

## REGARDING FUNDAMENTALISM: FEW COMMENTS ON THE ONE AND THE OTHER

*Fondamentalisme Concernant: Peu de commentaires sur l'Un et l'Autre*

*En cuanto a Fundamentalismo: algunos comentarios sobre el Uno y el Otro*

*Em relação Fundamentalismo: alguns comentários sobre o Um e o Outro*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a psychoanalytical perspective on fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is inextricably linked to the history of the modern and industrial world, to the transformation of the class structure, to colonization and to the development of science and new technologies. All types of fundamentalism share protesting and reacting against change. Cultural identity is a key concept for understanding fundamentalism, which seeks to defend it. On this matter, Freud and Lacan have shown that the process of identification is based on a structural alienation and the fragility of the subject in cultural identification and their need to belong leads to rigidity and blind obedience.

**KEYWORDS:** Fundamentalism. Psychoanalysis. Cultural identity.

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**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet article présente une perspective psychanalytique sur le fondamentalisme. Le fondamentalisme est inextricablement liée à l'histoire du monde moderne et industrielle, à la transformation de la structure de classe, à la colonisation et au développement de la science et des nouvelles technologies. Tous les types de fondamentalisme protestent et réagissent contre le changement. L'identité culturelle est un concept clé pour comprendre le fondamentalisme, qui cherche à la défendre. A ce sujet, Freud et Lacan ont montré que le processus d'identification est basé sur une aliénation structurelle et la fragilité du sujet dans l'identification culturelle et de leur besoin d'appartenance conduit à la rigidité et l'obéissance aveugle.

**MOTS-CLÉS:** Fondamentalisme. Psychanalyse. Identité culturelle.

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**RESUMEN:** El artículo presenta una perspectiva psicoanalítica sobre el fundamentalismo. El fundamentalismo es una especie de fanatismo reciente intrínsecamente ligado a la historia del mundo industrial moderno, a los cambios de la estructura de clases, la colonización y el desarrollo de la ciencia y las nuevas tecnologías. Todos los tipos de fundamentalismos comparten protestas y reacciones contra el cambio, y la identidad cultural es un concepto clave para su propia comprensión. Freud y Lacan, en este sentido, han demostrado que el proceso de identificación, para este caso, se basa en una alienación estructural en la cual se percibe una fragilidad del sujeto quien, mediante identificación cultural y su necesidad de pertenencia a algo, se conduce a la rigidez y la obediencia ciega.

**PALABRAS CHAVE:** Fundamentalismo. Psicoanálisis. Identidade cultural.

**RESUMO:** O artigo apresenta um olhar psicanalítico sobre o fundamentalismo. O fundamentalismo é um tipo de fanatismo recente intrinsecamente ligado à história do mundo moderno e industrial, às transformações da estrutura de classe, à colonização e ao desenvolvimento da ciência e novas tecnologias. Todos os seus tipos compartilham protestos e reações contra a mudança. A identidade cultural é um conceito essencial para a compreensão do fundamentalismo, que visa a defesa dessa identidade. Freud e Lacan, nesse sentido, têm mostrado que o processo de identificação se baseia em uma alienação estrutural e que a fragilidade do sujeito na identificação cultural e a sua necessidade de pertencer o leva à rigidez e a obediência cega.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Fundamentalismo. Psicanálise. Identidade cultural.

During an anti-US protest in Bangladesh in October 2001, the demonstrators carried large banners in support of Osama bin Laden. On some of these posters, Bert, one of the Muppets of *Sesame Street*, was shown peeking from behind bin Laden's left shoulder. The connection caused some perplexity: the West's public enemy number one was shown alongside a children's character loved by the American media and a mouthpiece for American values.

If it is true that all types of fundamentalism share protesting and reacting against change, resisting the modernization and secularization which they regard as a threat to the very roots of their alleged "cultural identity", it is also true that, as the above example shows, the contamination they resist so furiously has always already happened. We see this in the weapons that the fundamentalist fighters use, in the different media technologies they employ, in the banking system where they invest their money, in the racist slogans borrowed from the very cultures they are fighting against and so on. Fundamentalists are an integral part of the world they condemn and they make ample use of its resources and customs.

