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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
IN ISLAMIC CONTEXTS:
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
APPROACHES

Maria Cardeira da Silva

I will present, very briefly, some of the main approaches within social sciences, and particularly anthropology, which have contributed to elucidate social movements in Islamic contexts. This is specifically intended to provide a general overview, in order to more easily situate the following presentations. This also aims to better integrate those readers less familiarized with the anthropological jargon and current debates on these subjects. I will give particular importance to ethnographic research and its relevant role in preventing or refraining essentialist conclusions and considerations on matters of such political relevance. I will also highlight the authors who have used their ethnographies in order to try to solve the current dilemma between political and analytical approaches, a dilemma that is a frequent source for misunderstandings on these topics.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, ethnography, resistance, social movements, Islam, gender veil.

I usually like quoting Dale Eickelman, one of the authors I will frequently mention here, who says that “anthropology is a research area in which competence is acquired through taking part in its central discussions at the right moment” (2002). In order to reinforce the disciplinary strength of anthropology, I should add that this competence results from its accumulated historical knowledge as well as the reflexive capacity it has shown in its adaptability to new contexts.

In order to situate myself more clearly in the historical genealogy of my discipline, I should also say that although I agree with Sahlins, Kuper and others when they say that anthropology must not yield to moralisation or excessive politicisation, I think that this cannot inhibit it from participating in debates that are more central to contemporaneity. Social movements in Islamic contexts is a matter that cannot be avoided. This was one of the reasons why, following a brief but inspiring period as a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, in Leiden, I suggested to CEAS that we should organise an International Seminar on Social Movements in Islamic Contexts.

The seminar took place on 17 and 18 June 2005 with the participation of all the authors included in this issue apart from Saba Mahmood. Unable to come to the seminar herself, she contributed to the event by sending a revised version of an article about her excellent work on pietist movements in Cairo,¹ which we

¹ An earlier version was previously published in *Cultural Anthropology* volume 16 (issue 2), in May 2001, called “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival”.

present here in a Portuguese translation. We regret, however, that we were unable to have access to the written version of the joint paper given by Abdoolkarim Vakil and S. Sayyid, “‘Being a Muslim is a Hard Core Thing’: Islam, Muslims and Seeing the Wood for the Trees”, which would have contributed to providing an even more complete approach to the various current perspectives on social movements in Islamic contexts.

The original idea of this seminar was to bring together participants who had undertaken ethnographic work in a variety of Islamic frameworks and thus able to help us find out more about the collective action of people striving to build a better place to live on their own terms.

We must first try to establish what we are talking about when we talk, here and now, about social movements within an Islamic framework.

We could perhaps, to be more exact, though without great originality, adopt, when speaking about Islamic contexts, Marshall Hodgson’s term (in *The Venture of Islam*) of “Islamicate” as “something that would refer not directly to religion, Islam itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.” (1977 [1974]: 59).

With this initial intention in mind, the aim was to make known at least the range of such movements. We wanted to show a) that in an Islamic framework not all forms of resistance were expressed exclusively through a religious idiom; b) that in Islamic contexts, there was a wide variety of movements – ethnic, feminist and young people’s – that might or might not, be mobilised by religion; c) that Islamist movements – understood to be mobilised by and for Islam – not only adopted different discourses and strategies for action but also held different positions with regard to State/Nation and transnationalism.

It must be made clear that we should not read into these aims some covert plan to pulverise Islam and demean its political force. In fact, our insistence on diversity is only the result of anthropological knowledge of this universe among others, sustained by the ethnographic exercises on which, above all, anthropology bases its legitimacy.

In any case, this project was obviously a very ambitious one – from both a theoretical and a logistical point of view – to deal with in a first seminar in a discipline which, apart from anything else, has been, for some time, on the periphery of theorisation on collective action. So for this and other reasons, this presentation will have to be brief.

