁶

The condition of postmodernism has made Islam a politicized signifier in the public sphere, and this has affected Muslim subjectivity by politicizing Muslimness in public life. Thus, any form of Islamic politics must be aimed at overcoming the scandalous presence that Muslims are forced to inhabit in social life. In other words, the condition of postmodernism has resulted in a deeply politicized social existence for Muslims, and one of the core objectives of Sayyid’s work on the caliphate is to offer theoretical strategies for moving the ummah toward a new relation to the political. This subjective experience with the political is different from previous colonial iterations of political conflict in that the *ummah*, Sayyid argues, is largely a diaspora community today. He argues that Muslim identity today is routed by a diaspora form of identity; no longer is the nation-state the

central point of identity for Muslims. The people and the homeland are disarticulated.¹⁷ As Sayyid remarks, the *umma* as a diaspora is one that “subverts, hyphenates and hybridizes national identity”.¹⁸ The question of engagement with the sphere of the political hinges on the way in which Muslim identity forms itself around a common project in what Sayyid calls the Islamicate.

In the post-colonial period, there have been two dominant means for pinning down an Islamicate identity: Islamic economics and the Islamic state.¹⁹ But these projects, from Pakistan’s emergence as a Muslim state, to the Iranian revolution of 1979 and more deviant and radical efforts such as ISIS’ declaration of the caliphate must be seen as failed attempts to achieve a full Islamicate identity formation. Sayyid argues these projects have failed precisely in that they did not adequately harness an Islamicate identity in their process of becoming. To theorize this failure, Sayyid relies on the ontological theory of Heidegger, specifically his ontic and ontological distinction – as mentioned earlier. Heidegger’s ontological distinction to politics makes the space of existing politics (the status quo) the ontic, while the political is the domain of the ontological, which is the privileged space of a becoming community.

This distinction, or “political difference”, privileges interventions into the ontological (political) as the site of truth production, as it remains the space where thought can affect and alter the ontic. In Sayyid’s framework, the ontic refers to a partial expression of the Islamicate, such as a politics focused on the economy or the nation-state and not the entirety of the ontological ground of the Islamicate. The problem with ontic interventions is that they are self-limiting in that they do not provide a wide enough ground for the creation of an Islamicate identity to flourish. Islamic economics is a negative example of ontic politics in that it posits an expression of politics that sutures the universality of Islam to a limited sphere of political existence. The project of Islamic economy, despite all of its vast proposals and diverse field of ideas, can thus be seen as a political failure in its inability to open up a hegemonic project.

Another example of an ontic expression of Islam, although this is not mentioned by Sayyid, would be the way that many neo-traditional scholars and ulema claim that Islam is a “way of life” definable by rules and laws. This form of expression amounts to a suturing or attaching Islam to the sphere of the legal and the moral alone, to the exclusion of the political. The outcome of this exclusion of the political is that no new ground is possible for creative re-inventions. Neo-traditional movements fail to touch the ontological ground and thus fail to present the community with the potential for the development of a “fresh world of ideas” for which the prophet Muhammad’s establishment of the first Muslim community is the example *par excellence*. In short, the establishment of this more comprehensive idea of the Islamicate can only be done as a political act.²⁰

Islamic liberation theology is another example of an inadequate form of politics as it privileges the legal and the transcendent in its constitution of the social space, thereby ignoring the domain of the political. Without engaging the political, Sayyid argues, quite convincingly, that Muslims will remain relegated to the status of “a people without history”²¹ – which is to say that political acts punctuate historical time and open new temporal potential for the Muslim community. An important consequence of this theory of the political is that the spheres of the moral and the ethical are de-privileged as first philosophy (as having priority) and the political or the ontological refers to a form of being in which a fuller becoming is thought in a more constant form of active becoming, not a final end in itself.²² This parallels but also differs with a more general trend in continental and post-Marxist philosophical thought, which functions on what I name a political suspension of the ethical, or theorizes ethics and morals as necessitating a political intervention.²³ The political suspension of the ethical²⁴ can be described as follows: in order to ground a conception of ethics that brings about a moral framework for thinking the good, the right or the just; ethics must come after a political break with the social. In its Aristotelian conception, ethics is a discipline of philosophy that thinks about the good life, or *eudemonia*.

