
2. Thinking Islamism, (re-)thinking Islam

One way of describing the discourse on 'Islamic fundamentalism' is to call it 'orientalism'. Until Edward Said's pioneering critique, orientalism was simply an academic label describing disciplines that studied 'Eastern' societies, histories and languages.¹ Since then, it has come to denote an exercise in power/knowledge by which the 'non-western' world is domesticated. The debate generated by Said's critique raises several important theoretical points regarding the possibility or desirability of an epistemology that is aware of its site of enunciation. For example, Said argues that the construction of fundamentalism as a key term to analyse political conflicts is derived from the concerns of 'intellectual factories in metropolitan centres like Washington and London'.² This allows the 'abnormality and extremism' of fundamentalism to be contrasted with the moderation and reasonableness of western hegemony.³ As we saw in Chapter 1, attempts to articulate fundamentalism are exercises in normalizing and perpetuating the hegemony of a particular cultural formation. At the heart of this debate about self-reflexive epistemology (that is, an epistemology that does not start by assuming its uncontested universalism) is the question of the status of Islam. Is orientalism able to provide adequate descriptions of Islam?

Said, by combining Foucault's ideas on discursive formations⁴ with Gramsci's thoughts on hegemony, built up a powerful critique which questioned the validity of orientalism.⁵ Said rejected orientalism's claims to be a neutral scholarly activity that studied the East. He contended that orientalism was made possible by the imperialist expansion into the Muslim world, and, simultaneously, it made such an expansion possible. Thus, the practice of orientalism was inexorably bound up with imperialist domination over large parts of the Muslim world.⁶

Specifically, Said argued that orientalism provides accounts of Islam (and the Orient) which are organized around four main themes: first, there is an 'absolute and systemic difference' between the West and the Orient.⁷ Secondly, the representations of the Orient are based on textual exegesis rather than 'modern Oriental realities'.⁸ Thirdly, the Orient is unchanging, uniform and incapable of describing itself.⁹ Fourthly, the Orient is to be feared or to be mastered.¹⁰ Orientalism operates within several theoretical narratives: it is a theory of despotic power; of social change, of exoticism and of rationality.¹¹ All these narratives rest upon the assumption that Islam is ontologically distinct from the West. The orientalist approach to Islam can be summarized as 'essentialist, empiricist and historicist';¹² it impoverishes the rich diversity of Islam by producing an essentializing caricature.

Said's critique flirts with two different forms. In one form it sees the orientalist enterprise from the perspective of a sociology of knowledge: that is, the critique tries to show how western scholarship was subverted by its complicity with western imperialism, and how the reality of the Orient was distorted by orientalism. This is what I call 'weak orientalism'. The best example of this is provided by Said in *Covering Islam* (1981), the telling subtitle of which is *How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*.

In its 'weak' version, orientalism remains a discourse of power/knowledge informed by the historically specific conditions of European global expansion. Though Said is aware that there are older precedents which characterized Europe's relations with the 'other' (e.g. Ancient Greeks, the Crusades), he is able nevertheless to date the beginning of orientalism as coinciding with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt. Although he is equally aware that the question of orientalism raises more general issues about the representation of the other, he is unable theoretically to ground this. As a result, Said's reading of orientalism as an act of violence is limited. For him, the violence of orientalism comes from the power it exercises over 'Islam' – that is, violence is political and not 'philosophical'. In this version, orientalism remains a discursive possibility of imperialism.

The other form Said's critique takes is that of theorizing the orientalist enterprise, not in terms of its validity but with regard to how orientalism actually constitutes the Orient. This is what I call 'strong orientalism'. In this discourse—theoretical approach, the

problem with orientalism is not just that it distorts the 'real' Orient but that the Orient itself becomes a creation of orientalism. 'Strong orientalism' is not as developed as 'weak orientalism'. Largely because Said's relative scepticism about Derrida's enterprise prevents him from locating the violence of orientalism – not just in the relations of power, but in the logic of western metaphysics. Said interprets the confrontation between Foucault and Derrida as a struggle about what the text is. According to Said, Derrida sees the text 'as a praxis on whose surfaces and in whose interstices a universal grammatological problematic is enacted'; whereas for Foucault, the text's existence is due to a 'highly rarefied and differentiated historical power associated not with the univocal authority of the author, but with a discourse constituting author, text and subject which gives them a very precise intelligibility and effectiveness'.¹³ It is easy to understand why Said should side with Foucault, since his critique of orientalism rests on trying to historicize and implicate orientalists, colonial institutions and the Orient in relations of power/knowledge. However, his hasty (but qualified) dismissal means that he is unable to use the tools developed by Derrida to theorize more rigorously the possibility of 'strong orientalism'.

