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Beyond Compare? Free Market Islamism as Ideology

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This paper explores the ideological relationship between free market capitalism and Islamism, shedding particular light on the role of libertarianism in contemporary Islamic thought. While existing studies have attended to Islam's engagement with capitalism, they have focused principally on its historical sociology, Islamist responses to the challenges of the market and capitalist modernity, the sociology of Islam in an era of neoliberal globalisation, and the rise of Islamic banking and finance.¹ Less attention has been given to the ideological intimacy of this relationship in light of the increasing presence of free market thought in Islamist politics.² Within this milieu, a distinct right-libertarian strain of free market Islam - which I term 'libertarian Islamism' in this paper - has also emerged and has been the object of more systematic scholarly neglect. Notably, its proponents seek to challenge rather than assimilate to the liberal state, through radical decentralisation, ethical individualism, and post-state capitalist visions.

Libertarian Islamism is marginal relative to more conventional forms of Islamism today. This includes movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood which have also become more open to free market capitalism in recent years, albeit within the context of a wider, more authoritarian vision of state. This paper does not seek to advocate the intrinsic importance of libertarian Islamism, nor inflate its relatively peripheral status as an ideological movement. Rather, its presence poses two underlying challenges to current debates, from which it is largely absent, about the relationship between Islam and liberalism and to understandings of radical Islam. First, it points to the limitations of dominant discourses of 'Muslim reformation' which have sought, in myriad ways, to forge a progressive synthesis between Islam and the liberal state.³ These ideological interventions have rendered notions of radicalism and state subversion in Islam coterminous with Islamist militancy and have often stressed the need for institutionalised forms of Islamic authority to adapt to the framework of the secular state. Second, it alerts us to analytical biases in the scholarly framing of 'Islamism' as an ideological category which has come to denote authoritarian forms of politics which aim to appropriate and centralise the modern state or approximate to the liberal-democratic state. As a critique of both political liberalism and the authoritarian state, libertarian Islamism does not fit well within these constricted definitions of what ideologised forms of Islam should look like.

An underlying aspect of the paper then concerns the contested nature of 'Islamism', not only as a set of disparate ideological movements, but as an analytical category. In this respect, my treatment also touches on the burgeoning and contested field of comparative political theory (CPT) in addressing non-Western political thought.⁴ I am concerned, in particular, with how the interposition of libertarian Islamism challenges the dominant framing of political Islam which is seen largely through the prism of Western political theory and its preoccupations with the liberal state, its institutions, and citizenship. This framing, focused on the potential for compatibility between Islam and liberalism, has come to colonise the terrain of CPT and Islam: Andrew March's work on liberal citizenship exemplifies this trend in its self-conscious search for a Rawlsian liberal-Islamic synthesis which, as a normative project, in turn, echoes that of Muslim reformists such as Tariq Ramadan.⁵ While departing from these liberal premises, in its self-conscious symbiosis between Islamic and Western pro-capitalist libertarian thought, the specific composite nature of libertarian

Islamism has also not yet been addressed by cosmopolitan, or global, forms of comparative political thought which tend to critique the Eurocentrism of Western political theory from a methodological perspective, while objecting to free market capitalism as a form of Western hegemony.⁶

In this paper, I treat Islamism in an expansive way, denoting any ideologised variant of the religion of Islam – liberal, statist, or otherwise - which actively seeks social, political and economic transformation in its own interpretative image. I have deliberately retained the term, therefore, to describe the particular libertarian phenomenon I am addressing, for two related reasons: first, to destabilise the term’s common usage as leftist, statist, and centralising (in being tied to ‘top-down’ calls for and by Islamic, or *shari’a*, states and movements to implement socio-economic equality and social justice), opening up alternative ways of thinking about radical Islam and the subversion of the state; and second, to signal that libertarian Islamists are no less ideological than their more conventional statist Islamist counterparts, nor less tied to a global project of Islamisation in some form. Unlike its Islamist counterparts, however, libertarian Islamism has not been analysed as an ideological project with political import, or a discernible set of ideals and strategies that can be readily mobilised in the service of particular interests. Yet libertarian Islamists are, arguably, a more coherent intellectual movement centred primarily on a cluster of Muslim scholar activists and organisations linked to a web of Western libertarian think tanks, mainly in the United States and Turkey. These Muslim organisations include the Minaret of Freedom Institute, the Islamic Free Market Institute, Muslims4Liberty, and the American Islamic Forum for Democracy. While some of the most prominent Western free market think tanks have hosted libertarian Islamist writings, including the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Ludwig von Mises Institute, the Australian Institute of Public Affairs, the Fraser Institute, and the Atlas Research Network.

Libertarian Islamism is also based upon the propagation of a distinct set of libertarian propositions embedded within a wider orbit of pro-capitalist thought. It expounds a neoliberal vision of Islam, much of it resting on a selective deployment of Islamic religious and jurisprudential texts, recourse to a libertarian historical legacy, and a purported affinity between Islam and capitalism. Its exegetical strategies mirror those of more conventional Islamists, though, unlike them, it focuses on championing free markets, deregulation, property rights and private enterprise as the foundations of an Islamic utopia. In contrast to the revivalist discourses of Islamic state with which Islamism has come to be identified, and the synthetic Islamo-liberal state Muslim reformists envisage, libertarian Islamists posit a non-interventionist, radically decentralised state with the atomised individual believer at its centre: put differently, they call for an Islamic anti-state tied to a transnational commercialism rather than a centralising or super-state. While it is not readily captured, therefore, by existing vocabularies or genealogies of Islamism or, indeed, radical Islam, libertarian Islamism does not fit easily within post-Islamist binary understandings of Islamic revivalism framed in terms of a centralising politics or de-politicised Islam.⁷ Post-Islamism struggles to make sense of ideological aspects of Islamic thought which do not fit a narrative of assimilation towards the liberal state, its legal and political categories: libertarian Islamists move beyond the state as the centripetal force in Islamist politics.

Libertarian Islamism, nonetheless, exists in a wider milieu of free market Islamist thought. It makes sense, therefore, to better discern its import in this context. Islamism is, arguably, currently undergoing what one might term, a ‘free-market turn’ - a shift towards neoliberal orthodoxy in the practices of conventional Islamist parties. This development has been supported by a growing apologetic literature which, through recourse to Islam’s purported compatibility with classical liberalism, positions pro-capitalist free market Islam in opposition to extremism and militancy.⁸ But free market Islam has not gone entirely unchallenged, making unlikely bedfellows of anti-globalisation activists, from Tahrir Square to Gezi Park, who abhor the religious conservatism of

Islamists parties but are equally wary of the penetration of global capitalism, and old guard leftists, including some Islamists, who see free market capitalism as synonymous with Western imperialism. This opposition is also inter-generational, signalling perennial problems in the assimilation of capitalism to the modern Muslim world.

The current ideological turn to the free market also has its antecedents, however, in the emergence of Islamic economics, and its embodiment in the nascent Islamic banking and finance sector during the oil boom of the 1970s. Here, a first wave of free market Islam was linked to authoritarian forms of Islam, most notably in its sponsorship by Gulf monarchies. Understanding libertarian Islamism in these wider historical and theoretical contexts, I argue, can reveal both the ambivalent relationship between political and economic liberalism in Islamist thought, and how libertarian Islamists seek to detach themselves from the authoritarianism associated with Islamist movements, even as these movements too increasingly turn to the free market.

The paper is in four parts. Part one discusses some of the conceptual limitations of 'Islamism' as an explanatory category which fails to capture adequately the ideological dimensions of libertarian Islamism. This interpretative neglect, I argue, is compounded by the tendency within the sub-field of CPT to focus on synthesis between Islam and the liberal state, or to see free market capitalism, or neoliberalism, as a form of Western hegemony at odds with Islam.