The political suspension of the ethical is thus based on a wider claim that ethics cannot be realized in the context of contemporary capitalism or post-colonialism (for Sayyid). Ethical interventions are not efficacious in producing their desired effects of justice or morality due to the inevitable corruption of the world as it is, and the enhancement of human flourishing cannot be actualized or realized until a political intervention re-situates a given social arrangement. To speak of ethics is thus to speak of meta-ethics as politics now precedes ethics as the first philosophy; ethics becomes an ethics-to-come after a political intervention. This means that the priority of political thinking falls on the question of developing a new ground for the political – it falls on developing a foundation by which an ethics can emerge. In other words, in order to ground an ethics that produces moral frameworks²⁵ for thinking the good, the right or the just; ethics must come after a political break with the social.²⁶

Sayyid’s theory of the political is in line with this political suspension of the ethical. For Sayyid, the political is a condition that erupts when the social fabric is torn open, when habits and routines are thrown into question.²⁷ This tear is what both starts a hegemonic process and what opens the space of the political. Politics, in distinction from the political, emerges after (and with) this opening or tear, as “a domestication of the political on an *ummatic* scale through the institution of the politics of Islam”²⁸ – and the name of this institutionalization of politics is what Sayyid calls the caliphate. Importantly, this is a version of the caliphate that is not merely tied to physical and territorial space, but tied to a space that fosters the development of an ethical life for Muslims.

The caliphate, Sayyid notes, “has to be capable of building a world in which Muslims are not a scandalous presence”.²⁹ In this formulation, the caliphate is radically re-conceptualized as an abstract social space, not necessarily limited to regional or territorial confinement; the caliphate is now thought of as a site of becoming where an Islamicate identity becomes able to imbue Muslim subjectivity with an ethical horizon. Sayyid’s conception of ethics is therefore in harmony with the wider political shift in ethics occurring in post-Marxism and continental philosophy. This is a form of what we might call “deferred ethics” wherein Muslim subjectivity is opened and liberated within the space of the caliphate, and ethics is experienced after and as part of an unfolding and ongoing series of political struggles.

Counterpublic (Caliphate) as Worldmaking: Polemic or Problematization

As a strategy of worldmaking, one of the more interesting strategic modes of realizing the caliphate that Sayyid invokes is through the concept of the counterpublic. The concept of the counterpublic is a strategy Sayyid deploys to think of a set of possible cultural transformations as well as power-building approaches to achieving the caliphate. The concept of a counterpublic was first developed by queer theorist Michael Warner in the 1990s and it refers to a self-organized space that exists discursively, as a series of texts: websites, commercials, slogans, books, and other media, which are the material stuff of publics.³⁰ The standard concept of a public, by way of contrast, resembles the older model of voluntary associations central to the overall functioning of civil society. The public has to do with the address of public speech, a form of speech that is addressed to the personal and impersonal registers. To maintain this personal and impersonal address intact, Warner notes that, “a public is a relation among strangers” and he goes on to note that:

A public unites strangers through participation alone. Strangers are not exotic, but they must be a part of the world. Strangers in a community are placed towards commonality, but in a public, the stranger does not need to be on a path towards commonality.³¹

Counterpublics, on the other hand, are formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment (the public), and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion of the public’s hegemony and normative status. Warner is correct to point out that counterpublics are formed in relation not only to the common public, where an imaginary discursive set of texts arises to separate the counterpublic from the wider public, but also in relation to the state. The state thus forms both publics and counterpublics, but in the case of the counterpublic,

the state is situated as a threat/enemy to the proliferation of texts within its space; thus, the fashioning of a counterpublic is often based on a desire to abolish the state or to re-structure its own relation to the state.

A counterpublic must therefore formulate its address to a different type of stranger than the stranger of the mass public; the counterpublic forms its address to an audience interior to its own making. Warner argues that counterpublics in the age of the mass public tend to write in a dense and opaque way in part because their mode of address is to a public that does not yet exist.³² Furthermore, Warner argues that counterpublics understand their own revolutionary potential to be directed toward a future public, one for whom the present obscurity of its language will be enacted in a future time. This tendency to write to a set of strangers who will understand *in futurity* evokes a certain messianism and apocalyptic attitude toward a counterpublic.

A counterpublic is a process of worldmaking where what is enacted occurs through the development of cultural texts, artistic productions: films and plays from which a new language is developed. This process is what Warner names “worldmaking as polemic”, where the developments of these cultural productions present a stark separation from the public. This polemical model, it must be noted, is the model Sayyid follows in his conception of the caliphate as a series of cultural transformations in the arts and culture. The polemical counterpublic is significant in any theorizing of the caliphate as it entails a process of laying the proper ground for a caliphate to come, which means it is a future-oriented construct, addressing a mode of social existence to come.