An indication of some possibilities of 'strong orientalism' is provided by Bryan Turner's reading of orientalism. While Turner agrees with Said that orientalism constructs itself by a number of binary oppositions, he is keen to emphasize the way in which Islam is deployed as a counterfactual possibility. That is, the study of Islam emerges as a contrast to Christendom/the West/modernity. Thus, it is a means of establishing and reinforcing the identity of the West. Orientalism is an attempt to write the history of the West through the history of the 'other'. Orientalist narratives about the 'Orient' function as a supplement to the origin of the West.¹⁴

For Turner, orientalist narratives hinge upon a bifurcation between the West and Islam. The practice of orientalism established a set of binary oppositions in which the plenitude of the West was contrasted with the lack of the Orient: so that the West had rationality, the Orient was irrational; the West had tolerance, the Orient was fanatical; the West was progressive, the Orient was traditional; and so on. Islam is consistently identified with the negative and antithetical terms. The similarities between Turner's description of orientalist discourses and Derrida's description of western metaphysics are

striking. Derrida characterizes western metaphysics as consisting of a 'violent hierarchy' of binary opposition in which one term is privileged over the other (the pure over the impure; the rational over the irrational; presence over absence, etc.). The subordinate terms are guarantees of the existence of hierarchy; they are outside the system but, none the less, the condition of its very possibility. What is involved in orientalist discourse is the spatial fixing of the metaphysics of presence. The power of 'strong orientalism' does not just come from its attachment to imperial networks of control, it also comes from the organization and sedimentation of particular grand narratives which tell the history of the West.

'Strong orientalism' is the reason why attempts to read Said's *Orientalism* as simply a sociology of knowledge founder.¹⁵ Attempts to reduce the critique of orientalism to the problems of scholarship and other textual problems is completely inadequate. What is at stake is not whether particular scholars are bad or dishonest, it is not a question of bias; the problem of orientalism is the problem of what space exists for the 'other'. Said's attempt to account for orientalism outside the context of imperialism becomes strained because, by treating orientalism as power over the production of texts, Said has difficulty in explaining how orientalism continues to function outside those particular historical power structures which he examines in *Orientalism* – he has difficulties in coming to terms with the full implications of the constitutive role of orientalism.

Many of Said's critics find it difficult to understand his insistence that there is an equation between power and knowledge. They prefer instead to discuss Said's arguments (regarding how knowledge about the Orient is produced and distributed) without considering what kinds of power structures enable such production and distribution.¹⁶ Thus, the Middle Eastern scholars who have responded to Said's critique have tended to focus on its 'weak orientalism' form. This, as Mani and Frankenberg point out, has the effect of transforming political questions into textual problems.¹⁷ For example, it is alleged that Said seems to confuse the generic boundaries by including political and administrative text, diaries and travelogues within his category of orientalist writing. This lack of respect for genres produces a critique which is undifferentiated.¹⁸ There are also attempts to assert that the descriptions of orientalism are empirically valid, that there is a 'real Orient' which corresponds, to some degree, to the

descriptions of the orientalists.¹⁹ There are attempts to show that the 'bias' that Said finds in orientalism is also found in the representation of the 'other' in all societies²⁰ – that his critique is itself reductionist, historicist and ultimately based on an essential dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient which characterizes orientalism.²¹

These clusters of criticisms are not external to Said's text, or merely the product of antagonistic readings; they emerge from the blank spaces and ambiguities within Said's text. In particular, Said himself is not sure how to respond to the challenge of 'strong orientalism'. This explains the curious reticence about the fate of Islam after *Orientalism*. If Islam is constituted by orientalism, what happens when orientalism dissolves? What, if any, kind of Islam will remain? Said's main concerns are with the struggle against western intellectual and cultural imperialism. He illustrates the hostility of orientalism to Islam, his 'counter-writing' is directed towards negating orientalism, but 'the negation of Orientalism is not the affirmation of Islam.'²² This has the effect of turning Said's negation of orientalism into a negation of Islam itself.²³ There is nothing to suggest that he believes that Islam can exist outside the discourse of orientalism. As Binder notes, this is the *aporia* which emerges from Said's critique, beyond which it cannot go.²⁴ This paradox, by which the dissolution of orientalism leads not to a 'liberating interpretation of Islam' but to its dissolution, calls into question the limit of Said's text. Is it really possible for *Orientalism* to go beyond orientalism? For Said, to deny Islam as a meaningful entity would be to threaten his project: how can there be a 'counter-writing' when that which you counter does not exist?

Said seems to sense the ambiguity of his position; he cannot really speak for the subjects of orientalism, since orientalism reduces its subjects to a silence. For Said to speak he has to de-orientalize himself, but this means that Said has to find another place from which to speak. Said seems to understand that orientalism totally constitutes Islam, thus if he starts to speak about Islam, he will be reincorporated into orientalism. Therefore he remains silent regarding the possibility of an Islam outside the field of orientalism.²⁵ It is my intention to show that it is this impasse which has produced anti-orientalism.

Anti-orientalism and Islam

The implication of Said's argument for the study of Islamism is that there is no correspondence between the orientalist articulation of Islam and the diversity of the world of Islam.²⁶ Said's contention is that Islamism is neither homogenous nor monolithic in the way that it is represented by academic and popular mediums. Said argues, then, that there are different tendencies and varieties of Islam and Islamism. He writes:

Thus far from being a coherent movement, the 'return to Islam' embodies a number of political actualities. For the United States it represents an image of disruption to be resisted at some times, encouraged at others. We speak of the anticommunist Saudi Muslims, of the valiant Muslim rebels of Afghanistan, of 'reasonable' Muslims like Sadat, the Saudi royal family and Zia al-Haq. Yet we also rail at Khomeini's Islamic militants and Qaddafi's Islamic 'Third Way', and by our morbid fascination with 'Islamic punishment' (as administered by Khalkali) we paradoxically strengthen its power as an authority-maintaining device. In Egypt the Muslim brotherhood, in Saudi Arabia the Muslim militants who took the Medina mosque, in Syria the Islamic Brotherhoods and Vanguardists who oppose the Baath regime, in Iran the Islamic Mujahideen, as well as the Fedayeen and the liberals: these make up a small part of what is an adversal current though we know very little about it. In addition, the various Muslim nationalities whose identities have been blocked in various post-colonial states clamour for *their* Islam. And beneath all this – in madrasas, mosques, clubs, brotherhoods, guilds, parties, universities, movements, villages and urban centres all through the Islamic world – surge still more varieties of Islam, many of them claiming to guide their members back to the 'true' Islam.²⁷

Thus, Said argues that the term 'Islam' has been overused and is an 'unreliable index' of the phenomena that we are trying to comprehend.²⁸ According to Said the polysemic nature of Islam demonstrates the inadequacy of orientalist descriptions and raises serious questions as to the usefulness of Islam for accounting for recent developments in the Muslim world.²⁹

Said's critique has gained some influence in the study of Islamic phenomena, and has been instrumental in weakening the grip of classical orientalism on the study of Islam and the Orient.³⁰ His

relevance about an alternative to orientalism has led a number of writers to formulate an alternative. There has been an attempt to use other theoretical matrices to analyse Islamic societies and cultures which focus mainly on the 'material' socioeconomic forces at work.³¹ These theoretical interventions have, on the whole, tended to de-emphasize the concerns of the traditional orientalists on the significance of Islam. As a result, the role of Islam has been dismissed as simple nominalism.

The anti-orientalists, noting that Islam is empirically diverse and noting that Said's critique concentrates on castigating orientalism for its monolithic caricature of Islamic phenomena, have produced a theorization of Islam which seemingly rejects essentialism. That is, they have produced an account in which Islam is not reducible to eternal fixed substantive properties which define its 'whateness'.³² This turn towards an anti-essentialist and anti-orientalist understanding of Islam finds its most radical statement in Hamid El-Zien.³³ El-Zien proceeds with a review of various anthropological studies which aim to uncover the 'real Islam'. He focuses on five studies which he uses to represent various positions within anthropology.³⁴ However, El-Zien concludes that the diversity of practices relating to Islam, as revealed in these studies, challenges the assumption that there is a unity of religious meaning. If Islam is constructed by so many different discourses, can it still be Islam? This ability of Islam to be used in a variety of contexts leads El-Zien to the conclusion that there is no such thing as Islam, but that there are only Islams. Therefore, it is not possible to argue that 'a single true Islam' exists. Thus, El-Zien claims that 'Islam', as a concept, is not sustainable, since the idea of 'Islam' presumes a positive content immune to local articulations.³⁵ As he declares:

neither Islam nor the notion of religion exist as a fixed and autonomous form referring to a positive content which can be reduced to universal and unchanging characteristics. Religion becomes an arbitrary category which as a unified and bounded form has no necessary existence. 'Islam' as an analytical category dissolves as well.³⁶

This dissolution of Islam as an analytical category is the hallmark of the anti-orientalist approach. The problem with El-Zien's account is that he believes by demonstrating the multiplicity of the uses of Islam he can refute the orientalist idea that Islam is one entity, and

that by showing the great variety of Islamic practices he is making an argument against essentialism. Pluralization is not a safeguard against essentialism.³⁷ El-Zein rejects the totality of Islam in favour of its local articulations. Consequently, anti-orientalists mark not so much a break from orientalism, as its reversal – a reversal centred around the role of Islam. Whereas Islam occupies the core of the orientalist explanations of Muslim societies, in anti-orientalist narratives Islam is decentred and dispersed. In orientalism we encounter a reduction of the parts to the whole (local phenomena are explained by reference to the essence of Islam), while in anti-orientalism there is reduction of the whole to its constituent parts (Islam is disseminated in local events). The space left vacant by the dissolution of Islam as a serious concept is occupied by a series of 'little Islams' (that is, local articulations of Islamic practices). The problem of identifying these 'little Islams' is conveniently displaced to other categories and it is possible to identify two main categories to which the role of Islam is displaced in anti-orientalist discourse.

Islam as ethnicity 'Islamic' identity is located in ethnic solidarities and conflicts. Islam is seen as an ethnic marker – a mark on an already pre-existing ethnic identity.³⁸ There are two problems here. First, Islam is not a marker of all ethnic identities but only those found in certain contexts. If Islam is not a marker of all ethnic identities, then it is an addition to ethnicity. The nature of the link between the ethnic identities and their Islamic mark is unclear and it is not explained why such an addition is necessary – unless, of course, the ethnic identities are themselves not fully complete. But if this is the case, how can Islam be a mere addition if its presence is necessary to complete an ethnic identity?³⁹ Second, beyond discourses of biological determinism or nationalist absolutism, it is difficult to understand a priori the primacy of ethnic identities. Ethnic identities are as socially constructed as other forms of identification.⁴⁰ The idea that Muslim identity is more artificial than an ethnic identity cannot simply be assumed by examining the nature of these identifications. For example, in the Bosnian conflict Muslim came to denote a community equivalent to Serbs and Croats.⁴¹ In other words, being a Muslim meant being part of a distinct community; what was distinctive about the community was not its ethnicity but its Muslimness. In this sense, the ethnic dimension was secondary.