In order to make sense of libertarian Islamism, as a radical, anti-statist form of pro-capitalist Islamist ideology, parts two and three first explore the broader rise of free market Islam with which it shares affinities. Part two traces the emergence of the global Islamic banking and finance sector, supported by Gulf states, and the more recent incorporation of free market thought by Islamist movements who champion *shari'a*, notably the Muslim Brotherhood. Part three turns to the rise of popular tracts aimed at mass global audiences which equate free market capitalism with 'moderate' Islam. These policy-oriented and journalistic works serve as important populist forms of ideological production which seek to further legitimise and propagate free market Islam.

The final part of the paper addresses libertarian Islamism as a radical, pro-capitalist and anti-statist ideology. Focusing on its distinct intellectual genealogy, sociological milieu, and hermeneutic practices, I argue that its presence serves to recalibrate dominant understandings of 'radical' Islam and confound Islamism's purportedly fractious ideological relationship with the West. At the same time, I address ideological tensions inherent in libertarian Islamist thought, moving beyond its focus on anti-statist economics to its unstated or implicit assumptions about Islamic community and morality which appear paradoxically authoritarian.

I: Interpreting Islamism

Free market Islamism and its more radical, though peripheral, incarnation, libertarian Islamism are ideological tendencies which have been either largely neglected or else miscast within the academic study of Islamism. This is true for scholarship within various disciplines, including sociology, history and political theory, which has sought to conceptualise Islamism in some fashion, on the one hand, and within the emerging field of comparative political thought (CPT), on the other. While, in the former case, this has been more a problem of conceptual limitations or deficiencies in the treatment of Islamism as an ideological category, in the latter case, it has more to do with the preoccupations of CPT theorists with cross-cultural synthesis between Islam and the liberal state or, alternatively, with a critique of neoliberalism and capitalism as forms of Western hegemony.

What's left of Islamism?

Islamism is a contested term most often conflated with political Islam, alluding to the way in which its proponents aim to capture the state or create an Islamic super-state. It has come to be defined predominantly as a left-leaning ideology, emphasising community, social justice and centralised political authority. Olivier Roy has argued, for example, that the ideologisation of Islam has always been explicit among Islamists and there is ‘a Leftist dimension (often concealed by conservative references to *shar’ia*) that should not be underestimated...’⁹ Islamist formations in Europe and North America have also increasingly been categorised as subversive, where the concept of subversion carries a deliberate echo of the radical left of the past. In a related linguistic trope, the ostensible totalising nature of Islamism, as a complete way of life, has signalled its totalitarian impulses in much the same way as the communist threat was once perceived. Where Islamists have claimed assimilation to the rule of law, the spectre of radical subversion of the state to conform to an authoritarian polity ruled by the closed dictates of *shari’a* still looms large.

In academic studies, the genesis of political Islam is firmly entrenched in agitations against colonial rule in various parts of the nineteenth-century Muslim world.¹⁰ While this narrative has been challenged by scholarship which has drawn attention to the far more complex genealogies and geographies of political Islam, its formative centrality to what it means to be Islamist is rarely questioned.¹¹ Moreover, while some commentaries have drawn attention to free market strands of Islamic economic thought, they have not been concerned primarily with contesting Islamism as a category of analysis.¹² The origins of Islamism are thus largely settled in that its nineteenth-century moment is the epicentre from which Islamisms of divergent hues emanate. This is an unusual situation of historiographical conformity when compared to enduring disagreements over the origins of other modern ideologies, such as liberalism, conservatism, fascism or socialism. The crystallisation of Islamism as a political project linked to decolonisation in the twentieth-century further cemented its associations with the largely leftist political principles which coloured the new-found nationalism of emergent nation-states in the Muslim world. Despite their often fractious relationship with the left, Islamists shared principles with their Marxist fellow travellers even as they strived to create a new religious vocabulary which departed from Marxism. Within this milieu the idea of ‘Islamic socialism’, with the state as the vanguard of Islamist principles, took root.¹³

While the prevalent left-statist view of Islamism has obscured anti-statist aspects of Islamist thought, post-Islamism as a novel, though protean, concept also has analytical limitations, despite the fact that its focus on the implications of such factors as consumerism and economic liberty resonate with aspects of libertarian Islamism. As both an empirical and normative category, post-Islamism tends to function in two main ways: first, as a catch-all term for a de-politicised form of Islamic activism which emphasises multiple expressions of societal piety within an increasingly secular space; and second, as the explicit accommodation of Islamism with pluralist and democratic norms at the level of state and society.¹⁴ Common to these readings is the placing of Islamic social and political activism within an increasingly post-ideological framework shorn of overarching programmes for reform or revolution. Less obvious, though implicit, is their remaining tied to leftist moorings which emphasise social justice, equality and community though in a more fragmented, globalised and diffuse milieu.

The notion of post-ideology can obscure the inherent cultural and historical embeddedness within which all political schemas originate. Post-Islamism is also, in this normative sense, an ideologically infused analytical concept which belies the concrete and historically situated ethical premises upon which it seeks to fashion an open-ended, pluralist agenda. While it describes empirical transformations in Islamic thought and practice, it, nonetheless, remains a normative enterprise in at least four ways. First, knowledge about post-Islamism is rarely disinterested. Scholars such as Asef Bayat are working very much within a post-leftist frame aimed at a critique of the authoritarian centralising tendencies of revolutionary Iran and other Islamist movements.¹⁵

Here, post-Islamism becomes more than a descriptive term. It is rather an appeal for a rights-based Islamism amenable to liberal-democratic norms. Second, the concept itself is often applied to a range of social and political attributes which are broadly tied to anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist discourses very much within a left radical orbit. Indeed, Gilles Kepel has argued that Islamists are now ‘hijacking the anti-globalisation agenda’ through an ‘entryist’ approach to politics, highlighting its subversive nature.¹⁶

Third, its focus on deculturation processes echo those of other liberal projects presented to the world as disembodied from culture when they are rather based upon precepts deeply embedded within Western liberalism and its socio-political contexts. Thus, while the ‘Protestantization’ of Islam has become an increasingly popular theme for making sense of the disintegrative sociological impact of Western modernity on traditional forms of Islamic authority, its concomitant focus on the de-politicisation of Islam obscures the culturally embedded, politically charged nature of this process.¹⁷ Roy’s reading, for example, premised on global Islam’s decoupling from traditional Islamic cultures as a consequence of a market-driven, standardization of religion has little analytical room for free market Islamism as an ideology with a specific genealogy in an era of globalisation.¹⁸ Finally, even when the significance of the market relative to the state is cited as increasingly shaping Islamist agendas, it does so in obfuscatory fashion: as Islamists needing to adapt to the market as a disciplinary force rather than adopting free market principles.¹⁹ In these ways, post-Islamist readings remain tied to the formative leftist premise of Islamism but also inhibit a fuller appreciation of the evolution of Islamist activism across the political spectrum.

Islamism and comparative political thought

If the study of Islamism has been preoccupied with understanding it in light of the authoritarian state, scholarship which is self-consciously located within or with reference to CPT has tended to focus on Islam’s relationship to liberalism. This has compounded the analytical neglect of the ideologies of free market Islam and libertarian Islamism and is evident in two principal ways. First, in a preoccupation with forging a dialogue, consensus or synthesis between Islam and the liberal state and, second, in cosmopolitan, or global, forms of comparative political thought which tend to critique the Eurocentrism of Western political thought and neoliberalism.²⁰ In other words, CPT tends to be statist and liberal, on the one hand, or, when critical of the liberalism, focused on methodology or neoliberal hegemony, on the other. That libertarian Islamism falls in the gap between these approaches also reveals some of the limitations of CPT as an emergent field of study.

