# The Post-Laic Situation in the Era of Global Unicity

*Susan Buck-Morss*

We suffer from a chronically deferred process of naming the present. To speak of the "post-laic," or "post-secular" society is to continue to step gingerly into the future, dangling one leg in the open air of history, while clinging with the other to the edge of Western modernity, as if to avoid a free-fall into waters below, infested with terrorists, extremists, tribal traditionalists, and religious obscurantists. But given the miniscule minority of human beings who might plausibly be placed in such categories (and given the enormous violence of modernity's own past), why should we be so afraid of letting go? Is Western modernity the only safe ground? Has its version of secularization ever been safe? It is high time (it

is past time) for an alternative genealogy to the existing narratives of globalization, dispensing with the cautious "post-" in order to move unapologetically to a new affirmation of our time.

We live in an era of global unicity. We are no longer separate civilizations in the spatial sense, as all of the possible ways of dividing civilizations—by religion, language, culture, territory—are multiply compounded. From now on, "civilized" is a quality that needs to be earned. We no longer inhabit different stages of history in the temporal sense, as no criterion of development can be isolated from the global system in which we are all now imbricated. Global unicity rejects temporal-spatial cleavages irrevocably, demanding a revisioning of our segmented pasts.

The concept of unicity—the addition of components that maintain their differences within a composite whole—has itself a blended past. It was central to the Roman Catholic Scholastic thinking of the Sicilian Dominican, Thomas Aquinas, in the late thirteenth century, who taught at the University of Paris—who in turn derived the concept from the early 11th-century philosophical and scientific writings of the Persian Sunni, Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna), who lived in Bukhara and Hamadan—who in turn developed the concept from the writings of the early 10th century Khorasani (today's Afghanistan), Abu Nasr al-Farabi, who lived in Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus—who in turn was influenced by the neo-Aristotelian tradition of

Athens and Alexandria that dates to the imperial era of pagan Rome. While referring originally to the composite of matter and spirit that comprises a human being, the concept of unicity as a compound of differences fits our global present.

It is impossible to experience the full unicity of our era from any one place in the global composition. It is available to us only virtually, only in mediated form. The global composite became visibly perceptible in the 1960s, when the revolution in communications first made possible the political claim: "The whole world is watching." From May '68, to the fall of the Berlin Wall, to Tianamen Square, to September 11, to the streets of Tehran in summer, 2009, this whole world, this global public sphere, has so transformed the terms of political debate that it necessitates a rearrangement of the social imaginary in terms of how both past history and present realities are understood.

The realities of the economic context, as financially shaky as they may be, support our global unicity with a healthy dose of fact. Behind the scenes of televised spectacles, the global restructuring of capital has produced existential interdependencies, the precariousness of which was revealed by the recent financial crisis in x-ray form. The resolution of the crisis will not bring an end to the global capitalist system, but it may well bring an end to the world order as we have known it. There are multiple indications that the already-developed coun-

tries will recover less quickly, and, indeed, never regain their hegemonic status. There is no reason to presume in the future a continuation of past patterns of growth. Quite the contrary: It was precisely the penchant for linear projections into the future, that blinded economists to the danger of crisis in the first place. A dialectic of economic globalization—that the developed countries, having forged the terms of capitalism's global restructuring, lose their economic dominance paradoxically as a consequence of that restructuring—would be the most significant *political* outcome of the crisis. The continued supremacy of the West as defined by Samuel Huntington, that is, as the former colonizing countries of Europe together with the United States as a cultural/ethnic bloc, bears no empirical or metaphysical guarantee.

Transformations of the social imaginary in times of historical transition are precisely not the work of preexisting social blocs. Rather, particular human beings, for the most varied reasons, are the initiators of change. Their freedom to act is contingent on the dissolution of the social glue that has kept arrangements in place. It would be wrong to see these people in larger-than-life terms, as genial exceptions, creators *ex nihilo*. Rather, their power comes from a very mundane awareness that the ruling social imaginary is increasingly contradicted by the actual conditions of social life. They are the naïve ones who dare to say aloud that the emperor has no clothes; the youth whose lived experiences contradict the

authority of their teachers; the disenfranchized, whose life-dreams find no place in a society that excludes their significance from the start. Because these people are not bound to the *status quo*, they are capable of seeing reality more clearly—and, at least since the 1960s, the reality that they see is global.