Islam as ideology Islam is defined as a system of beliefs which, like any system of belief, in the final analysis is a reflection of socioeconomic processes and struggles. For example, Fischer is convinced that ideologies are covers for deeper structural interests.⁴² Here the role of Islam is inserted into a theoretical framework dominated by the opposition between idealism and materialism, in which the material sphere is primary.⁴³ By regarding ideology and society as two distinct spheres whose relationship is one of mere exteriority (a reflective link between two self constituted unities), this narrative seeks to displace Islam to the field of representation of real subjects (for example classes). The role of Islam is strictly secondary and mystifying. Islam is seen as a mere vocabulary through which legitimacy and representation are mediated. However, even if we consider Islam as a vocabulary, it cannot be simply a vehicle through which a set of secular demands are expressed; it is also the condition of possibility by which a set of demands can be constructed. vocabularies are not only expressive but also constitutive. The 'material' realm is not just 'expressed' by a certain vocabulary; rather, the representation itself is constitutive of the identity of that object. 'Reality' ('real' subjects or objects) is external to the representation, and the use of a particular vocabulary has a direct bearing on the identities of that 'reality'.⁴⁴ This means that Islam is not just the way in which deep structural interests are masked, it is also the means by which interests and identities are formed.

These attempts to account for Islam rest upon the displacement of what is to be explained. What unites these two approaches is their attempt to locate Islam in the contemporary world but, at the same time, displace it to the terrain of surface effects, where various signifieds (ethnicity, culture, class, etc.) bear the burden of explanation. What anti-orientalism produces is a series of 'little Islams' reflecting the various economic, ethnic and social factors of the variety of Muslim communities. What remains to be devised is an account of Islam not reducible to these 'little Islams'.

Said's critique apparently leaves only two options open for the study of Islamic phenomena: either one ignores Said's critique and reasserts the orientalist orthodoxy, or one replaces it with anti-orientalism. Either we follow classical orientalism and assume there is an entity called Islam, so there is no need to worry about the object of our analysis and we can consider Islamism to be simply a

manifestation of Islam. Or we can follow the anti-orientalists and assume that the category of Islam is largely irrelevant for the understanding of Islamism.⁴⁵

Anti-orientalists present an approach to the study of 'Islamic phenomena' which emphasizes the role of the political economy. In their framework Islam plays a variety of roles, depending on what socioeconomic context it is inserted into. Their structuralist (eclectic) perspective did not allow them to elaborate on the significance of nominal entities, other than as a form of ideologism. Anti-orientalists, by treating Islam as a nominal entity, tended to dismiss its importance. For them, Islam is nothing more than a label and has no importance in itself; any significance it may have comes from the contents that are attached to that label.⁴⁶ As such, an anti-orientalist framework is unable to provide a viable alternative for conceptualizing Islam. Islam, however, matters. Even anti-orientalist accounts, which are openly dismissive of its importance, and point to its instrumental use as means of supporting or opposing certain cultural and political positions, spend considerable energies delineating its functions.⁴⁷ The question arises, however, if Islam is purely a secondary element, why does it play the role of articulating social/political projects. Enumerating the variety of functions of Islam does not answer the question of why it is that its name is evoked. For anti-orientalists its importance is due merely to its use as a source of symbolic authority and validation – in other words its instrumentality. They, for the most part, do not enquire why it is that Islam is being used in this way.

Islam matters. Therefore, it needs to be theorized. It matters, but not because of the reasons the orientalists give. The anti-orientalists are right to point out the problems of the orientalist construction of Islam and are right to point to the polysemy of Islam. However, despite its polysemy, it retains its singularity. The question remains: why is it that it is the name of Islam, rather than another name, that has become so central in Muslim politics? It is only by theorizing the signifier 'Islam' that one can hope to understand current attempts at Islamization. The possibility of an alternative to the anti-orientalist view is provided by the work of Slavoj Žižek.⁴⁸

The matter of Islam

An anti-foundationalist approach to the relationship between Islam and Islamism would focus on the way in which Islam is deployed in the discourse of Islamism. We have seen that within orientalist discourse Islam is considered to denote a cluster of attributes. For anti-orientalists there is no such thing as Islam, but only the contextual application of the term to denote an ever-changing list of practices. What I want to do is to start with the anti-orientalist description of Islam as a nominal element, and extend that analysis as a way of refining the concepts by which we could identify a discursive object like Islam.

The starting point of an analysis of the political role of Islam must be Saussurean linguistics. The distinction that Saussure made between a signifier and a signified suggests the idea that a sign is a pure metaphor – that is, a sign without a concept is a theoretical impossibility. In Saussurean linguistics the distinction between the acoustic image (signifier) and concept (signified) is based on the idea that a pattern of sound refers to something else (that is, it has meaning because a signifier signifies – is related to a signified). If we say that a signifier has no fixed content (that is, it does not have a signified), we are actually saying that it is an acoustic image without meaning (that is, an acoustic image without any concept). A pattern of sound without a concept (without meaning) would be merely noise.⁴⁹ Islam is not noise; it may have many signifieds but it is never without a signified.