In his book, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: the Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (2009), Andrew March states he is motivated by “the aim of principled moral reconciliation.”²¹ Focusing entirely on the formal religious doctrines of “internal Islamic sources”, that is, on Muslim beliefs rather than Muslim identities, he “has in mind a certain ideal-typical Rawlsian Muslim citizen who takes her own tradition seriously, tends toward a formal, doctrinal understanding of religion, and self-consciously weighs the demands of citizenship against the duties of faith.”²² March ties his ideal-type to a subjective view of conservative Islamic (Sunni) orthodoxy, citing various ‘canonical’ and prominent present-day figures along the way, which only reinforces a form of intellectual closure by attributing authenticity to a particular version of Islam.

But, aside from this flaw in method premised on the centrality he accords to focusing on doctrinal orthodoxy in CPT, it is March’s underlying preoccupation with consensus between Islamic precepts and those of liberal citizenship which is most relevant to the present paper. Like the views of some of the contemporary activist Muslim scholars he acknowledges in his book, the possibility or desirability of ‘mainstream’, ‘orthodox’ or ‘authentic’ Islam’s compatibility with the liberal state is

itself an unstated assumption in the work.²³ The idea that it is the task of the comparative political theorist in the Western academy to search for ways in which Islam can or should correspond to political liberalism is not questioned but rather assumed by March. This mirrors reformist trends in Islam today which have become predicated largely on their correspondence with the political theory and practices of Western liberal democracies. In this way, in seeking to bridge ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’ through a synthesis between a dominant and conservative reading of Islamic ‘orthodoxy’, which chimes with that of his Muslim interlocutors, and liberal citizenship, March’s theoretical work and its normative commitments can also be understood within this broader ideologically activist context.

Other scholars working within or with reference to CPT depart from March’s normative commitment to searching for consensus between liberalism and non-Western political theories. In a response to March’s paper, ‘What is Comparative Political Theory?’, for example, Farah Godrej draws attention to what she regards as “the substantively and methodologically Eurocentric focus of political theory”.²⁴ Also pertinent to a critique of March’s method and, relatedly, the scholarly neglect of the intellectual production and ideological influence of outliers such as libertarian Islamists, Megan Thomas has pointed to the ghost of ‘Orientalism’ which, she argues, still haunts CPT. Among her criticisms are that CPT and Orientalism both privilege “written texts, particularly great texts, as the bearers of ideas worth studying, and both privilege textual analysis as the method for unlocking meaning.”²⁵

While Godrej takes issue with the limiting emphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy of March’s ideal-types in his treatment of Islam, her more recent critique of neoliberal constructions of self-hood also has relevance to the argument I am pursuing about how free market and libertarian Islamism cannot be readily located in analytical terms within cross-disciplinary understanding of Islamism nor by scholars of CPT. As a Western imposition, neoliberalism is for Godrej, a conduit for Western subjugation of the non-West which should be countered by “anti-neoliberal” practices.²⁶ For a ‘cosmopolitan’ political theorists like Godrej who has argued for a “a hermeneutic of existential understanding” rather than “objective” comparisons between cultures or traditions, there can be no positive ideological synthesis between neoliberal economics and Islam.²⁷ Consequently, libertarian Islamists fall beyond such analytical frames of reference and focus.

II: Free market capitalism and the *shari’a* state

Having addressed some of the conceptual and theoretical limitations in discerning the ideological presence and import of free market and libertarian Islamism in scholarship on Islam and Islamism, I turn to an empirical exploration of the relationship between free market Islam and *shari’a* states and movements. In this section, I trace the first wave of free market Islam in the emergence of the Islamic banking and finance sector, supported by Gulf states, and the more recent incorporation of free market thought by Islamist movements who champion *shari’a*, notably the Muslim Brotherhood. A key aspect of the emergence of free market Islam in these instances is its alliance with the authoritarian state, rather than its fundamental contestation of it.

Islamocapitalism in the Gulf

The analytical constriction of Islamism has a long history which has been evident since its emergence as an object of scholarly enquiry, especially since the 1970s, when a first wave of free market Islam was obscured. In the conservative Gulf monarchies, to varying degrees, capitalism is oddly divested of political liberty. Since the oil boom of the early 1970s, this has been the dominant mode of free market Islamism: a dissonant interweaving of free market ideology and authoritarian Islam. The rise of Islamic banking and finance has been emblematic of this synthesis, its tensions and contradictions.²⁸ Two aspects of these tensions, in particular, are relevant to the theoretical

argument I am pursuing about the inadequacies of dominant modes of analysing Islamism and free market Islamism as ideology. The first is that free market capitalism functioned to enhance the ideological efficiency of Islamist authoritarianism domestically. The second is that authoritarian Islamists were instrumental in propagating the discourse of Islamic banking and finance globally.

The modern discipline of 'Islamic economics', and the project for an Islamic form of banking and finance which has flowed from it, aimed to provide alternative intellectual resources and economic devices to Western ideologies of both capitalism and socialism.²⁹ It sought to reconcile a more prosperous and equitable economic system with a wider societal project based on distinctly Islamic precepts. As such, conceptions of community, social welfare, equality and individual liberty have been both central to its propagation and riven with deep tensions. Critical to the functioning of the Islamic banking and finance sector is the role of religious scholars who sit on the *shari'a* boards of banks, financial institutions and regulatory bodies. Notably, they illustrate the odd assortment of free market practices and centralised institutional authority which has come to characterise this sector. As powerful gatekeepers of Islamic knowledge and arbiters of *shari'a* compliance in what has become a multi-billion dollar global financial sector, this scholarly elite are few in number, with some sitting on the boards of more than one institution and many educated in conservative religious institutions in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.³⁰

While there is a voluminous and complex literature on various technical aspects of Islamic economic thought, however, the predominant juridical focus of Islamic economics has obscured deeper structural distortions which its emergence has set in train. The formative relationship between Islamic economics and Islamic authoritarianism suggests that free market Islam has multiple political valences, some of which are not liberal in their logic. The practices associated with Islamic banking and finance were intricately bound to petrodollar economies at a time when the modern concept of Islamic economics burgeoned. This has since facilitated the globalisation of the Islamic banking and finance sector which, despite its claims to a religious authenticity set apart from capitalist modernity, has been deeply embedded in global capitalism. Moreover, its sites of knowledge production have been primarily Western.³¹ Additionally, while Malaysia and the Gulf still dominate the Islamic financial sector, London, for example, has also become a significant global centre.