This fact militates against discourses based on ontologies of identity and difference. Such collective imaginaries distort political understanding by glorifying foundational narratives of unique cultural/civilizational authenticity, when in fact people today are living culturally porous lives under far more universal subjective conditions of capitalism, urbanism, and cultural hybridity. The conception of authenticity that underpins much indigenous and fundamentalist politics tends to promote mythical constructs and ideological obfuscations—in short, *in*authentic political subjectivities. This is the flaw of identity politics, which cannot escape the neo-liberal model of competing, agonistic self-interests—a perspective too narrow, too stingy, to activate the *demos* in democracy.[1] Ontologies of difference lead to splinter-interest coalitions that lose what Marx knew to be the hallmark of the ascending power, the fact that its own perspective, its vision, coincides with the universal interest, so that it can claim with justification to act for the good of all humanity.

1 I am indebted to Kyong-Min Son for this formulation (ks426@cornell.edu).

The truth content of concepts is constructed by means of their deployment within myriad acts of communication at every global level of society. Our meeting in Cairo at the *Académie de la Latinité* is one such act. We are not merely describing the social imaginary of *postlaïcité* from the outside. Nor do we reiterate an international model of civilizational dialogue, where each of us speaks as the delegate of a partial and pre-existing collective. Acknowledging the inner-temporal positioning of critical reflection requires of us that we produce schemata of the imagination that correspond to the global realities we experience. In this meeting, as in countless others that are taking place, whether face-to-face or by internet communication, we have no choice but to reinvent tradition, wherein Western-style secularism no longer provides (if it ever did) a secure *point de capiton* of human progress. This is the post-laic situation, in an era of global unicity.

## II

How can the traditions of Western philosophy contribute to a transformation of the global imaginary, specifically in regard to time? The Hegelian dialectic of progress, the optimistic scenario of world history as inevitable transcendence through negation, that was rearticulated by Marx in terms of the class struggle, has been discredited by history itself. In its wake, there has been almost exclusive emphasis on critical epistemology, the moment of negation, as if critique were all that is required of phi-

losophy. There is another potentiality of the dialectic, however, one that has largely been overlooked by philosophers and politicians alike.

Let us recall that the Hegelian dialectic relies on a triad of meanings contained within the word *Aufhebung*. One is, indeed, negation, exemplified by algebraic mathematics: equivalent terms on both sides of an equation nullify each other; they cancel each other out (*sie heben einander auf*). A second meaning is the now-discredited transcendence of negation, the overriding synthesis, the "supersession," that turns history's contradictions into progress as the (divinely guaranteed) cunning of Reason (*List der Vernunft*). But the verb *aufheben* has a third meaning as well. It is the German expression for "to keep, to save," as in saving a material trace, a memento of the past. I would like for us to keep, to save *this* meaning. It bears affinities with Walter Benjamin's idea of *rescuing* the past.

Marx paid even less attention to this conserving, rescuing gesture than did Hegel, whose dialectical logic was more scrupulous. History's persistence is for Marx the *Alp*, the mount-high "muck of the ages" that weighs like a nightmare (*Alp-traum*) on the shoulders of the living. No room for melancholy here. The sooner this historical detris is removed the better—and it *will* be remove, because the forces of history demand it. One finds in Walter Benjamin's theory what looks like a similar observation, and yet the difference is crucial. Central to

Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is the insight that new technologies, when they appear, mimic old forms (the first electric light bulbs were shaped like gas flames; locomotive wheels were designed to mimic horses' hooves).[2]

Developing the potentialities of the new in Benjamin's examples will not happen necessarily. It rests squarely on human invention and imagination, an act of freedom that attends to the utopian possibilities latent within the technically transformed, material world.

What holds for technology's forms is true of socio-political forms as well. Because there is no dynamic of history that pushes irresistibly toward social justice, the danger of an atavistic repetition of domination and *un*freedom is real: while property-slavery is negated and abolished, wage-slavery becomes entrenched; the socialization of production that supersedes capitalism leads to an intensification of state repression; neo-imperialism, hidden behind the mask of neo-liberalism, resurrects an atavistic return to colonial strategies of authoritarian rule.

Education of the imagination therefore takes center stage. Everything depends on it. But what precisely does this entail? And here is the surprise. Rather than shedding the past "muck of the ages" as quickly as possible, relegating it to the dustbin of history, Benjamin's charge for a revolutionary education is to *rescue* the past—*Aufhe-*

2 See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1989, Chapter 5, esp. p. 110-24.

*bung* in the unpopular, overlooked sense that I spoke of above. Nothing shows this surprising insistence in Benjamin's thought so obtrusively as his insertion of theology, wizened and deformed, directly into the prefatory thesis of his historical, materialist manifesto, "On the Concept of History."[3] The salvation of the socialist project is one with the rescue of theology for Benjamin, who has become the patron saint for a generation of Western intellectuals.