If, as I said, anthropology has for a long time not been very productive with regard to movements of collective action, the truth is that the European paradigm (where Alain Touraine, among others, is a leading figure) obliged anthropology to engage in a dual exercise of concentration, by emphasising the cultural aspects of mobilisation in ethnic, religious and gender forms in what it designates “new social movements” or “identity-oriented movements”. On the one hand, this

paradigm forced anthropology to focus on the endogenous movements of Western multicultural societies while, on the other hand, it compelled it to focus on decentralisation in order to concentrate on collective movements in non-Western contexts. As Marc Edelman (2002) put it, anthropologists were drawn to New Social Movements (NSM) perspectives for the central role that NSMs accorded to cultural practice as a force for political transformation. This link was formed to the detriment of previous models, that privileged a focus on resource mobilisation, which is not so appealing to anthropologists as it gives less importance to the processes of social and cultural mobilisation than to logistical and political resources and opportunities. Resource mobilisation theory had the further disadvantage of ignoring the different forms of “shadowy, submerged (Melucci) or hidden (Scott) forms of resistance that might or might not lead to collective action (Burdick)” (Edelman 2002). It is exactly this “quiet encroachment” that Asef Bayat, one of the leading names in the study of social movements in Islamic frameworks (and who unfortunately could not attend this seminar), examines among the poor in Cairo and Teheran (1997, 2000, 2002):

Quiet encroachment refers to non-collective but prolonged direct action by individuals and families to acquire the basic necessities of their lives (land, shelter, urban collective consumption, informal jobs, business opportunities and public space) in a quiet and unassuming illegal fashion. (2002: 19).

Bayat uses this paradigm “given the shortcoming of the prevailing perspectives and showing that this kind of grassroots activism tends to contest many fundamental aspects of the state prerogatives, including the meaning of order, control of public space, of public and private goods and the relevance of modernity” (*idem*). Perhaps as a reaction against the South American inspiration behind most social theory, Bayat contests the simplistic vision of Islamist movements in the region as being merely a Middle Eastern model of urban social movements. As he says, despite some similarities between these movements and others that inform previous theories, Islam seems to present broader aims and objectives. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, in particular the Liberation Theology Movement, Islamist movements often tend to mobilize not the poor but mainly the educated middle-class, which they view as the main agents of political changes.

Unlike Bayat, Quintan Wiktorowicz defends that Islamic activism should be incorporated in the social sciences of collective action and that these movements’ similarities and shared mechanisms of contention – resource mobilization, decision making and framing, each of which is operative in both Islamic and non-Islamic activism – must be emphasised to the detriment of their specificities. Such an understanding avails itself of a broader array of paradigms, theories and comparative empirical studies (Wiktorowicz 2004). It is the same

methodological position, though with obvious and dangerous political effects, that leads him to state that rather than perpetuate the unhelpful assumption that Bin Laden is “outside” Islam we should assume that al-Qaeda represents a part of a radical tendency within the transnational Salafi social movement that includes reformists and jihadis, violent and non-violent tendencies (Wiktorowicz 2005).

While it is true that anthropology has not accompanied analyses of Islamic movements in the light of collective action theory as applied in sociology and political science, the discipline has helped, to some extent, to reveal areas of resistance in the contemporary Islamic world. In fact, ethnography has played an undeniable role in deconstructing the paradigm of the indissolubility of the sacred and the profane, the religious and the political. A paradigm that, despite everything, influenced – and still influences – a view the media projects of an Islam without a civil society.

This was one of the orientalist misconceptions that Edward Said denounced, which led to a reappraisal of Islamic societies (and not only Islamic societies) and opened the doors to a number of ethnographies that relativised and challenged it.

Among the anthropologists who responded to Said (others, such as Maxime Rodinson, Fanny Collona, Pierre Bourdieu and Talal Asad himself, had in fact already taken up the challenge before Said) were self-designated “halfies” and feminists such as Leila Abu-Lughod: the construction of “ethnographies of the particular” with a view to a “tactical humanism” (Abu-Lughod 1991). Elaborated as a provisional and tactical response to epistemological challenges, the solution created new challenges. First, within the discipline, it inhibited its competence for comparativism and limited its participation in the discussion about cultural events which, secondly, from the standpoint of some cultural critique, made it easier to reify ethnicised or even individualised interpretations (especially when using life stories in studies of “ethnic minorities”) of Islam. Thirdly, according to more politicised Islamic discourse, particular ethnographies can be used as arguments to pulverise Islam as universal discourse. The latter seems to be, to a certain extent, Sayyid’s position in *A Fundamental Fear. Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (2003 [1997]) when he criticises anti-orientalist anthropologists, such as El-Zein (1977), who, in their anti-essentialist anxiety, end up by reducing Islam to an ethnic dimension or to an exclusively ideological one.