The intellectual centre of gravity of Islamic banking and finance is suggestive of the moral and geographical limits of its free market implications. From the perspective of the Muslim states that have sponsored its growth, this has led to a series of related dislocations in its effects: between economic and political liberalism; and between the freedoms it engenders abroad and those it delimits domestically. This illiberal logic of Islamic banking and finance is also tied more explicitly to its sponsorship by authoritarian Islamic states. First, from the outset, the discourse of Islamic economics was culturally divisive, in its bolstering of Islamic identity via illiberal Islamist ideologies as part of the wider strategic battle for Islamic legitimacy in the Muslim world spearheaded by Saudi Arabia.³² This was at odds with the universalism associated with free market capitalism and indeed other more ecumenical forms of Islam. Second, it was also intellectually constricted, in that criticism of the inequities of wealth which the practices of petrodollar economies engendered was far from central to fora such as the Jeddah-based, inter-governmental Islamic Development Bank whose own lending practices have arguably increasingly assimilated to those of its non-Islamic competitors.³³

As Islamic banking proliferated and diversified beyond the 1970s, the scandal surrounding the collapse in 1991 of Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) further illustrated the moral vagaries associated with the practices, if not the theory, of Islamic economics. Though not an Islamic bank, BCCI, headquartered in Karachi and London and founded with both Gulf and

American finance, had its own Islamic banking unit and strong links to the Islamic banking sector some of which, including the prominent Faisal Islamic Bank of Egypt, had made large, high-risk investments in it. Aside from its illegal activities, its liquidation illustrated the excessively speculative practices of some Islamic banks and with it the veneer of Islamic economic strictures to the contrary with which such banks had been associated.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the free market

The relationship between free market ideology and Islamist activism was not only the preserve of Gulf sheikhdoms. In the mid-1970s, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat had consciously attempted to make a break from the Arab socialism of his country's Nasserite past, by introducing both an 'open door' free market policy domestically and a shift in foreign alliance from the Soviet to American bloc. Sadat's *infitah* was intended to pave the way for political pluralism but it achieved the opposite, cementing the authoritarian state. Moreover, despite his attempts to frame capitalism as non-threatening to Islamic values, in the domestic inequalities the policy engendered, it arguably helped to foster an already burgeoning militant Islamism in Egypt. Sadat also attempted to court mainstream socially conservative Islamists and gave their middle class supporters preferential access to the privatized economy as a means to placate more radical forms of Islamism without success.³⁴

The ambivalent relationship between capitalism and Islamism, central to both Sadat's ill-fated reforms and Gulf sponsorship of the Islamic banking sector, is symptomatic of early attempts to accommodate free market values to Muslim contexts. Each, in its own way, led to the consolidation of political authoritarianism. The engagement of Islamist movements with the tenets of free market capitalism such as private property rights and free contracts was also heavily debated during the early years of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.³⁵ More recently, the alliance between the free market and the *shari'a* state has been evident in a shift away from the centralising economic discourses of mainstream Islamist parties towards the acceptance of neoliberal global institutions if not a blueprint for economic liberalism at home. This has been evident in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) whose evolution has been, to some extent, a pragmatic response to the ubiquity of neoliberal orthodoxy in the global economy fused with the electoral will to succeed (while the 'Turkish model' is often invoked in this regard, the AK Parti does not advocate a *shari'a* or Islamic state which is my focus here).

Unlike the Gulf states' free market activism in relation to their global propagation of Islamic banking and finance, the Muslim Brotherhood's tentative openness to free market economics, seen through the policies of the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), has been more reluctant. The MB does not have a clear economic platform, nor approach to the free market. Notably, however, it has increasingly engaged with neoliberal forms of governmentality. While in power in 2012, the FJP indicated its willingness to support structural reform of the Egyptian economy via the International Monetary Fund and endorsed a \$4.8 billion IMF loan which it stated was sharia-compliant.³⁶ Like other Islamist movements, the MB tends to subordinate economics to its core project of creating a virtuous Islamic state and society under *shari'a*. In the case of the IMF loan its simultaneous recourse to more traditional and conservative forms of Islamic authority was reflected when the FJP sought endorsement from the scholars of the Islamic seminary, Al Azhar, which enabled it to justify the interest on the loan as an 'administrative fee.'

The MB's reluctance to fully embrace free market policies is not surprising given that it has positioned itself at the forefront of Islamic resistance to Western political and economic hegemony – which it has characterised as an exploitative global capitalism - for decades.³⁷ It is also explained by the MB's traditional emphasis on helping the poor and promoting social justice. But it is equally

true that, in practice, the MB has always been a flexible and pragmatic actor which is what has ensured its survival. In this regard, its growing openness to free market capitalism may have less to do with ideology, or theology, than with sociology as it has attempted to align its interests with those of a rising Muslim middle-class or ‘pious bourgeoisie.’ As a wealthy businessman, the former FJP presidential candidate, Khairat Al Shater, who is now the MB’s deputy Supreme Guide and currently in prison, personifies this business-oriented shift. But, in part, owing to the tensions inherent in its wider programme for establishing a sharia-compliant society which would involve a significant degree of authoritarian state intervention, the MB’s relationship to free market capitalism is likely to remain ambiguous, under-theorised and uncertain.³⁸

III: Populist apologetics: free market capitalism and ‘moderate’ Islam

Beyond the variegated free market practices of Islamist states and movements, support for free market Islamism is also tied to an emergent ideological base, including an increasingly prominent apologetic literature which ties free market capitalism to ‘moderate’ Islam. Among recent popular tracts which argue for the civilising effects of neoliberalism in the Muslim world are those of Vali Nasr and Mustafa Akyol. Nasr’s *Forces of Fortune* and Akyol’s *Islam Without Extremes* are paradigmatic examples of literature aimed at mass audiences that seeks to validate an economically liberal vision of Islam. They are positioned more as populist books for policymakers and the general public rather than rigorous scholarly works but this is what also makes them significant as ideological interventions. It is useful, therefore, to outline briefly their particular arguments here both in relation to my focus on destabilising Islamism as an analytical category, and in order to further illustrate perennial tensions in the assimilation of global capitalism to Muslim contexts. Both Nasr and Akyol, in different ways, place a premium on free market values as representing the preferable future trajectory of Islamic civilisation. Critically, they equate capitalism with moderate Islam against extremism and stress the potential for synthesis between Islam and liberalism. In these respects, they share some affinities with the libertarian Islamists I discuss later, but diverge from their more fundamentally anti-statist arguments.

Nasr is concerned with the free market potential immanent within the Muslim world which he implores the West to actively engage. He argues that the ‘key struggle that will pave the way to the decisive defeat of extremism and to social liberalization will be the battle to free the markets.’³⁹ He situates his study in relation to claims of Islam’s incompatibility with Western civilization. Citing David Hume’s contention that the rationalism of commerce can displace war and conflict, he states that ‘It is time to think less about civilizations clashing, and to recover the great insights – which lie very close to the foundations of classical liberalism and modern political thought – about the transformative power of markets and commerce.’⁴⁰ He locates the engine of this change in an emergent Muslim middle-class: free market capitalism is the panacea for the Muslim world’s developmental intransigence and a force for moderation in its relations with the West. As he exhorts Western policymakers, in no uncertain terms, ‘Over time the profit motive will be our strongest ally.’⁴¹

For Nasr, in classical liberal mode, unfettered commerce creates the conditions for freedom. The inextricable link between commerce and liberty is an old trope in Western liberal thought premised on the idea that mutual benefits naturally accrue from the universal pursuit of profit. In arguing against muscular, military intervention in the Muslim world, on the one hand, and isolation from it, on the other, Nasr sees new possibilities in this old discourse where Dubai, in particular, stands as an exemplar of how piety and consumerism can coexist. As he states, ‘In revitalising the global economy in the wake of the current financial crisis, the West should work to empower the budding commercial forces all around the Muslim world.’ ‘This’, he goes on to argue, ‘will not only be good for the global economy...it will expedite the process of liberalization through capitalism.’⁴² As

a corollary to the main thrust of his argument for neoliberal economic, rather than cultural or military, engagement with the Muslim world, Nasr is also concerned with dissociating Islamic piety from extremism in the Western imagination. ‘There is little evidence’, he suggests, ‘that the growing conservatism of Muslim societies is a bar to fighting for freedom and prosperity.’⁴³ In this, Nasr also deploys the Turkish model to illustrate how free market Islamists can promote wealth and political pluralism despite religious conservatism.