The other form of worldmaking, what Warner names “problematization”, entails an ethics of dialogue that is internal to the polemical formation. This form of worldmaking arose after the May 1968 global protests against capitalism wherein an internal dialogue of the protesting counterpublic developed a series of practices that involved the development of a new public scene that has a different temporality from the counterpublic of polemic. A counterpublic of problematization is thus formed around speech that is aimed at the creation of a future public. Instead of inventing a new space for identity formation, it seeks agitation with the state and other dominant publics but from within its own space of worldmaking. This description of the counterpublic is important in that both of these forms – problematization and polemic – must be implemented in tandem, an insight we will track in the conclusion of this article.

Laclau and Sayyid: Power, Hegemony, and the Persistence of the Plebs

What is distinctive in Sayyid’s theory of hegemony from that of his early teacher and mentor Ernesto Laclau?³³ In this section, I aim to show that where Sayyid

differs from Laclau is over the role of power in a hegemonic struggle and this difference over power means that if we adopt a Laclauian account of the caliphate, the very notion of hegemony must cover excluded subjects: “underdogs” and “plebs”. In Laclau’s theory, the project of a counterpublic caliphate is one that must tether with the other, meaning that non-Muslims are an essential part of thinking of the caliphate as a counterpublic. As we noted in our analysis of the “political suspension of the ethical” above, the sphere of the political is what jolts political subjectivity of a given community into a new mode of subjective change based on a decisional or eventual eruption in the social. As Oliver Marchart states regarding this “moment of the political”:

What is given in the moment of the political is not only a crisis within a particular discourse (which leads to conceptual change only), but the encounter with the crisis of breakdown of discursive signification as such – in political terms, the encounter with society’s abyss or absent ground.³⁴

In Marchart’s reading of post-Marxist philosophers Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, and Jean-Luc Nancy, he identifies a common treatment of ontology in their conception of the political as that which “can step in as a radical supplement to an absent ground”.³⁵ Sayyid reads postmodernism as tied to a particular collapse of the meaning-making capacity of Western hegemonic discourse, and an outcome of this collapse is that “Islam” now functions as an empty signifier. In a paradoxical way, the collapse and crisis of this situation now permits Islam to contend in the field of politics about core issues of ethical life, from what it means to be human, freedom, to liberty. As Isabelle Garo has said of Laclau’s relationship to postmodernism, unlike many postmodernist philosophers who assert the effective dematerialization of reality replaced by its simulacrum, Laclau rather stresses the effectivity and quasi-demiurgic power of discourse once it is embodied.³⁶ The same positive embrace of the power of discourse and hegemony theory is no doubt apparent in Sayyid as well.

Sayyid’s understanding of the Islamicate strikes a similar theme to that of Laclau’s notion of the political, and indeed to Laclau’s hegemony theory, although his aim is to theorize leftwing hegemony struggles that might lead to a new “instituting moment of society”.³⁷ As mentioned earlier, both Laclau and Sayyid are not anti-foundationalists but post-foundationalist, which means that there is no final ground wherein signifying reconciliation is possible or totally complete. For both thinkers, such a full reconciliation or totalizing achievement is not possible at the level of a single mode of identity in the form of say communism for Laclau, or Islam for Sayyid. This is why the notion of the Islamicate as a layered process of continual social construction and development is so important in Sayyid’s

conception of social struggle as it shrugs off any essentialist or totalizing demand of politics. To quote Laclau:

Since there is no original fiat of power, no moment of radical foundation in which something beyond any objectivity is constituted as the absolute ground on which the being of objects is based, the relationship between power and objectivity cannot be that of the creator and the *ens creatum*. The creator has already been partially created through his or her forms of identification with a structure into which h/she has been thrown. But as this structure is dislocated, the identification never reaches the point of a full identity: any act is an act of reconstruction, which is to say that the creator will search in vain for the seventh day of rest.³⁸

Taking his cue from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Laclau defines any ontologically realized thing similar to the way that Freud names a particular form of desire as monstrous and impossible to reach a point of signification.³⁹ This means that in any discursive chain one particular signifier cannot integrate a final ground of identity in the ontological – thus, to transpose Laclau’s thinking onto Sayyid’s idea of the Islamicate, any potential Muslim identity formation of the Islamicate would remain riddled with partial objects, unable to inhabit the status of the universal. The ontological distinction between the ontic and the ontological, in Laclau’s conception, seeks to demonstrate that the ontological is only ever reached as a series of partial objects through the ontic and every ontic element of an Islamicate identity project might play the role of the ontological, but these specific ontic projects only function as stand-ins for the ontological because their signifiers are internally split between a differential and an equivalential side.⁴⁰