Given that each fundamentalist considers himself the guardian of a certain orthodoxy bound to protect his identity, as well as the identity of his group, it is useful to examine the topic of "cultural identity" in more details. The notion of "cultural identity" harkens back to the historical and cultural baggage specific to a given social group,

which most of the time shares the same language, and includes the traditions, experiences, rules, values, habits and know-how that are related to the way in which the group maintains and organizes itself, treats its members and behaves towards its geographical environment. The notion was at the basis of the modern concept of the nation, which went hand in hand with the assertion of the principle of popular sovereignty and the introduction of the new conception of the state. Following the 18<sup>th</sup> century revolutions, the legal adoption of *natural law* (the philosophical doctrine which attributes to man certain natural and inalienable rights, freedom and equality) implies an understanding of the state whose power is no longer absolute but limited. Based on an individualistic view of society, the state is now considered a function of the individual and the individual no longer considered a function of the State.

History indicates that the notion of "cultural identity" is by its very nature in flux; it is inhabited by constant transformations, which reflect the changes in the social bond and in the individuals that belong to it. Cultural identity maintains an unstable equilibrium between tradition and transformation. It is by definition an aspheric idea, as it is always the case in the domain of 'identity'. On this matter, psychoanalysis has much to offer. It has shown that the process of identification relies on a structural alienation. As Lacan points out, the emergence of the subject of

the statement necessitates a passage through an undefined subject and a reciprocal subject, which are logical agencies within the collective. Through a specific context (symbolic, imaginary and real); through language, *lalangue* and the primary affective environment where the exchange with the other inscribes *jouissance* in the body; through the identifying with the expectations and fantasies of the child's caretakers, the elements of a primary cultural identity, which is at the same time a subjective identity, are articulated. The exchange with the other is by definition a transmission, since it carries within itself, as Lacan puts it, the sound deposits ("*dépôts sonores*") of "the ways in which a group handles its unconscious experience"[1974, p.189].

What we call "culture" is a social bond infused with the subject's libidinal and affective relationships to the collective from which the subject originates, whose resonances we will continue to carry throughout our lives. The feeling of *belonging* to a specific cultural identity provokes immediate affective responses: whether it is nostalgia, joy, shame or rejection. This is inevitable, given that it results from an "operation" of identification that had initially mapped out the territory of the subject's drives and structured his relationship to the world. However, based on these premises, the identificatory process continues to operate throughout a lifetime, depending on our social life and standing, on the historical context in which we live, on our work and studies, our health, interests and so on. Always in a state of becoming, cultural identity includes both the idea of a community of kin and the ideas of plurality and difference. In this sense, the way in which the term is used -- and abused-- by all those who would like to turn it into a finite set of specific characteristics, which could be counted and determined, is quite paradoxical. It is a contradiction in terms, a hypostasis of sameness: a cult of the One that contradicts the divided nature of the subject of language and serves as a basis for nationalist, racist and segregationist claims.

In relation to this, we remark that the larger the need to adhere to a pre-established identity, the

stronger the necessity to manifest this need, the weaker is the subject that is expressing it. This is the case, for example, with many young people during adolescence, when the need to separate oneself from one's original environment and become independent, as well as the need to give meaning to the problems of existence, can result in one's joining all kinds of identity formations, which are often fetishized or radicalized. The vulnerable subject finds support in identifying with a group, in which, as Freud has shown, putting a person, thing or ideology in the place of the ideal, fosters the libidinal ties among members and strengthens the feeling of belonging. The result is often a homogenization and uniformisation, a bracketing of subjective responsibility and sometimes a blind obedience to the rules dictated by the ideal. By giving the individual a sense of certainty, the group masks the subject's own insecurity and restores a feeling of unity that is by nature fleeting. Let us note that the more the symbolic context is lacking (lack of recognition and social integration, lack of education, affective isolation, segregation, marginalization and so on), the more unstable is the subjective image and the sense of self. The ego responds to this instability with a defensive rigidity, a paranoiac turgidity, which easily leads to aggressiveness, violence and self-destruction. Hatred is triggered by the ego's reaction to the very alienation that constitutes it. Responding to the transitivity with the other inherent in the operation of identification, hatred reacts to one of the forms of the subject's *existence*.