## III

"After the death of God…." A mere relative clause, a nod by a Western speaker toward what appears as Nietzsche's definitive act of secularization, clearing the ground for any discussion of relevance in the present, is for the people in many parts of the globe precisely a dismissal of radical, political possibility. Are we to understand this miscommunication as simply one of insensitivity to the other, a presumed, Eurocentric universality when multi-culturality is called for? I think not. This critique does nothing to foster objective understanding of the real political situation. Let me take you to another location. It will demand a rescue of the past.

The place is the Middle East; the time is 1964. In April of that year Malcolm X made the Hajj to Mecca, an event that signaled his transformed understanding of politics,

3 Benjamin, Thesis I, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 389.

no longer a strategy of Black Nationalism and separatism, but one of transcending race through the universality of Islam. That same year Sayyid Qutb's small book *Milestones* (*Ma'alim fi al-Tariq*) appeared, a call to action by a lay writer, in opposition to both the religious and the government establishment, to recreate the Muslim world on strictly Qur'anic grounds. The book rescued for Islam the substance of Marx's critique of socio-economic injustice that echoed the contemporaneous politics of liberation theology among Catholics, and argued in Qur'anic terms, that obedience to God superseded the sovereign claim of any earthly power. It was the year, too, that the Leftist intellectual Ali Shari'ati returned to Iran after exile in France, where he had corresponded with, and contributed to the Iranian translation of works by the Martinique-born, Marxist psychoanalyst, Frantz Fanon, whose philosophy of liberation has been foundational for post-colonial theory.[4] Arrested for a brief time by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Shari'ati began his famous university lectures in Iran (including "Fatima is Fatima"[5]) articulating a truly *leftist* Islamic political position, drawing eclectically, *syncretically* (as opposed to Hegelian synthetics) on Marxist, Islamist, feminist, anti-imperialist, and existentialist theoretical insights.[6] Two years later, the Sudanese

4 Fanon died of lukemia in 1961.

5 See the new biography, *Ali Rahnema, An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2009.

6 In the 1970s, the public learned about COINTELPRO and other secret FBI programs directed towards infiltrating and dis-

Muslim, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, published *The Second Message of Islam*, a reading of the Qur'an that interpreted the Meccan revelations to the Prophet as universal in their truth, in contrast to the socio-historical specificity of the Medina revelations that, he argued, reflected the particular needs for pragmatic governance, given the customs and consciousness of the times: the Meccan revelations express radical racial and sexual equality.

Malcolm X was assassinated in the United States in 1965 (the plot involved the U.S. Nation of Islam or the FBI, or both[7]). In 1966 Sayyid Qutb, former functionary in the Egyptian ministry of education, who became the intellec-

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rupting civil rights organizations during the 1950s and 1960s. John Ali, national secretary of the Nation of Islam, was identified as an FBI undercover agent. Malcolm X had confided in a reporter that Ali exacerbated tensions between him and Elijah Muhammad. He considered Ali his "archenemy" within the Nation of Islam leadership. On February 20, 1965, the night before the assassination, Ali met with Talmadge Hayer, one of the men convicted of killing Malcolm X Source: *Wikipedia*, "Malcolm X").

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tual inspiration for the Muslim Brotherhood (founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928), and who spent years and was tortured in Nassar's prisons, was executed for alleged conspiracy against the government. Ali Shari'ati died suddenly in Southhampton, England, in 1978, just months before the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution (SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, remains suspect). In 1983 Mahmoud Taha was executed for his views by the Sudanese dictator Numeri, who was backed at the time by the Sudanese chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood.

All of these historical actors were part of the 1960s generation—a *global* generation, and this is the point. Their juxtaposition makes visible the source of the unicity of our era. When biographically lived time crosses collective time—this historical conjuncture makes a generation. We are born twice, the first time into a culturally specific world of particulars: ancestral names, class backgrounds, family circumstances, religious traditions, and educational possibilities. But the second birth is into the universal temporal dimension of history, and this second temporal baptism bestows upon us what Benjamin called a "*weak* messianic power."[8]

The conjuncture of the personal and the political that makes a generation is a shared moment of lived time, the materialization of a transitory field of action—and in our time the implications are global. Why is a generation's

8 Benjamin, Thesis II, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 390.

messianic power characterized as "weak"? A materialist-Marxist reading would interpret this as an acknowledgment of the limits of subjectivity given the priority of objective historical forces, and also the precariousness of manifesting such power given everything ideological that is stacked against its clarity of expression. But it may be a symptom of the fact that various components of a generation remain unaware of the unicity of their struggles. Who on the streets of Paris, Berkeley, Athens, Mexico City, or Tokyo in the 1960s was aware of Qutb and Shari'ati? Who on the streets of Cairo or Tehran expressed solidarity with Taha or Malcolm X? What, then or now, do we teach in our universities or discuss in the media that would make such connections apparent?