A brief note on Laclau’s terminology: equivalential signifiers form links of solidarity across heterogeneous particularisms, whereas differential signifiers maintain separation among particularities. The transition from more local and particularistic political demands to the development of a more collective set of demands realized in a hegemonic struggle, for example, operates through the construction of equivalential links. For example, the empty signifier of “Equality for All!” may form an equivalential link across identity groups, from labor unions, to racial minorities, to women’s rights groups functioning as a common but empty signifier that forms a common link among these groups. This plurality of links becomes a singularity through its condensation around a popular identity and through that point a hegemonic bloc is formed, and this process takes place through what Laclau calls “condensation”. But importantly, for Laclau, there is no ground beyond this play of differences, which is why any theory of discourse contains “no ground that would privilege *a priori* some part of the whole over another”.⁴¹

If we shift Sayyid's project into a Laclauian framework, we arrive at a different theoretical account of the political and ultimately of the caliphate. A Laclauian reading of the caliphate would be one in which a conception of Muslims would take the broader, more populist name of the "people" from power. This setting up of an internal antagonistic frontier entails the deployment of an equivalential articulation of demands making the emergence of "the people" possible; and the unification of these demands into the formation of solidarity.⁴² For Laclau, the caliphate would remain in an empty position, a "zero institution", and Islam would function as an "empty signifier", a quilting point that makes signification possible.⁴³ The empty signifier has no determinate meaning because it signifies only the presence of meaning as such, in opposition to its absence. In this sense, the *ummah* has no positive, determinate function – its only function is the purely negative one of signaling the presence and actuality of a social institution as such, in opposition to its absence.

Sayyid argues for a version of the caliphate as a cultural revolution or a counterpublic enacted outside the sphere of the dominant culture but conscious of its place outside of this sphere of cultural representation. Laclau would caution against such an understanding of the caliphate counterpublic when he argues that being outside of a space of representation does not endow a group with any distinct essence, totality or universality.⁴⁴ The notion of the caliphate as a counterpublic that is outside the sphere of representation of the dominant paradigm of culture does not necessarily imply the creation of a new form of universality.

Within any site of political contestation and hegemony, there is always something that escapes total inclusion; hegemonic struggle persists in the failure to provide a moment of rest for all subject positions. If we understand the *ummah* as inclusive of this concept of excess, or people who cannot be fully included, which according to Sayyid is the lot of Muslims in today's post-Westphalian order, the caliphate must be thought of both as a new arrangement of institutions, as Sayyid maintains; but it must also be thought as a process of worldmaking in which any number of "people's without history" might also find inclusion. For both Sayyid and Laclau, it would be problematic to think that the *ummah* can achieve a fullness of community, or that the community can be realized in a new totality. However, I want to suggest that what Laclau brings to a thinking of the Islamicate, and the caliphate is a particular attention to the antagonistic frontier, and to the question of the other as formative to the stakes of any political hegemonic struggle.

If the counterpublic must think of polemic and problematization in tandem, as an internal and external process of becoming it is to the latter problematization that a consideration of a public that is inclusive of the proletarian subjectivity question emerges. In other words, it seems that a hegemonic struggle set on a becoming Islamicate process would have to bridge to a form of counterpublic hegemony in which agitation with the state and other dominant publics occurs

but does so from within its own space of worldmaking. The problematization of a Muslim counterpublic in which something like a new idea of the caliphate might emerge, thought in Sayyid's way as a processual hegemonic struggle, requires a careful consideration of the sorts of political solidarities that can positively foster the wider struggle.

What we are driving at is a new conception of how hegemonic struggle handles matters of exploitation, social injustice, and forms of domination, which uniquely affects Muslims globally as a result of the capitalist division of labor. Do such questions of tethering the political project of the caliphate to a class conception bound up with capitalist processes of domination represent a false ontic solution such as the nation-state or overly moralistic conceptions of tying everything to Islam have done historically? Any such deeper analysis regarding the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production would necessitate a prior decision on the direction by which the hegemonic struggle will strategically direct its political tactics.