Often, the group exploits the subject's paranoiac tendency and legitimizes it, turning it into the substance of a collective revolt against "the other", "the outside", "the enemy" -- whose function is to consolidate the group's identity. Leaders take advantage of the individual weakness to reinforce the group's cohesion, obtaining in this way the submission of its members. This submission relies on manipulating individual libidinal drives, which are allowed to roam free in the service of a common ideology, whether the individual is rewarded or gratified, thus boosting

his narcissism, or by allowing him to kill, rape, dominate, humiliate and so on, thus satisfying what Freud called *Murderlust*, the lust for murder.

Resorting to cultural orthodoxy as a guarantee of total identity is both a mark of weakness and a very precise attempt at manipulating the social bond. In this context, we should distinguish between the two concepts of *nation* and *nationalism*. It is interesting to note that when a people recognizes itself as a “nation” (from the Latin verb *nasci*, “to be born”), it does so based on the construction of a collective memory. The latter is not necessarily derived from factual elements; it can include both facts that have actually occurred and myths and legends. All of these elements make it possible to characterize a given social bond as distinct from another. Based on the meaning of the received tradition, such a construction retroactively assigns a function to what the group itself defines as its historical baggage, depending on the requirements of the present-day community. This shows how memory, by turning backwards, is constructed in a forward fashion. This is a process of identification and selection, which, by linking together factual and imaginary elements, ensures that its own history is only to be constructed in the encounter with difference.

If by “nation” we mean a cultural community of territorial relations of kinship, where the notion of kinship structurally implies the idea of difference, we must distinguish this concept from both the “state” and from the ideology we call “nationalism.” A “state” designates a structure exercising sovereignty over a given territory, through institutions that promulgate and maintain certain laws and govern the relationships between individual citizens. A nation can become a state, but a state can contain different nations; the two concepts, one cultural and the other legislative, do not overlap. On the other hand, “nationalism” denotes an ideology (and a relatively recent one, if we think of Johan Gottlieb Fichte’s 1808 *Reden an die deutsche Nation*), which is founded on 1) the opposition between one nation and another (which can emerge even within the structure of a single state) and 2) the support of a single, systematic

vision unable to tolerate difference. In this sense, nothing is further away from the idea of a nation -- a community within kinship -- than nationalism.

This is worth keeping in mind because in many cases, past or present, the appeal to nationalism *destroys* the nation’s cultural identity. Nazi Germany was a macroscopic example of this. The invention of the Aryan race and its mythology, the apex of an identity construction whose elements were over determined by a very precise political and economic project, tore to pieces the social fabric of between the wars Germany, destroying its pluralistic cultural identity and dismantling certain aspects that were crucial to the complexity of its history. The cult of the One leads to totalitarianism, and thus to the disintegration and abolition of the cultural specificity of its followers. In this sense, the attempts to systematically eliminate certain elements of one’s cultural heritage show the radical bias of the vision that sustains it, the way in which the weakness of an ideology masks its true aims, which have nothing to do with a collective identity but strive instead to obtain political and economic power by oppressing the masses through sanction and terror. As an example, we can think of the many “cleansing” campaigns which have been carried out over the centuries in the name of a credo or an ideology, in different cultures and places around the world.