The possibilities of Saussurean linguistics were extended by Roland Barthes. In his earlier work, when he was dreaming the dream of semiology, Barthes examined the equivocal nature of the signifier. Semiology was to be the all-embracing science of signs, which would include all kinds of structural systems: fashion, highway code, myths, food systems, etc.⁵⁰ He stressed the ambiguous character of the sign and the possibility of polysemy. The issue of polysemy rests on the principle that one signifier has no *single* signified but can refer to a set of signifieds, depending on the context. Polysemy entails the possibility that a signifier can be reattached in different contexts.⁵¹ Barthes also maintained that, at the bases of all sign systems, there is a 'natural' language: an authentic and transparent medium. At the core of this natural language is the closed relation between a signified

and a signifier, on which a second order language is built. The first order language is the domain of denotation, against which connotation leans. The closed relation between signifier and signified, however, is abandoned in Barthes's later work, when he criticizes the Saussurean sign and discards the possibility of a first order language.

Jacques Lacan extends the later Barthes's theory of the sign and abandons the idea of the pre-existence – or even the existence – of a signified outside its relation with the signifier. For Lacan (and later for Barthes), the signified is produced by the signifier. The latter is no longer representative of a signified because Lacan abandoned the very notion of representation in relation to the sign. Lacan would then theorize the construction of meaning in discourse as halting the sliding of the chain, or network of signifiers, by the use of a quilting point.⁵³ It is this quilting point which makes possible the illusion of a referent.⁵³

From the above we can argue that Islam is not a signifier without a signified, but a signifier whose meaning is expressed by its articulation. This, however, seems a rather unsatisfactory answer as we are left with two problems. The first refers to the context of any articulation. The second relates to the specific character of the articulation of the signifier Islam: its particular function in the network of signifiers (that is, its status as a nodal point). We should now look at these problems in turn. Even if at the level of theory it is possible to articulate any one signifier (or chain of signifiers) to any signified, no articulation occurs in a vacuum; it always occurs in a terrain where there are already relatively stable articulations (that is sedimented meanings). In other words, signifiers are found in articulated networks.⁵⁴

Moreover, signifiers tend to preserve traces of previous articulations and these traces are organized in chains by the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy. They refer ultimately to no referent or, rather, they point at something beyond that field and from the field itself. But, these traces can be articulated, and re-articulated in chains. For example, in the case of Islam one can see that 'Islam' connotes many things (Qur'an, Messengership of the Prophet, and so on), which it carries along in any of its articulations within any single Muslim community, and these cannot be disarticulated without dissolving the specificity of 'Islam'.

The inter-discursivity of Islam cannot be erased by its inclusion

within any particular discourse. By the same token, Islam cannot be the product of any one discourse (except, of course, its founding discourse). The inter-discursive character of Islam raises the question of what prevents its dissolution: why does it have, not only a specific relevance within a certain context, but also continues to carry some distinctive qualities – for example, its relationship to the Qur'an, to Muslims, etc. Theoretically, there is nothing to prevent Islam from dissolving into its constituent discourses. Islam is saved from dissolution by political action. That is, in the absence of an intrinsic link between signifier and signified, there is a need for that link to be established by a political act and maintained by police actions.⁵⁵ The various attempts to reinterpret and re-articulate Islam already carry within them traces of previous articulations and interpretations, to the extent that all attempts at re-articulation must begin where the last articulation left off. This would suggest that, although Islam can be used to suture a large number of discourses, and that in each act of suturing, its identity will be transformed, it still retains traces of its other articulations.

We can see that re-articulations of Islam have a tradition, that is marks of its previous uses. This tradition is not only temporal. Islam does not only bear the marks of its previous interpretations, it also bears the marks of its current articulations in different discourses. Thus, the content of Islam is provided by the contestation between past and present reinterpretations. Behind these various articulatory practices, there is the trace of Islam's inauguration. This foundational moment continues to act as a call to 'return to the origins'. This return is inscribed in the possibility of recovering the 'original meaning' of Islam. This attempt to recover is never a recovery, for the attempt modifies what was to be recovered and forces us to question the status of this 'return to origins'. How can this calling back to the original Islam continue to operate despite its polysemy? Are we not simply asserting an essence to Islam by imparting it with an original content? I do not suggest that Islam has one true meaning outside the political construction of that meaning, but what I do propose is that the sign of Islam carries with it its history of articulations, including the history of its founding. This moment of foundation, however, has its own specificity.

What does Islam found? Tautologically, it founds a community of those who subscribe to it: Islam founds the Muslim *Ummah*. In this

act of founding Islam is the means by which a community is unified and established: the unity of a 'Muslim' community comes from retrospectively constructing its identity, through the use of Islam as a nodal point. That is, Islam would not only function to unify a particular community with respect to this signifier, but it is also the name by which the Muslim community identifies and actualizes itself. What unites the various 'Islamic' practices found throughout the world is their invocation of the name of Islam. Islam's relationship with Muslims is unlike any other relationship between any element and Muslims, since, within the discourse of Muslims, Islam occupies a privileged place.⁵⁶ The inter-discursivity of Islam is tied up, in a large measure, by its significance for the construction of a Muslim identity.