Whither the Plebs? Surplus Populations and Muslim Political Struggles

What we have argued thus far is that Laclau's theories of hegemony compel us to enlarge the scope by which we imagine Muslim political hegemony, as it calls on us to make an account of the way that excess or surplus populations,⁴⁵ in addition to Muslims themselves, fit into the wider Muslim hegemonic struggle. The reason that surplus populations are uniquely pertinent to any Muslim politics in today's time is tied to the fact that these populations are not only discarded from formal productive labor, but they are also often excluded based on their status as refugees or migrants, a designation that uniquely affects Muslim populations globally. But, of course, surplus populations are also diverse and heterogeneous in terms of faith identity. And while there are rich jurisprudential (*fiqh* and *shariah*) resources available for treating non-Muslims within a Muslim polity, the question that the role of surplus populations raises is a more directly political and strategic question; it concerns the material basis by which a Muslim counterpublic can achieve a hegemonic victory over-exploitation and social injustice as borne uniquely from capitalist processes.

We thus need to combine the question of counterpublic political strategy with the question of hegemonic political struggle that aims to establish the Islamicate. Within this combination process, our question is as follows: how are the discarded plebs of global empire, not only Muslims but class positions such as migrant laborers, what in Marxist class theory is referred to as the proletariat – the class that is largely propertyless and who must sell their labor power as a means for basic subsistence – and especially the lumpenproletariat to be included not merely

as allies to political struggle but active agents of worldmaking? Although, as a post-Marxist, it is important that we note Laclau's theory of hegemony does not rely on a privileging of the working-class proletariat in its theory of populism. Although Laclau does argue that "changes to the system will be from outsiders of the system the underdogs those we have called the heterogeneous they are decisive in the establishment of an antagonistic frontier".⁴⁶

A Muslim counterpublic could play a positive role in organizing a site for this wider group of excess populations to contest power by forming alternative modes of political and civic life that remain centered on an Islamicate formation more broadly speaking. These excess subjects would not only serve as a partner in the struggle; they would have to be thought of as part and parcel to the success of the Muslim hegemonic struggle itself as strategic partners. The wider premise of Sayyid's theory of the caliphate as a counterpublic is that it seeks a corrective in the development of the caliphate compared to the historical model of the caliphate embodied in ontic structures such as the nation-state.

As we mentioned, Sayyid points out that previous attempts to unite an *ummatic* identity under the Westphalian order failed because Muslims were not permitted to rally around the signifier of Islam as an identity marker for the creation of a state. Such a project was structurally barred by the Westphalian secular project as it barred any master signifier other than the nation-state to emerge as the universal organization of the people. Sayyid cites the historic examples of the formation of Pakistan as a state and how it limited its points of unified nation-state identity to ethno-linguistic signifiers and consequently failed to rally the state around Islam.⁴⁷ What Sayyid calls for is a thinking of the *ummah* as a people disarticulated from the homeland or the state. The *ummah* must therefore be thought of as a global presence that "subverts, hyphenates and hybridizes national identity".⁴⁸ A future caliphate or *ummatic* identity construction project must therefore be thought around the rallying point of a unified Muslim identity.

The assertion that Muslim identity is less sturdy, less authentic and far more fictional than ethnicity or class and is therefore incapable of constituting and sustaining a collective identity is little more than a reflection of the idea that the political is impossible for the non-West.⁴⁹

This is not to be construed as an argument in favor of identity politics, or an exclusive centering of Muslim identity as the sole signifier in a hegemonic process. As we articulated above, Sayyid's notion of the Islamicate allows for a more heterogeneous process of collective struggle and becoming.

An analysis of Sayyid's political thought does not reveal a particular concern with the tradition of socialism and communist thought, and consequently there is

no concerted analysis of how the Islamicate process might specifically address the persistence of capitalism as a system of domination. In this way, a Marxist critique of Sayyid could easily chalk much of his framework up to a version of utopian thinking in the way it does not deal with the unique forms of exploitation that Muslims will inevitably face in both the struggle to develop a caliphate and in a post-caliphate social and economic order. Addressing and overcoming capitalist forms of exploitation cannot be resolved by moral and ethical jurisprudence or Muslim-centered governance; they must also be considered prior to any political hegemonic struggle as well as followed through in the consequences of breaking with the global capitalist market, indeed if such a direction is called for or seen as necessary. If this question remains unthought, Sayyid's version of the caliphate risks becoming an idealist utopian form of political struggle which could be construed as a hyper politics.