There is a blindness to institutionalized education that passes down the authority of tradition, a mental timidity, born of privilege or just plain laziness, that cloaks itself in the heavy bombast of cultural heritage and historic preservation. It generates enormous resistance to trespassing conceptual boundaries or exceeding the limits of present imagination, rewarding instead the virtues of scholastic diligence, disciplinary professionalism, and elitist erudition, all of which are escapes from the pragmatic necessity of confronting the new. Indeed, extreme discomfort is caused by the truly new, the truly "contemporary," that which Nietzsche called the "untimely" (*unzeitgemäß*)—meaning here, those aspects of the present moment that simply do not fit our established tradi-

tions or modes of understanding. At the same time, the contemporary cannot be understood *without* the past, hence the political centrality of a globally oriented education that constructs new genealogies, breaking with traditions by passing through them.

It is at this point that the issue of universality becomes concrete. We—all of us alive today—who may have nothing more, nor less in common than sharing *this* time, share as a consequence precisely the *untimeliness of the present*—the truly new, that none of our knowledge traditions has anticipated. The attempt, nonetheless, to seize the contemporary and stuff it back into the Procrustean bed of tradition, destroying precisely its global newness, is a moment of political danger. This threat entails not merely, as Marx observed, a farcical repetition of past history, but an annihilation of future history's potential. It opens the door to a reactive return to the past via trans-historical assertions of identitites and continuities, whereby the new is flattened into that which has always been, reifying our individual identities within eternally fixed collectives, that are remembered as perpetually antagonistic, perpetually at war against each other. Political judgments are correspondingly ossified, based on fictive, ontological constants: there are determinately good collectives, but others are by definition evil; there are true beliefs while others are heretical; there are actors who are perennially *a propos* and others generically, if not genetically, behind the times.

A generation's Messianic power demands the historical convergence of two ruptures. The first, albeit man-made, is objective. It is the moment of economic, military, or ecological crisis, the "shock and awe" that endangers the continuity of biographically lived time, the history of the individual.[9] The second rupture concerns the hidden potentialities of the present, the untimeliness of our time that demands in response a rupture in collective imagination, a transforming rescue of tradition that is the antithesis of reactive return.

## IV

How does this set the terms of debate in our era of global unicity? Consider a recent theoretical discussion: Alain Badiou has provided an analysis of the historical moment of rupture that he names "the event," encouraging us to return to the past and rescue it anew. Moreover, this is a rescue of theology in the literal sense. His prototype of the transforming event is the conversion of St. Paul. And, as a Marxist, materialist, and atheist, he insists on the totally secular character of this rescue, that is to be made fruitful for revolutionary politics today. Has not Badiou's Paul, then, fulfilled the criteria for a redemptive pedagogy, a transformation of intellectual imagination, one that already bears the temporal la-

9 See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2007.

bel of "post-secular"? Has it not led to new genealogies of Western thought, expressed in a general discussion regarding the historical and political phenomenology of St. Paul's event (Žižek, Agamben, and others)?

Badiou is modern, *au courrant*, but he is not contemporary, not *against* the current. By returning to the standard history of the Christian West, *yet again* "putting on the mask of St. Paul" (Marx!) in order to speak politically of the rupturing power of the event, the pragmatics of his action reinforces the past and obliterates change, weakening the messianic, political power of the present that he intends to affirm. Might not Badiou have made a more (un)timely choice by engaging the writings of Sayyid Qutb? That which Qutb accomplished, in *Milestones* specifically, was the mobilization of tradition for politically radical engagement—not only against British *and* USSR imperialist designs inside of Egypt, but also against the Islamic religious establishment that had made its peace with the dictatorial *status quo*.