Turkey also looms large in Akyol’s more autobiographically driven account in his *Islam Without Extremes*. He is closer than Nasr, however, to libertarian Islamism citing Rose Wilder Lane, a key figure in libertarian Islamist thought, approvingly, for example.⁴⁴ Akyol is concerned with bringing to light how liberalism has inhaled in Islamic traditions by excavating ‘how rationalist and even liberal ideas emerged in those earliest centuries of Islam’, pointing to the historical symbiosis between Islam and capitalism.⁴⁵ Citing Ibn Khaldun, for example, as a pioneering free market thinker, he remarks that he developed ‘a theory of economic liberalism that advised governments to minimize taxes, secure private property, support free markets, and avoid budget deficits.’⁴⁶ In reaching back into history to bolster the religious legitimacy of present arguments, a divergent array of prominent mediaeval Muslim scholars - including more controversial figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah whose writings are more often deployed in the service of militant Salafi Wahhabi agendas today – are frequently invoked by ideologues of Islamic free market economics and in commentaries on Islamic economics.⁴⁷ In this regard, Nasr mentions Ibn Taymiyyah’s influence on Qutb’s militant radicalism, but, notably, as with Akyol, not on the free market thinking in Islam that his book supports.⁴⁸

Unlike much literature on Islamism, for Akyol, capitalist modernity is not seen as an external imposition with which the Muslim world has had to grapple to find responses. There is a problem of methodological anachronism in historical interpretation here, however, not least in its bypassing of scholarship on the historical sociology of capitalism as a modern phenomenon.⁴⁹ Akyol is deploying a selective reading of Islamic history to support an ideological manoeuvre. By positing a commercial Islam of the past and conflating it with modern capitalism, he defends a neoliberal Islam of the present. This is also evident in his excavation of Turkish and Ottoman history – particularly his mobilisation of the legacy of the ‘Young Ottomans’ of the nineteenth century - which posits a liberal reading of Turkish history as being instructive of the way in which contemporary commentaries on Islamic history often betray the Muslim world’s perennially overlooked accommodation with liberalism.⁵⁰

In keeping with the tenor of much neoliberal thought which strives to present itself as non-ideological, Akyol situates his own account of liberal Islam as quite distinct from ‘Islamism’ which he defines as ‘the anomaly of the twentieth century, which gave us oppression, militancy and even terrorism in the name of Islam.’⁵¹ As with Nasr, elsewhere, Akyol invokes Sayyid Qutb, among other prominent Islamist ideologues, to personify the anti-commercial logic inherent in Islamist fundamentalism.⁵² The implicit inference is that there is something intrinsically irrational and immoderate about anti-capitalism which equates to religious extremism and threatens the West. In this context, in his extended discussion of Islamic fundamentalism Nasr spends a significant amount of time on the propagation of illiberal Islam by the Saudi state since the 1970s oil boom but none on it also being heavily implicated in the first wave of free market Islamism through sponsorship of global Islamic banking and finance in the same period.⁵³

Events at Taksim Square in Istanbul in 2013 were instructive of the limits of acceptance of free market Islam of the kind espoused by Nasr and Akyol. Some of the criticisms of the then Prime Minister Erdogan and his government, for example, were directed explicitly toward the perceived growing intimacy between neoliberalism and Islamist authoritarianism. While there were complex

local factors which led to the occupation of the square, with grievances aired across the political spectrum, this particular criticism has been encapsulated in what was seen by some protestors as the forced privatisation of Gezi Park in the service of a wider and rapacious global capitalist agenda, against a backdrop of creeping Islamisation at home.

The ouster of President Morsi in Egypt in 2013 and the targeted killings of liberals in Tunisia in recent years have further fuelled criticisms of the perennial tendencies of Islamists toward authoritarianism, despite their turn to free market economics. Contra Nasr and Akyol, the latter of whom has spoken out against Erdogan's authoritarian handling of the Gezi Park occupation, this critique is directed at the underlying structural violence of neoliberalism as much as Islamist authoritarianism.⁵⁴ While they may share this aversion to Islamist authoritarianism, therefore, the conundrum this poses for the libertarian Islamists, to whom I now turn, is viewed antithetically – as the need to argue even more robustly for more radical forms of neoliberal Islam in which the state itself, rather than any variant of it, authoritarian or otherwise, is seen as the principal obstacle to liberty and progress in the Muslim world.

IV: Libertarian Islamism against the state

If the literature supportive of Islamo-capitalism and the turn to free market capitalism among some Islamist groups is symptomatic of a new wave of free market Islamism, the radical end of this current strand can be seen in a distinctly libertarian and anti-statist body of emergent Islamist ideology. These 'libertarian Islamists' have sought to mitigate the ill-effects of both the first wave of free market Islamism bound to authoritarian Islamo-capitalism and the new-found liberalism of conventional Islamists which they view as suspect. In doing so, they seek to distance their Islamic activism from identification with Gulf state autocracy and the authoritarian origins of Islamist parties. Libertarian Islamist thought can be viewed as radical a political philosophy as that of more conventional Islamists. Related to its focus on free market capitalism and underlying anti-statism are three ideological properties in which it diverges from other forms of Islamism: first, its particular intellectual genealogy; second, its sociology expressed in the sites of its intellectual production; and third, its hermeneutical approach to Islamic history and textual sources.

Genealogy

The relationship between American conservatism and Islam is often viewed as one of conflict. Neoconservative 'crusading' interventionism abroad and Tea Party xenophobia at home have, in different ways, painted an alarming picture of a purported dissonance between the Islamic world and Western liberal democracy. Conservative libertarianism, however, with its intellectual antecedents in elements of the Old Right, Austrian economics and nineteenth-century individualist anarchism has had a more ambivalent relationship to Islam. While the conventional narrative of Islamism traces its origins to the nineteenth century anti-Western discourses of modernist Salafism, here is an alternative lineage situated firmly in the West which reaches back to the same historical period revealing the hidden history of ideological cross-pollination between Islamic and American values. While this was apparent in, for example, the work of Rose Wilder Lane, the American libertarian and correspondent of Ayn Rand, earlier in the century, it was also evident in the scattered writings of the leading American anarcho-capitalist of the late-twentieth century, Murray Rothbard.⁵⁵

Rothbard, also a one-time associate of Rand, was a key ideologue on the anti-militarist Right during the Cold War speaking out against America's intervention in the Islamic world. In a diatribe against American intervention in Afghanistan and Iran in 1980, for example, in which he critiqued America's 'gut fears of Islam', Rothbard noted, 'Ayatollahs are selected by the faithful in much the same way as judges would be picked in an anarcho-capitalist society...'⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he opined that

the Iranian Revolution was ‘a change that should gladden the hearts of libertarians, for it shows that a Leviathan State, even a particularly brutal and dictatorial one, *can* be vanquished...’, although he was careful to qualify that ‘Libertarian rejoicing has nothing at all to do with whatever State replaces the shah. It celebrates the fact that a powerful, dictatorial, seemingly impregnable State *can* be and has been overthrown by the force of an idea.’⁵⁷ Unlike some of his fellow conservatives, Rothbard represents the way in which this strand of American conservatism has tended to steer away from defining itself in alienating Judaeo-Christian, civilizational terms.

Libertarian Islamists, such as Imad Ad Dean Ahmad, draw heavily on this tradition, citing von Mises, Lane and Rothbard as key influences.⁵⁸ When compared to conventional genealogies of Islamism, they represent a deeply contrasting vision of political Islam but one that can equally be viewed as an ideological project with global ambitions. This has particular implications for understanding dissident Islamist conceptions of social, economic and political liberation in an age of American hegemony which do not fit readily within conventional analyses of political Islam. Such conventional readings obscure the complex, non-linear evolution of global political Islam in a neoliberal world. They also caricature the multiple ways in which ideologically inflected forms of Islam are received by the American Right and the related ideological disparities between radical libertarian conservatism and other forms of American conservatism on issues such as immigration, military intervention and sanctions. Libertarian Islamists and their American forebears tend to be anti-militaristic, against intervention, and against the strict policing of borders, in stark contrast to neoconservative postures.