A hyper politics is a form of politics in which deeper and more embedded forms of domination and social injustice remain sunk features of shared political and social life and are not overcome even after a supposedly successful counterpublic hegemonic process occurs. This is not to say that Sayyid's version of the Islamicate must simply become more socialist, for we know that other religious-based political communities, such as early twentieth-century Zionist proposals for the state of Israel, were premised on an insufficiently socialist utopian vision. What attention toward the domination borne from capitalist exploitation does offer, however, is a new way to think of universally intersecting lines of oppression that will inevitably affect any Muslim political struggle. While more serious consideration of capitalism is called for in this regard, one thing is clear; Muslim political hegemony does necessitate political solidarities with other surplus and discarded subjects, and the model for this can be linked back to the early Muslim communities' own rich and documented examples of political solidarities that were formed with different Christian and polytheist communities during its early formation.

Beyond a Muslim Benedict Option: Solidarity and the Counterpublic Strategy

Sayyid's conceptions of the political and hegemony offer a thinking of politics that is not content to assume that a total meaning can be achieved by any Muslim group simply by latching onto the identity formation of Muslimness alone. How might we imagine such a comprehensive framework of political hegemony in a Western context, specifically through the concept of cultural counterpublic? To conclude, we now turn to an exercise in applying Sayyid's framework to Muslims in Western countries, specifically in America.

Given that the conception of the caliphate as a counterpublic hegemonic process is not tied to physical territory, Sayyid's theory opens a more abstract

conceptual and aesthetic model of political action and thought which Muslims outside of Muslim-majority countries can benefit from. Sayyid's praxis is centered on a theory of worldmaking and the creation of a counterpublic, a strategy that other faith-based movements have also adopted. For example, the conservative Christian writer Rod Dreher's popular book, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, presents a similar proposal to that of Sayyid's counterpublic. Both Dreher and Sayyid present strategies for faith communities to form a counter-community to hegemonic liberalism (in the case of Dreher) and Western postmodernism (in the case of Sayyid). Dreher develops something close to the concept of a counterpublic, but a more politically quietist version than Sayyid's.

Dreher's model is centered on the proposal that Christians must begin to actively form alternative micro-communities to resist the hegemony of liberalism and its usurping of Christian morals and values. Dreher's strategy is to encourage a counter space of living for Christians, what he calls the "Benedict Option" (loosely modeled on St. Benedict and his monastic order during the Middle Ages). But unlike Sayyid's conception of the counterpublic as a cultural alternative centered on a hegemonic political struggle, Dreher's strategy opts for a more apolitical turning away from institutions. Dreher's framework is in a way like Islamic liberation theology ends up suturing its conception of political struggle to the moral community as an end in itself, whereas Sayyid's strategy is far from quietist given that it places such a strong emphasis on working with and transforming institutions.

The key difference between Sayyid's and Dreher's strategy revolves around the means by which the counter space is opened. In the case of Sayyid, there is a necessary power, or hegemonic, struggle bound up in any potential achievement of the caliphal counterpublic. Dreher's strategy circumvents political engagement and opts for an apolitical quietist break with mainstream culture. Dreher model is limited as it focuses on a shift at the level of lifestyle break with mainstream liberalism and capitalist consumer culture, wherein practicing Christians can avoid collaboration with the dominant culture.⁵⁰ Sayyid, on the other hand, aims for the creation of a cultural and political situation that is far more transformative.

What might a Sayyidian framework of counterpublic activism look like in the context of the American Muslim community? Most often, Muslim counterpublics form around culture, namely around Hip-Hop and Qawwali music.⁵¹ The American Muslim community is interesting to examine in this regard as it sits at a global crisscrossing of different experiments in counterpublic formation for the global *ummah*. As Hisham Aidi has shown in his study *Rebel Music*, hip-hop music has managed to bind young Western Muslims across racial, ethnic and transnational forms of solidarities around a shared Muslim global identity.⁵²

Sayyid's argument of the decline in Westernese and the crisis of legitimacy that it purports has been exacerbated in the American context, especially since the

2008 economic downturn and the crisis American Muslims face with mainstream politics.⁵³ This crisis with mainstream politics refers to a decline in the viability of mainstream liberal political parties to adequately represent the domestic and global interests of the wider American Muslim community. Arguably, the most visible example of this decline was found in the erosion of trust that American Muslim institutions have had in mainstream political power since the Obama presidency. In the post-9/11 period, the political center of Western countries functioned as the site of partnership and general collaboration between Muslim activists and the state. This collaboration reached a high point with the presidency of Barack Obama, wherein the American Muslim community experienced unprecedented government, NGO, and community-based collaboration with the wider political establishment. But despite this collaboration, it was soon evident that the policy vision of Obama's administration was in many ways a continuation of the neo-conservative vision established by the George W. Bush administration, especially concerning the policies of the War on Terror. The premise of both the Bush and Obama regimes was to develop allies within American and Global Muslim communities to mutually "reform" Islam by identifying Muslim reformers eligible to receive their support.⁵⁴