Does Islam have a different status among the signifiers to which it is articulated? We know that Islam may be used as the means of articulating a multiplicity of positions, but this does not necessarily mean that there are multiple Islams. I would like to recall here the question posed by Žižek: 'What creates and sustains the identity of a given ideological field beyond all possible variations of its positive content?'⁵⁷ This is exactly the question we face: Islam has emerged as the means of articulating a multiplicity of positions without losing its specificity. That is why, when much of the literature complains about the emptiness of Islamist programmes and the malleability of Islamic symbols, it misses the point. What is extraordinary about Islam is that, although it can be used to articulate so many divergent positions, it maintains its specificity – it remains 'Islam'. Žižek sets about answering the question he posed by stating that a field of discursivity is unified and bound by the intervention of the Lacanian quilting points.⁵⁸ The various elements which are constitutive of the field of discursivity do not have positive identities, but their identities come from their insertion into a relational ensemble. Their meaning is given, not by reference to their positive content, but in relation to other signifiers. The quilting point performs the function of totalizing the field of discursivity (unifying it and drawing its limits), and thus produces a meaningful structure.⁵⁹ To put it succinctly, the social is formed by the structuring of a number of 'proto-ideological elements' (floating signifiers) into a unified field, by the arbitration of a nodal point.⁶⁰ This knot of meaning fixes the other elements, arrests their floating, and thus gives meaning to the whole ensemble.⁶¹ The floating

signifiers acquire their identity in the (never fully closed) ensemble of meaning quilted by the nodal point. The significance of the quilting point is that it gives a retroactive meaning to all the other elements in the system. It is this point which organizes the discursive field by retroactively fixing the meaning of the elements. (One should be clear that a nodal point is a functional category not a substantial one: any element may become a nodal point if it is used to quilt a chain of signification.)

It seems that we can fine-tune our description of Islam by considering it as a crucial nodal point. Nodal points are discourse-contextual but not all discourses have the same nodal points. We could go further and argue that Islam is a nodal point in the discourse of Islamism but, of course, one could easily say that Islam is a nodal point in the discourse of *fiqh* (jurisprudence of Islamic law); that it is a nodal point in the discourse of the various Sufi orders; and is also the nodal point in the discourse of the various practising Muslims. In all these cases Islam performs the function of a nodal point: it retrospectively gives meaning to other elements included in the discourse. Of course, there are other discourses in which Islam is just an element, for example the discourse of comparative world religions.

In a totalized universe of meaning we find a multiplicity of nodal points operating to structure the chains of signification, but among them we find one specific signifier – the master signifier – which functions at the level of the totality (that is, it retroactively constitutes that universe of meaning as a unified totality). This master signifier is a paradoxical signifier in so far as it is a particularity that functions as a metonymy for the whole discursive universe. As such, it acquires a universal dimension and functions as the place of inscription for all other signifiers. It is the signifier of the totality that guarantees and sanctions that unity: it designates the whole by its very presence. It functions as the place of inscription of all other signifiers of that totality.⁶² The master signifier is a signifier to which other signifiers refer, and are unified by – and it fixes their identity. It is the unique point of symbolic authority that guarantees and sustains the coherence of the whole ensemble.

But why 'Islam'? Why has it operated as a master signifier in such diverse and multiple discourses? It cannot be due to its substance, since the master signifier does not have a substantive identity. Yet it has something 'that makes people feel that there's something in it'.⁶³

That 'something' is its 'iness'. This is what Žižek calls the real kernel that escapes signification of any constructed object.⁶⁴ In the case of the master signifier it becomes the 'thing', the relationship which holds a community together.⁶⁵ As Žižek says, it is what is accessible only to the members of the community; it is what gives plenitude. It is not a set of features or practices, because there is something 'more' in it – 'something that is present in these features, that appears through them'.⁶⁶ It occupies the place of master signifier because it holds that community together for as long as the members of that community believe in it, even though it marks the point where signification is impossible (that is, where signification fails, since the thing cannot find a referent and no signifier or set of signifiers can fully define it). As such, it is the paradoxical signifier par excellence for, although it marks the failure of signification, its very presence masks it.

It is in this sense that Islam has become the master signifier in Muslim communities. It is analogous to the way in which the nation occupies that place, in the same way, in many European societies. Islam unifies the totality and is the place that holds the community together. It unifies and totalizes and, at the same time, draws the limits of the community. Yet these limits will become areas of contention for any successive articulations of Islam and force us to question whether these limits are marked by ethnic markers (non-Arabs, Arabs), by the post-colonial borders, or solely by its distinction to what it is not – that is, the West.

Islamism: Islam as a master signifier

The relation between Islam and Islamism is not as direct as the orientalisists maintain, nor is it, as anti-orientalisists would contend, merely opportunistic. Rather, it is constitutive – that is, both Islam and the identity of Islamism are transformed as Islamists attempt to articulate Islam to their project. The ability of Islamists to articulate Islam as a central political category is not due, as some maintain, to the reputed indivisibility of politics and religion in Islam.⁶⁷ Rather, it is the function of how Islamists attempt to transform Islam from a nodal point in a variety of discourses into a master signifier. Hence, the often-heard Islamist slogan: 'Islam is the solution'. This is an attempt by Islamists to hegemonize the general field of discursivity

by constructing Islam as a master signifier, the point to which all other discourses must refer.

