

# The Myth of the Clash of Fundamentalisms\*

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A myth that has been heavily promoted recently is that of the clash of fundamentalisms which supposedly shakes the present world. Schematically, it is argued that what we face today is a conflict between the ‘extremists’ of the West and those of the East, namely, of the political fundamentalism of the Washington neoconservatives versus the religious fundamentalism of extreme Islamists. However, as I will attempt to show briefly, such views are not only completely false and misleading, constituting part of the ‘progressive’ liberal ideology supported by both the centre-left (in the framework of today’s social-liberal consensus), and the reformist Left (see, e.g. Tariq Ali’s *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, Verso 2003), but also bear no relation to an antisystemic problematic on this crucial issue. The common denominator of such views is that today’s social resistance movements should turn against these two fundamentalisms rather than against the system of the capitalist market economy itself and its political complement, representative ‘democracy’. It is not, therefore, surprising that analysts of the reformist Left like Tariq Ali and Chomsky end up with the baseless conclusion that the Left must support the Democratic candidate in the elections, ‘forgetting’ that when the ‘progressive’ Clinton succeeded Bush senior he went on, as representative of the transnational elite, to bombard Yugoslavia, while preparing the ground for the present invasion and occupation of Iraq through a crushing embargo and remorseless bombardments!

On the other hand, according to an alternative problematic (see Takis Fotopoulos’ *The War against ‘Terrorism’*, Athens, Gordios, 2003), today’s conflict may be seen as the main expression of political globalisation, i.e. as the political administration of capitalist neoliberal globalisation by the transnational elite. This conflict, in effect, began immediately after the collapse of ‘actually existing socialism’ in the East and social democracy in the West —the two versions of statist socialism. The well known events that marked this conflict were the first Gulf war, the systematic subjection of the Palestinian people to Zionist oppression, NATO’s war against Yugoslavia, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the indefinite war against terrorism that was set in motion by 9/11. In reality, however, this is neither a case of war nor of terrorism. A war against anyone resisting systemic violence<sup>[1]</sup> is inconceivable, whereas the counter-violence<sup>[2]</sup> to systemic violence has always characterised every form of heteronomous hierarchical society —the resistance movements invariably being called ‘terrorist’ by the dominant elites!

Today, those activists among the Arab peoples (i.e. the peoples who find themselves at the centre of the transnational elites’ attack because of their geopolitical position) who resist its systemic and political-military violence, are called ‘terrorists’. It is well known that, after the demise of the Arab socialist and nationalist movements, many of their members

resorted to Islamic fundamentalism. This was not, of course, out of a sudden conversion to religious obscurantism, but rather because these movements -even where they seized power (Egypt, Syria etc) - proved unable to avert the intensifying economic and political decay of the Arab nation which culminated in the 1967 war. It is not accidental, therefore, that the Islamic fundamentalist movements began flourishing at the end of the 1960s. Clearly, then, these movements attract fighters not for religious reasons, but mainly for social ones. The same reasons led to the creation of the first fundamentalist regime, that of Iran, when the struggle for the overthrow of the Shah's tyranny (a Western clientele regime) led many activists into the ayatollahs' embrace. Similarly, the Palestinians turned to fundamentalist organisations not only because of the fact that such organisations refused to cooperate in the selling off of their struggle through the Oslo agreements, which would have established a kind of Bantustan in Palestine, but also because these organisations offered significant social services to the lower strata —something that was never effectively done by Arafat's corrupt regime.

In all these cases, therefore, religion has been used by the peoples who have particularly suffered the consequences of the concentration of power at the hands of the transnational elite as a unifying element, as an ideology, exactly as was the case with Arab nationalism and socialism. This does not of course mean that there are no 'nett' fundamentalists who are motivated by purely religious incentives, which sometimes even include the aim to establish theocratic regimes. However, even then, contrary to the transnational elite whose main goal is the imposition —by violent means if necessary— of the western model (market economy and representative 'democracy') all over the world, fundamentalists aim to replace the present Western protectorates in Islamic countries with theocratic regimes, and not to universalise their obscurantist model —as the ideologues of the New World Order misleadingly claim!

Correspondingly, the neoconservatives' ideology does not constitute any kind of extremist fundamentalism either, as is deceptively suggested by the centre-left and the reformist Left in order to hide the essentially systemic character of the present crisis and conflict. Neoliberal ideology is the basic means used by the transnational elite to justify the systemic violence implied by capitalist neoliberal globalisation, which, in the context of the present system of open and liberated markets, and contrary to the nonsensical arguments of the reformist Left, is indeed a one-way street. An indication of this fact is that all the centre-left parties which have taken power over the last two decades or so in France, Italy, the UK, Germany and elsewhere have not only never considered even attempting to overthrow neoliberal globalisation but, instead, have been doing everything they can to adapt to it, covering their actions with a social liberal ideology («Third Way» etc). Finally, the question of whether neoliberal globalisation, in the form of the New World Order, will be imposed by the hegemonic power within the transnational elite (as the Washington neocons would like to see) or collectively by the entire elite, as most of its European members (and John Kerry) would prefer, is of course merely a matter of tactics and not of goals, which are shared by all of the elite's members.

The obvious conclusion from the above analysis is that the supposed 'clash of fundamentalisms' is simply part of the cycle of violence that characterises any heteronomous World Order. Systemic violence and state repression (if not state terrorism), as well as counter-violence (including popular terrorism), are built-in elements of any society characterised by an unequal distribution of political and economic power. But, if the ultimate cause of political violence in all its forms is the asymmetry of power it is

obvious that the only way out of the cycle of violence is the elimination of this asymmetry and particularly the elimination of systemic violence. This involves the establishment of new political and economic institutions that aim at the equal distribution of power in all its forms, between, as well as within, nations, and the parallel creation of a culture compatible with it.

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[1] **Systemic violence** is defined as the institutionalisation of highly asymmetric situations arising from the concentration of power in all its forms, that is, the institutionalisation of political, economic and social inequality. Such asymmetric situations may therefore refer to the economic level, where the built-in control of economic resources by a minority, which is institutionalised in a market economy system, leads to unemployment, poverty and insecurity for vast parts of the population; the political level, where the institutionalisation of the control of the political process by a minority in a representative 'democracy' leads the vast majority of the population to political alienation and apathy; the social and cultural levels, where the control of social and cultural institutions by parts of the population leads to various forms of discrimination against the other parts.

[2] **Counter-violence** against systemic violence may be undertaken by social groups collectively, or by individuals acting on their own. **Collective counter-violence** may take the form of direct action, violent demonstrations and riots that may culminate in a violent revolution and, in extreme cases, it may assume the form of guerrilla warfare or even popular terrorism. **Individual counter-violence** mainly takes the form of crimes against property (robberies, break-ins, car thefts etc), although it may also take the form of physical violence, as in the case of terrorist activities undertaken by individuals or groups (which do not have organic links to popular movements so that they could be classified as forms of popular terrorism) against the elites and their representatives. Collective counter-violence, when it takes mass proportions, could lead to either direct **state repression** (i.e. the violence against civilians, which is undertaken directly by the state apparatus and is bounded by normal legal proceedings, with the aim of fighting collective counter violence) or, in extreme cases, to state terrorism, whereas individual counter-violence is dealt with stricter legislation on crime and corresponding increases in the prison populations.