What undergirded this policy approach was a framing of political reality along a binary logic, wherein conflict was thought to arise across a cultural chasm between the "Islamic" and the "Western" spheres. But through the policy approach, it was thought that this chasm could be closed if dialogue, partnership and mutual trust between Muslims and the various sectors of the state, civil society, NGOs and other actors were to develop proper rapport. What this approach to managing the conflict of the supposed "Muslim-West" divide managed to do was present a theory of conflict that de-emphasized the site of antagonism away from capitalism, private power and imperialism (structural forms of power and racism) and toward an understanding of power as rooted in identity-based formations of difference. The policy task was thus one of bridging and re-routing a conception of the primary antagonisms of politics toward a seemingly endless cultural divide between Muslims and the West. But the demands of American Muslim activists, especially younger Muslims, that developed because of this ongoing collaboration with the state proved to be unrealizable demands. Most notably, Obama's support for the drone program stood out as the most glaring contradiction in his wider effort of relationship-building with Muslim communities. A complete break with the political establishment occurred upon the election of Donald Trump in 2016–2017 and this collapse of the political center opened the possibility for a hegemonic struggle; that is, the friend–enemy distinction emerged where it had not been seen before. As noted above, hegemonic struggle emerges when a tear occurs in the logic of political life, and the friend–enemy distinction reemerges.

Any question of the politicization of Muslims in Western countries, particularly in America, is already bound up with the prior political racialization that Muslims face in an everyday, existential form as citizens. As such, any touching of the sphere of the political must address the problem of Islamophobia. As I have written elsewhere,⁵⁵ a more politically engaged strategy to address Islamophobia emerged prior to the rise of Trump, driven largely by a pervasive sense that the institutional means for addressing rampant discrimination and institutional Islamophobia were not adequately provided by community organizations. A more non-institutional, social media based and individual-based set of activists began to emerge, which sought to actively frame Islamophobia as an issue of racialized exclusion from access to resources and power. Thus, the very axis by which Islamophobia has been understood by a wide cross-section of American Muslim activists has been based on the need to develop partnerships with other marginalized groups and communities.

In a political and social climate where institutional trust continues to be low in working with established political power, including even in the return to a more seemingly-centrist neoliberal administration with the Biden presidency (2020–present) a counterpublic strategy of political activism remains an urgent model for American Muslim activists to think-through. In any consideration of the counterpublic form of political action, it is the question of building solidarity with other marginalized groups that emerges as a central task because of the construction of a hegemonic bloc, especially in an American context in which structural racism and class conflicts affect such a racially diverse cross-section of the population. Through forming solidarity with other marginalized groups, the counterpublic can move from merely a cultural alternative, or quietist Benedict Option, to a movement that seriously contests political power and forms a new world of political possibility.

Notes

- 1 Left-Heideggerians are not all Marxists, however, the lineage from which Sayyid’s thought is connected to typically do have a connection with Marxist thought. For an overview of Left-Heideggerian thought, see Mertel, Kurt C. “Two Ways of Being a Left-Heideggerian: The Crossroads Between Political and Social Ontology”. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, March 2017.
- 2 See further discussion on the dominance of liberalism within Western academic strands of Islamic political thought in Massad, Joseph. (2016) *Islam in Liberalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- 3 I will argue that Sayyid is best understood as a “post-foundationalist” political thinker, not an anti-foundationalist. As his earlier work on hegemony, political struggle and post-structuralism indicates, he is more influenced by the field of post-structuralism rather than post-Marxism in a technical sense. See Sayyid, Salman, and Lilian Zac, “Political Analysis in a World Without Foundations”. In Elinor Scarbrough and Eric Tanenbaum, Eds. (1998) *Research Strategies in the Social Sciences: A Guide to New Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford Academic, 1 November 2003, 249–267.