In terms of global unicity, it is not the undeniable dogmatism of his call to "implement the system" of *Shar'ia* law that is the radical universality of Qutb's writing, nor is it the dialectical reversal in his understanding of the struggle (*jihad*) that transforms the "absolute freedom of man" into "absolute obedience" to a merely human, albeit Islamic regime. Rather, it is his uncompromising advocacy of human dignity and social justice throughout years of imprisonment by the state that took his life, that

is the revolutionary core of his theology. Relentlessly criticizing the "transfer to man [of] one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty," the work of Qutb, a Sunni, connects laterally in time with Roman Catholic liberation theology, as well as with the Christian-based, civil rights movement in the United States. The left-interpretation of the Islamic revival by Shari'ati, a Shi'ite, brings him fully into this politically powerful constellation, thinkers who, in Qutb's words, consider religion not merely a belief, but a political practice, "a declaration of the freedom of man from the servitude to other men."[10]

Rescue here takes on concrete form. If we in the so-called West stick to our Western stories, content to criticize our critical critics, or to resurrect our own dusty thinkers of the past for a post-secular present defanged of religion's revolutionary power, if we do *not* rescue the progressive moments in present-day religious writers—Qutb, Shari'ati, and so many others, whose political actions we have neglected even to see, but who belong objectively to *our* time and who are, in the uncomfortable sense, our *contemporaries*, if we continue to ignore their highly influential work, abandoning them on the field of political imagination, then we allow their legacy to be taken over by reactionary forces all to eager to appropriate it for their own hegemonic projects. A

10 Sayyid Qutb's book *Milestones* in English translation can be downloaded. The quotations here are from that download, p. 9 and 55: http://www.scribd.com/doc/8652790/Qutb-milestone.

relevant anecdote: Nathan Coombs writes: "When [the journal] *Culture Wars* approached me to review a release from Verso's Radical Thinkers series, I responded 'great, give me Ali Shari'ati.' But Shari'ati was not in the collection."[11]

It is easy to misunderstand my point here. I am not saying that one needs to affirm everything in Qutb's or Shari'ati's writings, adhering to some notion of revolutionary solidarity with any and all who criticize the present order, nor am I advocating a Foucauldean glorification of the Iranian Revolution itself. (Mahmoud Mohammed Taha was, it can be noted, fully opposed to political violence—as was *his* contemporary, the Reverend Martin Luther King). I am arguing something more radical. It is that the writings of these deeply reflective intellectuals need to be engaged because as members of the generation of the 1960s, they have been recently our contemporaries, and only with the help of their thinking are we able to think anew, strengthening the "*weak* messianic power" of the present generation. (It needs to be noted that Shari'ati, like so many Islamic intellectuals, knew Western philosophy "inside out."[12]) Yes, we need to take

11 See Nathan Coomb's review of Rahnema's biography of Shari'ati (above, note 19) for Culture Wars, "Ali Shari'ati: between Marx and the Infinite," http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2008-05/rahnema.htm (posted May, 2008).

12 "Nothing in his work suggests a return to the good old days, but rather leans towards existential concerns about the role of the intellectual and the necessity of decisive action, echoing

the radical core of religion seriously, because in our time, transformational power depends on its rescue and reinvention, and not on some facile assertion that "we" have now progressed beyond religion, when the vast majority of the world's population is excluded in that statement.[13] At the same time, our rescue saves Shari'ati and others from monopolistic appropriation by reactionary interpreters—it is Benjamin's work that we do. Coombs writes: "Thus it is not just that here in the complacent, naïve West we don't have the gumption to truly know Shari'ati, but that even in his native Iran, the true character of his work remains veiled."[14] Our political responsibility, then, extends far beyond the rescue of the particular intellectual traditions into which we happen to have been born.

A commitment to global unicity implies a different criterion of judgment. Rescue is tentative, decentralized, eclectic, and often not theoretically coherent. It is syncretic rather than synthetic. Adopting a *radical* neutrali-

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aspects of Kierkegaard, Fanon, Husserl and Sartre" (Coombs, http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2008-05/rahnema.htm.

13 "It would be all too easy to strike at Shari'ati with the same stratagem as the aforementioned writers [Badiou, Eagleton, Zizek, Agamben], i.e., to find within his philosophy the radical break and attempt to shake off the religious baggage. But alas the Idea of Shari'ati will never buckle to such a convenient formula. Religion is inscribed deep within his thought, is what made his writings ascend to public prominence" (Coombs, http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2008-05/rahnema.htm).

14 Coombs, http://www.culturewars.org.uk/208-05/rahnema.htm.

ty dedicated to carving out a political space that belongs to neither enemy side, we affirm fragments of incompatible discourses. Our task is to open up a theoretical terrain wherein Afghan women can demonstrate openly against Islamist laws that would fetter their autonomy, *without* this action being sucked into the ruling hegemony of the West. The Iranian opposition deserves our support precisely because its protests are articulated within the discourse of political Islam in a way that rescues that discourse for globally shared, human goals. None of us will succeed if we read only Western writers or only writers from the non-West who enter into the debates on existing terms. It will not happen if we remain within the comfort zone of any civilization into which we happen to have been born. Global unicity in our time demands this re-articulation, this rescue of the past, but such a time is only slowly forthcoming.