We should, however, refrain from returning to the debate on Islamic anthropology and focus on the ethnography of social movements and remember, as Tapper has said, that “the anthropological study of religion is not theology. It is not necessarily against either theology or religion. But good anthropology does have subversive potential; it asks awkward questions about the political and economic interests and the personal connections of powerful ideologues at

all levels of society; it also asks how ideologies are constructed and how language and other systems of symbols are manipulated" (Tapper 1995: 190).

It is precisely anthropology's ability to denaturise what is seen as acquired that increasingly encourages other disciplines, such as cultural studies and political science, to use ethnographic methods.

It is the case of political science as illustrated here by Alev Çinar, which makes combined use of ethnography, history and literary criticism to show us the performative politics of alternative modernities in Turkey. Alev shows us how competitive models of modernity are expressed in everyday life and exhibited to the "public gaze", and how different performances make use of the body, re-interpret national history and occupy the public space, confirming that "Islam is confronting, negotiating and challenging secularist construction of the national, modern, Western Turkish subject, as defined and interpellated by the constitution and monitored by the state" (2005).

Alev's recent work is very representative of a trend that has been expressing itself since the early 1990s in some publications that Dale Eickelman has co-authored and co-edited. The first was *Muslim Politics* (1996), which Eickelman wrote together with Piscatori. This book saw the start of challenges made to the model upheld by Ernest Gellner, amongst others, who derided the existence of a civil society in Islamic contexts. The challenge continued in collective works such as *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (1999) that Eickelman co-edited with Jon W. Anderson. These books explained how alternative media are related with the growth of Muslim middle classes and invite us to read this in the light of the role that Benedict Anderson had assigned to newspapers in the formation of a modern bourgeois sensibility, filling and expanding the "public space" between "mass" and "class". More recently, *Public Islam and the Common Good* (co-edited with Armando Salvatore in 2004), drawing on examples from the late Ottoman Empire, Africa, Asia, South Asia, Iran and the Arab Middle East, again challenges an ethnocentric concept of public sphere that considers secularly-oriented rationality to be the normative terrain on which public life flourishes. For this, new processes and agents ("religious celebrities" and hajj-organizing business enterprises) are made especially evident in the progressive consumption and commodification of new forms of religiosity installed between "official" and "popular" Islam that shape public Islam nowadays (see Salvatore and Eickelman 2003).

However, the theory has, of course, adjusted itself during this intellectual process to the social and cultural realities it has encountered. While anthropological theory and ethnographies have acknowledged the existence of a public sphere in Islamic contexts, actual contemporary witnesses in countries such as Turkey and Iran – which have received more media coverage – corroborate this idea.

The case of these two countries has become even more interesting as they also seem to challenge another orientalist paradigm: the "harem" or the

silencing of women who eternally wait to be rescued by Westerners. Alev Çinar again makes use of ethnography (following the path of another political scientist, MacLeod, in his celebrated *Accommodating Protest. Working Women, the New Veiling and Change in Cairo*) and demonstrates how veiling and unveiling should then be interpreted within the framework of a changing Turkey, as symbols of negotiations dealing with the limits of public and private space in which women are taking part.

Although my work has not focused on collective action movements, I have been able to observe in a continuous manner the way in which some women have progressively made use of the veil, modesty and other Islamic features and taken on notions of modernity they find more suitable, especially with regard to conjugality. I conducted research work twelve years ago on the Salé medina in Morocco, and have revisited the country on a number of occasions (1998, 1999, 2003). Of course, there are far more eloquent works than mine in this field. This is the case, among others, of Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), in which she understands Islam as a "discursive tradition" (following in the steps of Foucault and Talal Asad) and examines grassroots women's piety movement in the mosques of Cairo, whose orthodox practices are commonly viewed as inconsequential to Egypt's political landscape.