What makes Islam a candidate for a master signifier? Islamists make use of the inter-discursive nature of Islam in three main ways: they define Islam as *din* (faith), as *dunya* (complete way of life), and as *dawla* (a state or political order).⁶⁸ Each of these attempts to construct Islam also involves confronting and adapting to other interpretations of Islam. It is not that Islamists simply articulate Islam, but that their articulation already includes both other articulations and traces of Islam's presence in other discursive configurations. The Islamist project revolves around gathering the ways Islam operates in different discourses, and unifying them by using Islam as a master signifier.

The master signifier functions as the most abstract principle by which any discursive space is totalized. In other words, it is not that a discursive horizon is established by a coalition of nodal points, but rather by the use of a signifier that represents the totality of that structure. The more extensive a discourse is, the less specific each element within it will be: it will become simply another instance of a more general identity. The dissolution of the specificity and concreteness of the constituent elements clears the path for a master signifier becoming more and more abstract, until it reaches a limit at which it does not have any specific manifestation.⁶⁹ It simply refers to the community as a whole and it becomes the principle of reading that community. It does this by becoming a manifestation of the impossibility of fullness of any social complex. (This is because no social complex is based on objectivity; the differential moments within the social do not refer to a positivity but, rather, an attempt to constitute a positivity.)⁷⁰ The greater the number of elements a master signifier is called upon to muster, however, the more fragile will be the link it has to any particular element. In this case the limits of the discourse will not be provided by an aggregation of antagonistic others, but by an expression of the most general form of antagonism: the incarnation of evil.⁷¹ This is part of the answer to William Connolly's question: why do identities close themselves by defining a range of differences as evil, when there is no apparent threat from the bearers of this difference?⁷² It is only through the incarnation of evil that a multiplicity of differential elements are able to be concentrated in a single point. It is at this point that the political nature of a master signifier cannot be separated from ethics.⁷³ The operation

of a master signifier is an attempt to unify a way of being which is lost and fragmented in its unspectacular mundane daily manifestations.

For Muslims, Islam is the most abstract signifier. This allows it to operate in a most generalized way. It is not that Islam is equivocal or ambiguous and can be articulated to a variety of political tendencies; rather, to make use of the distinction that Rorty draws when describing his notion of a final vocabulary, Islam is the thinnest of phrases in Muslim's final vocabulary. It is this thinness which makes it difficult to contest. Ultimately, for Muslims, Islam is another word for 'Goodness incarnate'. Thus, when Islamists claim that the best government is an Islamic government, here 'Islamic' refers to the incarnation of goodness, so that the claim becomes: the best government is good government. This is a claim which is difficult to refute directly, except by attacking the relation between Islam and the incarnation of goodness. But it is precisely at this point where Islam is strongest, because, for the majority of Muslims, Islam must be the definition of good. It is for this reason that Muslim governments which have been challenged by Islamists have often responded by arguing that Islamists do not represent true Islam, rather than by claiming Islam does not represent true goodness.

Theorizing Islam as a master signifier avoids the essentialism of the orientalist approach, since Islam is not imposed with an historical essence. At the same time this approach rejects the structuralism of anti-orientalist accounts which, by treating Islam as a superstructural moment, minimize its significance, and thus have to resort to categories of 'opportunism' and 'false consciousness' to try and account for the emergence of Islamism. Islamism, then, is a project which attempts to transform Islam from a nodal point in discourses of Muslim communities into a master signifier. In particular, the Islamist project is an attempt to make Islam a master signifier of the political order. It is the struggle to establish which signifiers will constitute the unity and identity of a discursive universe which is central, since the transformation of a signifier into a master signifier is what makes possible the constitution of unity and the identity of the whole and its parts. For Islamists the name of the master signifier is Islam; for their opponents, Islam cannot be the master signifier. The conflict being waged throughout Muslim communities ultimately revolves around this issue.⁷⁴ To clarify the contours of this conflict

between the Islamists and their opponents I need to outline the identities of their opponents and their relationship to Islam. It is puzzling that Islamist projects aim at Islamizing already existing Muslim societies, since how can Islam not be a master signifier in Muslim communities?

Notes

1. I am very much aware of my intellectual debt to Edward Said and his work, and any disagreements that I express in the following pages should be seen in the light of my acknowledgement of Said's influence in opening up these horizons for me.
2. Said, 1994, p. 375.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
4. Said, 1985a, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
6. This does not preclude the possibility that different types of 'orientalism' were deployed in other areas subject to western conquest.
7. Said, 1985a, p. 300.
8. Said, 1985a, pp. 300-301.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Turner, 1989, pp. 631-3.
12. Turner, 1978, p. 7.
13. Said, 1978, p. 703.
14. See, for example, the debate among sociologists trying to write the history of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the problems presented by the endurance of Asiatic state structures. See Wickham, 1985.
15. For example, Halliday, 1996, pp. 199-207.
16. For example, see comments by Irwin, 1981; Al-Azm, 1981; Lewis, 1982; Hourani, 1991, pp. 63-4.
17. Mani and Frankenberg, 1985, p. 176.
18. See for example, Halliday, 1996, p. 213; Lewis, 1982; Irwin, 1981, p. 106.
19. This line of reasoning is very common among *Leftist* critics, wedded to a stagist concept of history, who see in orientalism the confirmation of the Marxist reading of historical development rather than a confirmation of the orientalism inherent in Marxism itself. See, for example, Al-Azm, 1981, pp. 6-8.
20. Halliday, 1996, pp. 214-15.
21. This argument has been most forcefully made by Al-Azm, 1981, pp. 18-22.
22. Binder, 1988, p. 120.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-21.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Said, 1981, p. x.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
29. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