Milieu

Seen in this light, it is perhaps surprising that Gilles Kepel has tied radical Islam to neoconservatism.⁵⁹ Kepel is, of course, reading Islamism through a conventional prism: as a communitarian movement grounded in leftist precepts which is subversive of the Western liberal democratic state. In this, the notion of free market Islamism would appear oxymoronic, though his argument for Islamism as a mirror to neoconservatism only serves to further highlight the intellectually fragmented nature of Islamism. What is missing from Kepel’s analysis is not simply his neglect of libertarian Islamism as a distinct ideological force, but also the way in which it too is partially embedded in the wider milieu of conventional Islamist activism which he describes. This is apparent, for example, in the activities of prominent conservative political lobbyist, Grover Norquist, co-founder of the Islamic Free Market Institute, and the web of libertarian think tanks which have championed libertarian Islamism.

While libertarian Islamists seek to confront statist political Islam, despite their right-wing credentials they have also been subject to the alarmism associated more generally with American conservative views of Islam. The association of Norquist’s co-founder at the Islamic Free Market Institute, Khaled Saffuri, with Abdal Rahman Al Amoudi, former head of the American Muslim Council, who was sentenced to 23 year imprisonment on charges of financing Islamist terrorism in 2004, is only among the more striking controversies which have placed free market Islamism in the wider orbit of visceral criticisms and fears of Islamism among the American conservative Right. Norquist himself, a supporter of the so-called Ground Zero mosque, has been accused by conservative detractors of being a ‘Muslim Brotherhood facilitator’ despite his political conservatism.

While, in contexts such as these where free market Islamism intersects with the radical libertarian Right, evangelical Christianity has played a less emphatic role than in other American conservative political formations, there is now also a burgeoning literature on ‘spiritual capital’ which, echoing Max Weber’s study on the subject though from a different ideological perspective, privileges

Protestant forms of ethics in the legitimisation of capitalism and free market economics.⁶⁰ Unlike Rothbard's approach, it is explicitly anti-Randian and seeks to mitigate what it regards as the morally degenerative and corrupting effects of forms of 'crony' capitalism, criticisms given greater force by the current world economic crisis in which the structures and practices of financial capitalism have been heavily implicated. These 'virtuous' forms of religious capitalism are, it is argued, the antidote, and have been particularly fertile in the US.⁶¹ This libertarian religious impulse has latterly extended to Islamic business ethics and, in doing so, has further bolstered libertarian Islamism. In this guise, it can be viewed both as an emergent Muslim version of prosperity theology, and symptomatic of a wider neoliberalisation of Islamic authority in which religious entrepreneurs compete in an increasingly diffuse marketplace unseating traditional centralised institutions of Islamic authority and giving rise to divergent militant, liberal and now libertarian readings of Islam.⁶²

Along with the Islamic Free Market Institute, the Minaret of Freedom Institute in Washington DC, headed by Imad Ad Dean Ahmad, is one of the most prominent Muslim free market think tanks. Its name pays homage to Rose Wilder Lane's influential libertarian work which Ahmad re-published as *Islam and the Discovery of Freedom*, complete with scholarly notes drawing parallels between anarcho-capitalism and Islamic beliefs.⁶³ Other libertarian Muslims have also been involved in the project of synthesising libertarian Islamic and American conservative values, including the American Islamic Forum for Democracy. Outside America, the Malaysia-based Muslim think tank, the Istanbul Network for Liberty is active globally. Its chairman, Wan Saiful Wan Jan, is also founding Chief Executive of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs in Kuala Lumpur and a former researcher for the British Conservative Party's Research Department. One of the three members of its Advisory Board is Muslim British Conservative Party Member of Parliament, Syed Kamall, a contributor to the British free market think tank, The Cobden Centre. The Istanbul Network for Liberty has held several international conferences, including in Morocco and Pakistan. In both countries free market think tanks have also been established in recent years (the Arab Center for Scientific Research and Humane Studies in Rabat, and the Policy Research of Market Economy, PRIME, in Islamabad). Among PRIME's board members is Fred McMahon of the Fraser Institute in Canada, a libertarian think tank which has ties to over 80 free market think tanks globally through its Economic Freedom Network.

As the Fraser Institute's links suggest, the propagation of libertarian Islamist ideology is not limited to Muslim organisations and ideologues. The leading British free market think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs, has also hosted libertarian Islamist literature in its house journal, *Economic Affairs*.⁶⁴ Critical also in this propagation is the Atlas Economic Research Foundation based in America, an umbrella group of free market think tanks from around the world. Further afield, the prominent Australian free market think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, has published articles with a free market, libertarian view of Islam.⁶⁵ Collectively, a distinct sociology of intellectual production and dissemination, centred mainly in America and Turkey, has emerged as the ideological expression of libertarian Islamism. This phenomenon is quite separate from conventional forms of Islamist activism and, in its radically libertarian aspect, diverges also from the more classically liberal biases of Nasr and Akyol.

Exegesis

In an article hosted by the Atlas Network, Volkan Ertit has asserted that 'Islamic traditions and teachings have no conflict with a market-oriented economy inspired by profit motive...'⁶⁶ Libertarian Islamists deploy a variety of hermeneutic strategies, historical and textual. In this endeavour, a core preoccupation is to allay widely held fears among Muslims of the moral laxity associated with unfettered capitalism and the concomitant perception of individual liberty as

licentious rather than virtuous. This moral anxiety has not gone unnoticed by Muslim libertarian proponents of a minimalist state who support anti-authoritarian political Islam as representing more than simply an ideological apologia for unfettered capitalism.⁶⁷

The Prophet Muhammad's role as a trader is one significant dimension of libertarian Islamism's historical legitimisation. Benedikt Koehler's recent book, *Early Islam and the Birth of Capitalism*, supports the argument, common among libertarian Islamists, that traces capitalism's origins to the Prophet.⁶⁸ Suleyman Dost, for example, describes him as a 'commercial agent...eager to continue this tradition of free trade.'⁶⁹ The deployment of personifications of the Prophet to bolster divergent readings of Islam has been a common strategy among Islamist ideologues. Among other things, he has been invoked variously as warrior, peacemaker, diplomat, scholar, lawyer, proto-socialist and, now, proto-capitalist. Global sensitivities about depictions of the Prophet have taken on a new urgency and prominence since the tumult associated with the Rushdie affair and, more recently the Danish cartoons' crises, in particular. This has been further compounded by invocations of the Prophet as warrior-scholar in militant Islamist discourse. In the justificatory rhetoric of Muslim activism, the Prophet's importance has thus increased in recent years. It is not surprising that libertarian Islamists have seized on the political currency of the Prophet to propagate the notion that capitalism is inherent within Islamic traditions: to do otherwise would be to concede ground to the vast diffusion of contending portraits of the Prophet's innate character.

