The Nature of Totalism and Its Use in the Analysis of Militant Heterodoxies

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Abstract

Als Totalismus soll ein übergeordnetes, allumfassendes System der Interpretation und Beurteilung der Welt gelten, das keine anderen Wahrheitsansprüche akzeptiert. Totalismus wird in diesem Beitrag als analytisches Werkzeug für das Verständnis militanter Heterodoxien wie des Islamismus verwendet. Dessen Antriebskraft entsteht aus der Verpflichtung, eine totalistische Weltanschauung umzusetzen. Um die Art und Bedeutung des Grundsatzes der Totalität zu verstehen, erscheint es erforderlich, die Verbindung zwischen Zeitlichkeit, Telos und universeller Freiheit als wiederkehrende Themen in der Entwicklung der totalistischen Heterodoxien ausführlich zu analysieren. Dies geschieht am Beispiel des Mahdismus und der Ideologie von Sayyid Qutb.

I. Introduction

A part of the literature dealing with totalitarianism and Islamism consistently tends to understand the phenomenon as being different from or even incompatible with Islam itself, yet still underlining the perils of relativist positions. For instance, Bassam Tibi uses Arendt's theory of totalitarianism as well as the concept of political religion to understand Islamism and its strands as a cultural system and ideology which, in his view, must be completely distinguished from Islam.[1] Hansen and Kainz take this perception even further with their conclusions about Western influence on Islamist thought in their otherwise valuable analysis, which approaches the commonalities between Islamism, Marxism and

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[1] Cf. Bassam Tibi, The Totalitarianism of Jihadist Islamism and its Challenge to Europe and to Islam. In: Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 1 (2007), pp. 35–54. For a comparison between Islamism and totalitarian elements also see Michael Whine, Islamism and Totalitarianism: Similarities and Differences. In: Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 2 (2001), pp. 54–72.

National-Socialism.[2] Indeed, such works have merits in distancing themselves from the narrative which equates militant Islamism and terrorism primarily with social and economic exclusion, alongside the often used concept of alienation.[3] Hansen and Kainz rightly argue that Islamists see themselves as personifications of the good on a mission to fulfil the destiny of mankind, yet they also – unconvincingly – conclude that Islamism is a distortion of Islamic values inspired by western ideologies like National-Socialism and Communism.[4] Nevertheless, this article argues that Islamism can be understood, first and foremost, as a manifestation of a distinct worldview which we shall call totalism. Thus, even if coloured by their interpretation of Islamic traditions and their own cultural backgrounds, we encounter the basic structure and patterns which unify the variants of Islamism in other militant movements, which we will call totalist heterodoxies.

Rather than understanding Islamism and Western totalitarian polities in general mainly as a critique of the liberal promise of freedom, the emergence of militant totalist ideologies should be seen as a distinct and recurrent mindset present in an ideal development path of charismatic movements from heterodoxy to hegemony and, finally, ideocracy. Indeed, the theme of the recurrent emergence of heterodoxies which were defined by renovative or utopian goals[5] has been explored by S. N. Eisenstadt.[6] In order to understand the nature of Islamism we must also understand its driving force, namely, its obligation to fight for the implementation of a totalist worldview built upon the principles which form the doctrinal core of the movement. Therefore, throughout the next sections we will detail the nature and importance of the principle of totality, as well as analyse the link between temporality, telos and universal freedom as recurrent themes in the development of totalist heterodoxies.

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2   Cf. Hendrik Hansen/Peter Kainz, Radical Islamism and Totalitarian Ideology. A Comparison of Sayyid Qutb's Islamism with Marxism and National Socialism. In: Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions, 8 (2007) 1, pp. 55–76.

3   Nevertheless, on the shortcoming of the alienation-centric theories in terrorism, see Frazer Egerton, Jihad in the West. The Rise of Militant Salafism, Cambridge 2011, pp. 23–52. Also see John Horgan, The Psychology of Terrorism, London 2005.

4   Cf. Hansen/Kainz, Radical Islamism and Totalitarian Ideology, pp. 71 f.

5   As a rule, utopian theories and ideals aim at or envision the complete reshaping of human existence. Indeed, it is important to note that when defining a movement or program as being utopian we are referring to forces which would result in the radical or complete restructuring of its target society. Having said this, meliorism is not to be confused with – in principle revolutionary – utopianism, whose proponents believed in sudden and dramatic renewals and changes. See Frank Manuel/Fritzie Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World, Cambridge 1979; Jürgen Georg Backhaus (Ed.), The State as Utopia. Continental Approaches, London 2011; Doyne Dawson, Cities of the Gods.Communist Utopias in Greek Thought, New York 1992; James Hadley Billington, Fire in the Minds of Men.Origins of the Revolutionary Faith, New York 1980.