None of these works is aimed in any way at concealing forms of violence and domination, masculine or other, in their contexts, nor to stifle secular movements that fight together with other discursive traditions for men's and women's liberation. They merely ask different questions from different points of view. As Saba Mahmood put it so well, "by allowing theoretical inquiry some immunity from the requirements of strategic political action, we leave open the possibility that the task of thinking may proceed in directions not dictated by the logic and pace of immediate political events." (2005: 196)

Yet, perhaps Iran is nowadays the *locus* of the most lively debate between secular feminism and Islamic feminism – which received a great deal of press coverage when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to one of its activists, Shirin Ebadi. In view of the fact that women were seeking new forms of emancipation by endeavouring to interpret the *xaria* and trying to conquer more favourable political and social positions within Islam, this debate divided authors such as the anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999), a Cambridge-educated anthropologist, and Haideh Moghissi (1999), a professor of women's studies in Canada, and poses the following question: is Islamic feminism an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms? This discussion only adds to the problems of an already awkward relationship (described by Strathern): that between anthropology and feminism.

Iranian women's political strategies seem to inspire feminists in other Islamic countries. The Egyptian feminist, Nawal Al-Sadawi, ran for the

presidency in the last election, for example, as have Iranian women. Concurrently, Iranian academic debate is also nowadays the inspiration behind feminist debate in other Islamic contexts. This is the case of Morocco, presented here by Ángeles Ramírez. Ángeles is aware that this discussion should not be polarised and that, as Moghadam reminds us in the case of Iran, it is women and not religion that must be central to the debate and that in every group, in every place and at every time, the meaning of “feminism” is worked out in the course of being and doing (Moghadam 2002). Ángeles will demonstrate, on the basis of thick ethnography and paying special attention to local and national practices and rhetoric, how in the case of Morocco and despite a clear political divide between secular feminist and Islamic feminist, the borders between their discursive strategies are blurred and ambiguous.

Debate about women’s movements in Islamic contexts has accompanied, if not integrated, literature on human rights and Islam. The Social Sciences have tried, although without great success, to make the discussion go beyond the level of rhetoric about rescuing other men’s women versus rhetoric about the imperialism of human rights. The anthropologist Joseph Suad interestingly questioned Anouar Majid’s position with regard to the latter formula in his controversial article on “The Politics of Feminism in Islam” (1998). As Suad put it:

Awareness of the problems in the hegemonizing strategies of some rights, democracy, and civil society discourses does not yet give us grounds for dismantling these limited tools currently available to address the wrongs of politically abusive systems. It does, however, call our attention [...] to the extremely difficult and urgent work that must be done to develop better tools that can accommodate cultural diversity. But we must not enshrine “culture” or “cultures” in a defensive attack against the homogenizing and essentializing strategies of hegemonies. Historically, women have been the prime victims of such sanctification of culture. (1998: 365)

This is the current topic of debate between collective rights versus individual rights that runs throughout anthropological literature on human rights but usually becomes feminised when it meets Islam. However, another theme usually included in that literature involves multiculturalism in Islamic contexts. Debate here develops in a similar vein to the debate on feminism. Abdullahi A. An-Na’im is a leading figure in this area and has said that although the constitutions of most Islamic countries protect “religious minorities”, they also allow for the *xaria* to be applied, which, according to him, places them at risk (1987). In a different fashion, Talal Asad, in a recent interview with Saba Mahmood, points out that the principals of pluralism and tolerance are not a modern and liberal invention (1996). Although pluralism of individual interests is one of the areas that the liberal tradition has best theorised on, it has failed in its attempt to

provide ethnic minorities with a degree of representability. Islamic tradition, in turn, is based on notions of plural social groups and religious traditions and is consequently historically well-equipped to construct coherent differences, especially by means of ideas of *ijtihad* (innovation) and *ijm'a* (consensus) as contemplated in Islamic law. It is a fact that cyberspace has allowed freedom of expression for *e-ijtihad* and women's *e-ijtihad* (see Cooke and Lawrence 2005, among others).

Although anthropologists such as Talal Asad have taken an active part in this debate and despite a relatively large amount of ethnographies about ethnic and religious minorities in Islamic contexts, I think I can say that anthropology has done very little work on human rights movements and associations and their performance within these contexts. I also believe that this is a field where ethnographic practices and thick descriptions of how local, national and transnational discourses work, especially in legal pluralism contexts, could be of use.