30. Hannam and Rieker, 1988, p. 100. See also the comments by Halliday and Alawi, 1988, pp. 2-3.
31. See Glavanis, 1995, for the way in which political economy-based studies of the Middle East began to proliferate in the wake of Said's *Orientalism* (1985a).
32. For the definition of essentialism used here, see Fuss, 1989, pp. xi and 1.
33. El-Zien, 1977, *passim*. See also Al-Azme's discussion of Islam as a political category (1993, pp. 23-31).
34. El-Zien, 1977, p. 227.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
37. For an elaboration of this point, see Fuss, 1989, p. 4.
38. Zubaïda, 1989, pp. 150-51.
39. This is similar to the argument developed by Derrida to theorize the notion of supplement, see Derrida, 1973, pp. 88-104; 1976, 141-64.
40. Benedict Anderson, 1990, demonstrates some mechanisms by which nationalism is constructed.
41. This contradicts Halliday's assertion that it is never valid to consider Muslim subjectivity as being equivalent to an ethnic community (1996, pp. 115, 119 and 215). The primacy of a subject-position is context-dependent: in certain situations, certain subject-positions may have greater salience than others. Underlying Halliday's attempt to argue that Muslim subject-position is by definition secondary is the assumption that ethnic identities are, by definition, primary.
42. Fischer, 1990, p. 189.
43. See Laclau and Mouffe's 1987, pp. 86-92 discussion of idealism and materialism in their defence of discourse analysis from Gerac's critique (1987).
44. For further elaboration of this point, see Rorty, 1982, pp. 191-210; 1991b, pp. 21-34; Laclau and Mouffe, 1987, pp. 93-148.
45. For example, see Halliday, 1996, p. 114.
46. This is the position taken by Halliday and Alawi, 1988, pp. 6-7.
47. See for example, Halliday, 1996, pp. 207-10, or Shepard, 1987; or Fischer, 1980.
48. For details see Zizek, 1989, Chapter 3.
49. Laclau (1996, pp. 36-46) makes a similar argument regarding what he calls 'empty signifiers'.
50. See Barthes, 1973, *passim*.
51. This examination of the equivocal nature of the signifier forms the bulk of Barthes's early work on semiology. See Barthes, 1973, especially the last chapter: 'Myth Today'.
52. Lacan's notion of quilting points comes from Freud's nodal points. See Freud, 1900, pp. 388 and 456. According to Freud nodal points in dreams are 'elements upon which a great number of dream thoughts converge ... for purposes of condensation and disguise'. Lacan extends this notion: it is 'around them [that] everything is irradiated and is organised as if there were small lines of force formed in the surface of a tissue by means of the quilting point' (Lacan, 1988, p. 383).
53. The illusion of a referent is produced by the retroactive operation of quilting. For further information on this, see Zizek, 1989, p. 95.
54. We never encounter a field that is either empty or only a possibility; nor do we find a fully determined and closed field. There is always a certain ensemble of

- structural limits. The terrain of meaning which is historically constituted is never fully fixed, allowing then a certain play of signification but having a certain stability.
55. Boyne, 1990, p. 105.
56. This privilege is due to its historical circumstances not its essential characteristics.
57. Zizek, 1989, p. 87.
58. See Zizek, 1989, pp. 87-8. See also Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 111-12.
59. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 141. Laclau and Mouffe have annexed this concept of nodal points from the work of Freud (see Freud, 1900).
60. Zizek, 1989, p. 87.
61. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 105-13.
62. Zizek, 1989, pp. 88-9.
63. Freud, 1900, p. 221.
64. This marks the point of failure of representation and the impossibility of fully suturing any unity, but at the same time the master signifier, by its very presence, makes that impossibility since it creates the illusion of the referent and normativity: i.e. the illusion of the necessity of that inscription.
65. Zizek, 1990, p. 51.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
67. For example, see Lewis, 1976, p. 44; Kepel, 1985, pp. 21-4 and 224-8.
68. Ayubi, 1991, p. 68.
69. Zizek, 1990, pp. 51-2. Zizek makes a similar point in regard to the emergence of xenophobia in former Yugoslavia, in which what he calls the 'nation-thing' is the source of identification beyond any concrete manifestation.
70. Laclau, 1990, pp. 90-91.
71. Examples of this logic at work can be seen in Reagan's notorious characterization of the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire'. It can also be seen in the discourse of Khomeinism in which the United States is reduced to the Great Satan. See Bernard and Khalizad, 1984.
72. Connolly, 1991, p. 3.
73. Zac and Sayyid, 1990.
74. This is not to deny that many other factors are in play, including greed, vested interest, short-term calculation, personal advancement and so on. The conflict is like any other political conflict into which a myriad of other factors intrude. The point is that confrontation between Islamists and their opponents overdetermines these other struggles.