And yet, we must distinguish between the past and current ways of attacking the cultural heritage of a given people. If various forms of fanaticism and millenarianism existed over the centuries, fundamentalism is of a recent date. Fundamentalism is inextricably linked to the history of the modern and industrial world, to the transformation of the class structure, to colonization, to the development of science and new technologies, as well as to the rise of, precisely, a new conception of the state inspired by the Rights of Man. The term itself is derived from *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Faith* (1910-1915) of the American Baptist Church, which advocated a return to the dogmatic foundations of faith, contrary to both modernism and the Evangelical theological rationalism. In order to defend the Protestant faith against the

reformed tradition, Christian fundamentalism gained a foothold by attacking other forms of Protestantism, liberal theology, “Romanism” (Catholicism), socialism, modernism, atheism, evolutionism and so on and so forth. According to their nationalistic base, the values embodied by the conservatives in small American towns and villages expressed the “authenticity” of the nation, in contrast with the alleged depravity of urban modernism -- epitomized by woman, sexuality and alcohol.

As an expression of change in modern society, fundamentalism must be distinguished from other forms of pre-modern fanaticism. Here, the fetishized, literalist and absolutist return to a supposedly “sacred” text -- seen as an expression of the divine word and a guarantor of a monolithic world vision -- takes on the form of a paranoiac convulsion as a reaction to the hostility or the transformation of local conditions. Such conditions are part of a social reality in which the foreign has already gained control. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the present-day manifestations of fundamentalism are also expressions of globalization, the development of human rights, the free movement of ideologies, the speed of information as well as the transformation of the neoliberal economy, which has developed thanks to factors such as the supranational powers of investment.

As the vicissitudes of its name illustrate, ISIS deliberately makes a reference to the idea of the state. It has proclaimed a program of territorial conquest (following the slogan “Consolidation and expansion”) based on a totalitarian state as its preliminary condition. Its aim is to subjugate nations conquered by force, to “denationalize” them in order to align them with a law that is imposed through the systematic destruction of the specificities of the subjected groups, and of the cultural reference points underpinning their national images. Following the Wahhabi slogan revived by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (named ‘Caliph’ by ISIS in July 2014): “Those who would not conform to this view should be killed, their wives

and daughters violated, and their possessions confiscated.”

Hannah Arendt observes that totalitarianism is an expression of the mass society and a form of power that differs from both despotism and tyranny: it implies a systematic destruction of the existing social, political and legal traditions, and imposes a regime of terror, which makes ideology into a principle of action. These applied ideologies, Arendt remarks, are “-isms” which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise – a comprehensive explanation of reality, which can interpret any political act as a secret conspiracy and encourages both the acting out and the enjoyment associated to it. What is particular to the mass crimes such regimes perpetrate, is their attempt to strike at and abolish the symbolic universe of the victims; it is a will to deprive them of their cultural heritage and identity – as it was the case in the “final solution.” The cult of the One brings out the passion of hatred that aims at the other’s being, at the other’s uniqueness and history, and tries to abolish its symbolic environment – whether the target is the body, art, architecture, books or habits.

In this context, it is no accident that fundamentalists of different cultures share one common target: women. According to Lacan, hatred as a passion is what comes the closest to the *ex-sistence* of the speaking being [*parlêtre*]. It is a response to the subjective division expressed through the act of speaking in the structural discordance between knowing and being; a division manifested on the side of speech closer to the subject’s eternal exile. It is a response elicited by the encounter of the limitations of the Symbolic in face of the Real. Which brings up the irreducible aspect of the encounter with difference and its traumatic quality. It is not by accident that Freud makes the refusal of femininity (*Ablehnung der Weiblichkeit*) a key factor in the subject’s resistance to his or her own truth, regardless of one’s sex. The unrelenting fight against femininity, the desire to subjugate it, to reduce it to nothingness, shows the unbearable character of the

confrontation with a difference that is, in fact, an encounter with one's own difference and division. The "love of the whole" -- the belief in a phallic, imaginary, turgescence completeness -- shows its fundamentalist tendencies, its terroristic implications, as a result of the denial of subjective *ex-sistence*.

Related to the structural exile of being, hatred aims at the irreducibility of the One within difference. The Other cannot be added to the One; the two can never be complementary -- quite the contrary, the Other differentiates itself from the One, emphasizing its intrinsic discordance and undermining the dream of an ideal and satisfying complementarity.

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