Turkey and Iran have also received a great deal of attention from anthropologists and sociologists in connection to the mobilisation of young people. Asef Bayat, among others, examines the subversive accommodation of young people in Iran; Ayse Saktanber has been following Muslim identity and youthfulness in Turkey (2002) and Alev Çinar, as we have seen, looks into the way young people have appropriated religious and nationalistic symbols. Further afield in Morocco, Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi shows how young Moroccans are both *soumis et rebelles* (1995), an opinion corroborated by other researchers such as Bourqia, el Harras, and Bensaid (1995) and Bourqia, Elayyadi, el Harras and Rachik (2000). All these works, which address different contexts, show that political analysis is in need of direct, thick, localised and up-to-date observation on which to base itself. Anthropologists should devote themselves more to this, for while it is true that many are engaged in work about young people, they are mostly focussed on "ethnic minorities" in Western contexts.

The amount of anthropological research work has grown with the second generation of immigrants in European countries and this growth, which is also related to the "identity" appeal of the new emerging cultural forms, has accompanied the movement towards a greater focus on religion, especially Islam. Most of these works differ from more sociological approaches to immigration in order to nourish and be nourished by a flood of theory on the deterritorialisation of culture, travelling cultures, diaspora, *ethnoscapes* and global ecumene. The increasing amount of anthropological research work is extremely important to the way Islam is experienced and interpreted locally and subjectively. Politically, it amasses information that may contribute towards good practices of social integration and for a debate on European Islam. However, this anthropological trend has not cast more light on the transnationalisation processes of Islam.

It is not because this may be seen from a political standpoint to be anthropology's contribution towards ethnicisation – that is to say the balkani-

sation of Islam – that I believe that anthropology should debate it. On the contrary. Once again, and in order not to yield to immediate political influences, anthropology should follow all clues, even the less obvious ones, and concern itself with recovering scales of analysis – such as that of nation and transnationalism lost in the midst of the excitement for agency and the local – and strive to achieve greater objectivity. It is probably here that comparativism should be re-introduced into the methodological agenda of the discipline.

Without mentioning more historical studies such as those of Eickelman and Piscatori *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination* (1990), transnational Islamic movements have been chiefly analysed by political science or political sociology. Among the many names the media have made known are Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel – two former students of recently-deceased Remy Leveau. Central to both their theses, given in greater depth by Roy, is the failure of political Islam (*L'Echec de l'Islam Politique*, 1992). This thesis, with its diagnosis of the depoliticisation of Islam through its transnationalisation, remained unshaken in *Généalogie de l'Islamisme* (1995) and in *L'Islam Mondialisé* (2002), which he wrote later after 9/11: “We are well into post-Islamism”. We are facing the separation of an Islamic nationalism that is beginning to manifest itself and a globalised and deterritorialised Islam. And we no longer manage to situate it in some geostrategic space, because it moves in an imaginary world, or *umma* (an imaginary world shared by non-terrorist movements such as the Tabligh) (2002). This does not mean, as Roy argues, that re-Islamisation has stopped but rather that it has become individualised.

These are strong arguments. Is anthropology ready to back them up or else to refute them? Should it be so? More than any other discipline, anthropology has striven to ask, as Talal Asad suggested, “What do they aim at doing so? And why?” instead of “Why are they not behaving as expected?” (1996). Anthropology must, in the first place, continue with this line of questioning in order to achieve an objectivity that it must always keep in sight however distant it may seem. This will allow anthropology to remain useful in the service of a great modern debate.

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MOVIMENTOS SOCIAIS EM CONTEXTOS
ISLÂMICOS – ABORDAGENS
ANTROPOLÓGICAS

Apresentarei aqui, de forma sumária, algumas das principais abordagens no seio das ciências sociais, e em particular da antropologia, que contribuíram para o conhecimento dos movimentos sociais em contextos islâmicos. Este texto tem como principal objectivo fornecer uma visão geral que permita situar os restantes textos deste dossiê com facilidade; igualmente, pretende familiarizar os leitores menos especializados com os debates contemporâneos sobre esta temática e o jargão antropológico. Atribuirei uma importância particular à questão da pesquisa etnográfica e à relevância do seu papel na prevenção ou combate a conclusões essencialistas e considerações sobre estes assuntos, revestidos de uma urgência política. Também darei especial importância aos autores que fizeram uso da etnografia para tentar resolver o dilema contemporâneo entre abordagem política e analítica que tão frequentemente armadilha a pesquisa sobre estes temas.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: antropologia, etnografia, resistência, movimentos sociais, Islão, véu e género.

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