A second dimension to libertarian Islamism's interpretative approach to Islamic history is its connecting the early spread of Islam and the civilisational vitality of its empires with its unfettered pursuit of free commerce. As Ahmad asserts, 'the uncompromising defense of property rights (even while calling for a greater responsibility for alleviating the plight of the poor and needy) pushed the Islamic civilization to the front of the world's economic stage and made the Muslim world the defining force in international trade for over 800 years.'⁷⁰ From a non-Muslim, pro-free market perspective, Chris Berg and Andrew Kemp, writing in the house journal of the Australian Institute of Public Affairs, concur with Ahmad. 'It would be hard to find a successful civilisation without a stable economic base at its origins', they argue, 'but it is worth emphasising the extent to which Islam, in particular, was conceived in a commercial environment.'⁷¹ A third related historical factor in the ideologisation of libertarian Islamism is the positing of a hidden history of Islamic libertarianism in the form of the historically minimal role of the Islamic state in regulating the market. As Ahmad argues, 'There was no government intervention into the economy except to expose fraud, punish theft, or nullify *riba* (the charging of interest).'⁷²

In terms of textual exegesis, libertarian Islamists place a heavy emphasis on individual property rights. Much of this interpretative work is centred on the clarification and justification of interest (*riba*) in the context of the widely accepted Islamic view of its prohibition and on the non-coercive nature of alms giving (*zakat*). More widely, it aims, first, to legitimise the centrality of individual self-interest despite Islamic directives on social welfare. Secondly, it makes an explicit connection between anti-authoritarianism and the freedom of commerce inherent in Islamic teachings as an antidote to the political extremism of more centralised forms of political Islam. Libertarian Islamists seek to accommodate Islamic teachings to selfishness as a motive for action. In addressing the moral command for social welfare which, they concede, is also integral to Islam, they situate this ethical aspect in the concept of individual voluntarism. This is particularly evident in the treatment of *zakat* or obligatory almsgiving. *Zakat* becomes defined as voluntary charity rather than a tax imposed by the state. It is better understood, free market Islamists argue, within the domain of individual moral obligation than a coercive instrument of state. The moral supervision required for the general welfare stems from the individual believer's direct relationship to God and his rules, unmediated by any human or institutional layer of authority.

This is also used as a way of accommodating *zakat* and *riba* to the Islamic free market by creating a level playing field of risk as well as religious duty. As Zuhdi Jasser, founder of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, asserts, ‘There should be no involved parties insulated from risk in the free market...the more one spends and the less one hoards, the less charity God commands us to spend. This seems to be a resounding endorsement of the free market and concept of “virtue of selfishness”’.⁷³

This individualist perspective also extends to the rule of law, particularly as it pertains to contracts freely entered into as justification for an anti-statist agenda. In conceptualising the rule of law as being non-arbitrary, however, drawing on the Austrian school of economic thought, libertarian Islamists depart also from conventional Islamic approaches, including mainstream liberal ones, in that law is discovered by men, rather than imposed by human legislators. Law, defined in terms of the discovery rather than imposition of *shari’*a, serves to secure the freedom of the market. It is not the thicker rights-based social practice of the liberal-democratic state. Thus, drawing an explicit parallel with conceptions of justice in Friedrich Hayek’s thought, Ahmad states ‘Islam is neither democracy (in the sense of legislation by the people) or theocracy (in the sense of legislation by clerics) but is *nomocracy*, rule by a fixed law that develops by a process of discovery rather than legislation.’⁷⁴

If the risk of moral laxity is an anxiety shared by Muslim proponents of a free market, its solution in the melding of individual religious duty with individual egoism is also deployed as a bulwark against extremism. The authoritarianism associated with conventional forms of Islamism is seen to be a product of the historical departure, of both Muslim leaders and political theorists, from a libertarian, non-interventionist anti-state. State intervention in the economy is tied explicitly to the erosion of political liberties more generally. On this, libertarian Islamists share much with the Islamic ‘Calvinism’ of their liberal free market bedfellows in an era in which Islamism is increasingly equated with political extremism. The ‘free market turn’ in global Islam thus represents more than simply an alternative economics: it is, in many ways, as totalising in its ideological ambition as the Islamism it seeks to confront in its delineation of a social, moral and political, as well as economic, vision of Islam as a way of life. Thus, while Ahmad laments that Muslim political leaders ‘began interventions into the economy, gradually developing a loss of respect for private property and individual liberty’, Akyol suggests that with free market Islam ‘the world will be a much safer place — for a morally-guided quest for capital is way more peaceful than a hate-driven “battle” against it.’⁷⁵

Ambivalent liberties

Libertarian Islamists offer little detail about the kind of Islamic society they envisage beyond the virtues of the economic model they expound. The lack of a blueprint is not unusual in Islamist thought and can be related, in part, to the core Islamic belief that, in an ideal Islamic society, God’s sovereignty supersedes any institutional form of human authority. Interestingly, in this regard, libertarian Islamists share some affinities with the radical Islamist ideologue, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), in his disavowal of man-made institutions of authority, including the nation-state. Indeed, the anti-statist tendencies in Qutb’s thought have been largely overlooked and instead his permissive arguments about violence deployed in current debates about militancy which centre on the conventional view of Islamists wanting to capture the nation-state or otherwise create an Islamic state.⁷⁶ For Qutb, like libertarian Islamists, enacting Islam in its most authentic, divine form would, in effect, remove the need for the state as the new order would be premised on the self-regulating flourishing of an unmediated society under God’s law.⁷⁷ Seen in this light, the difference between Qutb and libertarian Islamists on the question of the state and its secular arrogation of God’s authority is more one of method – Qutb advocates a vanguard group to violently hasten the

withering away of the state, while libertarian Islamists look for more pacific ways to enable the expansion of the free market and the erosion of state intervention.

Qutb was, of course, focused on rejecting the West because it represented *jahiliyya*, a Qur'anic concept signifying pre-Islamic Godlessness which he had borrowed via the Indian Islamist thinker, Abu'l Ala Mawdudi, and similarly reframed as a contemporary attack on the corrupting influences of Western modernity. This is what informed his rejection of the secular state.⁷⁸ Libertarian Islamists, on the other hand, embrace Islam's engagement with the West, championing the free market as a site of cross-cultural exchange and arguing for capitalism's pre-modern antecedents in Islamic thought and practice. Yet while the seemingly atomised individual sits at the centre of libertarian Islamist thought, as with Qutb and in keeping with wider Muslim belief, it is ultimately the wider *ummah* or Islamic community which takes religious and moral precedence. In this way, bringing a functioning religious and moral community into being without recourse to the authority of the state or a theory of social contract, poses a shared dilemma. In Qutb's case, this is partially solved by permitting violence in the overthrow of the state. It is expressed in libertarian Islamism, however, in its ambivalent libertarian commitments beyond the sphere of economics. Libertarian Islamists tend towards social conservatism despite their economic liberalism. This tension is evident in the lack of libertarian Islamist advocacy on certain social issues and implicit assumptions about how the Islamic community should collectively self-regulate and censure behaviour by recourse to a conservative vision of Islamic law.

The ideological production of libertarian Islamism is strikingly disconnected from radical calls among some Muslims for greater individual liberty in the social sphere. For example, issues such as LGBT rights, while becoming increasingly prominent in debates in the West about the evolving relationship between Islam and liberalism, even among more traditional Muslim organisations, are notably absent in the libertarian Islamist literature.⁷⁹ There is not a single mention in a recent publication by the Institute of Economic Affairs, titled 'Islamic Foundations of a Free Society', whose Foreword implores its Muslim readers to "understand more clearly the consistency of free society values with Islamic sharia."⁸⁰ In these ways, libertarian Islamists expound a dual morality - supporting the unencumbered moral freedom of the individual engendered by the economic market while guarding against social expressions of individual liberty traditionally seen as morally lax in an overly permissive society. But for this duality to function, the morals of the social community require some kind of authoritative sanction in order to curb excessive freedom.