- 4 Sayyid, Salman. (2014) *Recalling the Caliphate*. London, UK: C. Hurst and Co., 169.
- 5 Heidegger, Martin. (1962) *Being and Time*. London: Harper and Collins, 22.
- 6 The project of Jean-Luc Nancy and Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe in the Philosophical Center for Research on the Political, and the various responses elicited by this center will provide a frame of reference for thinking political difference.
- 7 Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 148–149.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 9 For more background on Sayyid’s treatment of postmodernism, see his path-breaking book, Sayyid, S. ([1997] 2015) *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*. London: Zed Books, 113–124.
- 10 Sayyid argues that the West is not tied to an essence, but is rather tied to a set of particular properties; the West is a set of articulations that point to a particular destiny. See Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 15–16.
- 11 Not every account of postmodernism fails to specify or periodize the transition to postmodernism. For example, the Marxist literary critic Frederic Jameson links postmodernism to the beginning of what he names “late capitalism” which emerges in conjunction with a global economic shift from industrial based capitalism to financial capitalism shortly following the Second World War. Sayyid claims that Western discourse has entered a period whereby it has lost its capacity and efficacy in compelling subjects to adhere to its form of universalism.
- 12 Sayyid, S. *A Fundamental Fear*, 43.
- 13 Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 57.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 16 While Schmitt would not discuss the later Foucauldian concept of “biopolitics”, we can see many of his ideas of the depoliticization of the field of politics as the reign of a form of biopolitics. For more on this connection, see Žižek, Slavoj (2004) “From Politics to Biopolitics ... and Back”. *Southern Atlantic Quarterly*. 103 (2/3): 501–521.
- 17 Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 107.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 23 This trend in post-Marxist thought is commented upon in several works, most notably see Marchart, Oliver. (2007) *Post Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 24 Žižek, Slavoj (2012) *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. New York: Verso, 616.
- 25 Sayyid understands morality as institutional and embedded codes of behavior whereas the ethical is a tightening of the basis of the moral.
- 26 This concept of an ethics to come, or what I name a “meta-ethics” is an argument that I develop in greater detail in an essay entitled (2016) “Love, Psychoanalysis, and Leftist Political Ontology”. In Alejandro Cerda-Rueda, Ed. *Sex and Nothing: Bridges from Psychoanalysis to Philosophy*. London: Karnac.
- 27 Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate*, 171.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 182.

- 30 Warner, Michael (2002) *Counterpublics*. London, UK: Zone Books.
- 31 Ibid., 89.
- 32 Ibid., 130.
- 33 Salman Sayyid studied with Ernesto Laclau at the University of Essex.
- 34 Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Ontology*, 32–33.
- 35 Ibid., 164.
- 36 Garo, Isabelle. (2023) *Communism and Strategy Rethinking Political Mediations*. Gregory Elliott, Trans. New York: Verso Books, 2023, 80.
- 37 Laclau, Ernesto. (1990) *New Reflections on the Revolutions of Our Time*. New York: Verso Press, 47.
- 38 Ibid., 60.
- 39 See Laclau, Ernesto. (2006) *On Populist Reason*. New York: Verso Press, 116
- 40 Laclau, Ernesto. (2012) *Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. New York: Verso Press, 145.
- 41 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 68–69.
- 42 Ibid., 74.
- 43 Sayyid remarks Islam "... is a quilting point: a name that unifies a discursive formation." *Recalling the Caliphate*, 149.
- 44 Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, 159.
- 45 In addition to the potentially revolutionary power of the working-class, a major theme in thinking the contemporary class struggle for Marxist thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek has been the proposal of the "nomadic proletariat", a global class position that is not defined as proletarians in the strict Marxian sense but are more in line with the lumpenproletariat, i.e., surplus populations. The category of surplus populations is defined by individuals whose labor position is not assured within productive labor in a formal sense. It has been a hallmark of Western Marxism in the post-Second-World-War period running up to the present to center the surplus or lumpenproletariat class in revolutionary political struggle, a trend that was apparent with the Black Panthers all the way up to more contemporary Marxist thought such as the Endnotes collective. See Endnotes Vol. II *Misery and the Value-Form*, April 2010
- 46 Garo, *Communism and Strategy Rethinking Political Mediations*, 78.
- 47 Sayyid, Salman *Recalling the Caliphate*, 126.
- 48 Ibid., 109.
- 49 Ibid., 125.
- 50 Dreher, Rod. (2017) *The Benedict Option A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. New York Sentinel Books, 185.
- 51 Ibid., 127.
- 52 Aidi, Hisham (2014) *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- 53 See Considine, Craig. (2017) "The Racialization of Islam in the United States: Islamophobia, Hate Crimes, and 'Flying while Brown'". *Religions Journal*, May 2017.
- 54 See Mahmoud, Saba. (2006) *Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- 55 Tutt, Daniel. "The Saturation of Islamophobia Activism". *The Islamic Monthly*, January 2015. <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/the-saturation-of-islamophobia-activism/>

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