Libertarian Islamists locate this in the *shari'a* but they say very little about how it should be instituted or enforced. As we have seen, like other Islamists, they believe that economic practices should further the moral and religious ends of the Muslim community as a whole. Radical free market economics is seen as the engine which both drives and binds the wider needs and obligations of the Muslim community under God's law. But, in the absence of explicit libertarian advocacy beyond economics and with so much store set on the obligations of the *shar'ia*, libertarian Islamists appear to share implicitly a conservative conception of the social and legal norms which should govern Islamic morality and community. Rather than mirroring the wider workings of the whole of Muslim society, therefore, for libertarian Islamists economics functions more as a realm of exception. For the freedom of economic liberalism is disconnected from other social freedoms in libertarian Islamism despite claims that its economic model underpins a freer, more 'moderate' Islamic society. This disconnection is not only due to the fact that, as I have discussed above, libertarian Islamists are largely embedded within and supported by a wider global network of Western free market advocacy organisations which are themselves mostly socially conservative in orientation. But also because, like them, libertarian Islamism presents a picture of the free market as being not only unfettered, but as functioning outside or above politics. In this way, the fact that they do not regard the market as a conscious political construction and, therefore,

like the state they oppose, also a product of power, is intimately tied to their attitude towards *shari'a*. For if the market is natural and God-given, so is the *shari'a*. This leads libertarian Islamists to naturalise another construction - the conservative or traditional corpus of rulings on Islamic community and morality which are seen as being implicitly timeless.

Conclusion

The interposition of free market Islamism, and its libertarian strain, onto the ideological landscape of global Islam forces a re-evaluation of definitions of radical Islam and of what constitutes subversion of the liberal state. These are themes that have been central to both scholarly and political understandings of Islamism. It is clear that, on this view, current templates for analysing political Islam have constricted conceptions of what counts as 'Islamism' and have ideologised the vocabulary used to describe it. As a consequence, the multiple possibilities for politicised forms of Islam across the ideological spectrum have been obscured or overlooked. While this signals a need for greater awareness of the political dimensions of scholarly framing, it also poses a conceptual conundrum: if Islamism is largely coterminous with socialist values, liberal democracy or a radical free market ideology, what remains of its utility as a mode of explanation if ideological expressions of Islam are so malleable, other than a perfunctory nod to *shar'ia* or the instrumentalisation of authenticity?

There may also be deeper scholarly rationales, however, for these seemingly circular tautologies in our analytical understandings of Islamism. It makes empirical sense to expand our analytic conceptions of Islamist ideologies in light of the growing phenomenological pluralism and complexity of ideologised forms of Islamic thought and practice. But prevailing treatments of 'Islamism' also expose the dominant ways in which Western political theory is conducted: as both statist and liberal. Non-statist and non-liberal departures remain peripheral to the study of Western political ideologies: the perennially marginal status of anarchist thought, despite minor fluctuations in its academic fortunes from time to time, is a case in point. Subsequently, our ways of applying theoretical insights to non-Western forms of political theology also mirror the dominance of the liberal political theory of the state.

As an ideological phenomenon, we tend to construct 'Islamism' in our own image: one which frames our understanding of it as either assimilating to the liberal state or veering toward a totalitarian one. If libertarian Islam can be seen as a critique of both the state and liberalism, however, it cannot be fully discerned via the conventional categories of liberal political theory, such as the state, constitutional law, representative democracy, and institutionally sanctioned forms of human rights. These are institutional categories with which variant strands of reformist Islam, in its opposition to 'radical' Islam, have also come to be associated. Each, in their own diverse ways, regards state authority as a critical guarantor of a free society, Islam as fundamentally not at odds with the values and variant institutional forms of secular liberal democracy, and an idea of Islamic religious authority, grounded in some institutional form, as elemental to a virtuous Muslim society.

The liberal concerns of Muslim reformists are further amplified by those of comparative political theorists whose normative enterprises involve delineating the compatibility between Islam and liberalism.⁸¹ In the process, the dissolving boundary, between the activist projects of Muslim reformists and the academic study of Muslim liberalism from within political theory, serves also to affirm a hegemonic liberal reading of the possibilities for Islamic political thought. Typically, the adoption of and reliance on liberal categories by Muslim reformists for their modes of argumentation also compel their conceptions of radical Islam toward being coterminous with the existential threat to the state from violent extremism. The solution inevitably becomes one, therefore, of further enhancing the liberal state's purview and authority. For libertarian Islamists, as

we have seen, the opposite is true, which leaves them in a perversely paradoxical predicament as lovers of individual liberty: sharing, implicitly, the same conceptual space as jihadi militants in the political anxieties of liberals, yet existing beyond the imaginaries of both. Moreover, in its marked degree of deliberate intellectual cross-pollination and self-conscious borrowing between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’, libertarian Islamism’s particular composite nature remains unidentified in post-Eurocentric comparative political theory which, nonetheless, seeks to move beyond conventional categories of Western political theory including hybrid and synthetic modes, thinkers and traditions in its focus on ‘non-Western’ thought.⁸²

The analytical constriction of Islamism can be tied to the liberal categories through which we have come to view global contexts of political and ideological action. This *presumption* of liberalism can also help to explain why libertarian Islamism has remained beyond our conceptions of the multifarious ideological factors which continuously reshape global Islamist politics.

Notes

¹ Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism* (London: Saqi, 2007), Charles Tripp, *Islam and the Moral Economy: the Challenge of Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Timur Kuran, *Islam and Mammon: the Economic Predicaments of Islamism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: the Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004), Clement M. Henry, & Rodney Wilson (eds), *The Politics of Islamic Finance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), Bill Maurer, *Mutual Life, Limited: Islamic Banking, Alternative Currencies, Lateral Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

² Ibrahim Saif and Muhammad Abu Rumman, *The Economic Agenda of the Islamist Parties* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

³ Roxanne L. Euben, ‘Making the World Safe for Compatibility’, *Political Theory*, 38: 3 (2010), pp. 424-41.

⁴ For introductions, see, *inter alia*, Fred Dallmayr (ed.), *Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent, ‘Introduction: The Study of Comparative Political Thought’ in Michael Freeden and Andrew Vincent (eds), *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ Andrew F. March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ See Asef Bayat, ‘The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society’, *Critique*, 9, Fall (1996), pp. 43-52., and Roy, *Globalised Islam*.

⁸ Vali Nasr, *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of the New Muslim Middle Class and What it Will Mean for Our World* (New York: Free Press, 2009), Mustafa Akyol, *Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011).

⁹ Roy, *Globalised Islam*, p. 59. See also Humeira Iqtidar, ‘Jama’at-e-Islami Pakistan: Learning from the Left’ in Naveeda Khan (ed.), *Beyond Crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 245-73.

¹⁰ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), Francois Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003).

¹¹ For an alternative view, see Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad* (London: Hurst, 2005).

¹² See Kuran, *Islam and Mammon*, Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) and Sohrab Behdad, ‘A Disputed Utopia: Islamic Economics in Revolutionary Iran’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36: 4 (1994), pp. 775-813.

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- ⁴³ Nasr, *Forces of Fortune*, p. 261.
- ⁴⁴ Akyol, *Islam Without Extremes*, pp. 61-2.
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- ⁵³ Nasr, *Forces of Fortune*, pp. 145-76.
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- ⁷⁶ The literature on Islamist movements, militant or otherwise, is replete with references to Qutb's influence on them. For an alternative view, see Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi, 'Introduction: Islam after Liberalism' in Faisal Devji and Zaheer Kazmi (eds) *Islam After Liberalism* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2017). On Qutb and comparative political theory, see also Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- ⁷⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, revised translation with a foreword by Ahmad Zaki Hammad (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1990).
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⁷⁹ Note, for example, the two-day conference, ‘Diversity: The Gift of Islam’, organised by the UK-based LGBTI group Imaan in London in August 2014 at which members of influential Muslim organisations once considered conservative participated, including the Islamic Society of Britain and The Muslim Institute.

⁸⁰ Nuh El Harmouzi and Linda Whetstone (eds), *Islamic Foundations of a Free Society* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2016), p. xv.

⁸¹ See March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship*.

⁸² Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought*.