6   See Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Revolution. The Jacobin Dimension of Modernity, Cambridge 2011.

II. The Nature of Totality

1. Totality and the Classical Abrahamic World

In the Western world, we find the clear shape of monism and totality already in the work of Parmenides, which distinguishes between *Alētheia* (the Path of Truth) and *Doxa* (the Path of Opinion).[7] Nevertheless, the idea of totality was taken to an unparalleled level only with the advent and powerful dominance of monotheistic traditions. From the polities of the Iron Age the classical Abrahamic world inherited the concept of cosmocratic domination and a model of social organisation where the ruler or priestly class acted as the sole mediator between man and the divine. The latter aspect leads to one of the key elements of totality and the rise of totalist movements: the fusion between secular and spiritual roles. Even as their differences far outweigh their similarities, the civilizations which rose to prominence throughout the classical Abrahamic world shared several key features. The most important common root of the great Monotheistic traditions includes the scriptural existence of a final divine revelation before mankind. The revelation of God's will was indisputable, a principle which aspired to rule absolutely and completely over the entirety of human existence, its conduct and its morals.

The relationship between totality and modernity in the Occidental world and across the wider so-called Axial area has been described by Eisenstadt as a series of revolutions which acted as the culmination of "sectarian heterodox potentialities".[8] For Eisenstadt, these transformations implied the merging of the City of God with the City of Man on a macro-societal scale, whilst at the same time remaining true, at least in some ways, to the cultural and political program of modernity.[9] What lay at the heart of these movements was a fundamental tension between an imagined ideal and a lived reality which in effect reverberated in the greater conflict between two mutually exclusive visions, namely that of a totalizing and that of a pluralistic conception of human existence.[10] Regardless of the identities of the nations or cultures upon which the most radical political and social revolutions of modernity were unleashed, their common root usually lies in the reverence with which they treat totality and universality. Whether such ideas pursued the restoration of an idealized past or the building of a completely new order, whether they aimed for a cosmocratic empire or a dominion of liberty, their story was often one of crossing the threshold towards totality.[11]

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7 Cf. Patricia Curd, The Legacy of Parmenides. Eleatic Monism and Later Presocratic Thought, Las Vegas 2004.
8 Eisenstadt, Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Revolution, p. 40.
9 Cf. ibid.
10 Cf. ibid., p. 63.
11 On the impact of totality as a concept within European modernity and Marxism see Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas, Berkeley 1984.

2. The Concept of Totalism

One of the most useful psychological approaches on the subject of totality and its possibilities is found in the work of Erik H. Erikson, probably the first scholar to systematically use and define the concept of "totalism". He came to distinguish between two very different types of perception, that is, between wholeness and totality. Whereas wholeness connotes an organic mutuality between diversified functions within an entirety with open and fluent borders, totality evokes: "a *Gestalt* in which an absolute boundary is emphasized: given a certain arbitrary delineation, nothing that belongs inside must be left outside, nothing that must be outside can be tolerated inside [...]. When the human being, because of accidental or developmental shifts, loses an essential wholeness, he/she restructures him/herself and the world by taking recourse to what we may call *totalism*."[12]

Crucially, the use of totalism is, for Erikson, a good way to describe a distinct psychological stance possessed by those individuals who are part of a system of thought organized around one or several dichotomies. Long before Eisenstadt would systematically point out to the common theme of "totalistic reconstruction" of society for many different movements, Erikson could depict the simple, yet highly effective polarity which is part of all totalist systems, regardless of their intensity. At the same time, he could draw attention to its specific use of language, which functions as the link between identity and ideology. In this respect, for Erikson an ideological system functions as a coherent body of shared images, ideas and ideals which offers for all its participants a "coherent, if systematically simplified, over-all orientation in space and time, in means and ends."[13] In exploring ideology, Erikson also writes about some of the most important features typical of totalist worldviews, namely earnestness, asceticism and indignation, which function as constants in the grand struggle between conservatism and radicalism. His approach also touches on the relation between the appeal of totalist systems and their necessarily uncompromising commitment to what I call a soteriological-simplifying principle. Such a principle is soteriological, since the emotional implications of decay and destruction can only be offset by an appeal for ultimate salvation, whether material or spiritual. It is simplifying, since it unites in its doctrine, whether explicitly or implicitly, the totality of human existence and all of its possible obstacles. Therefore, a soteriological-simplifying principle acts as a set of moral imperatives whose goal is to turn the individuals which accept them into better human beings and, in a sense, free them from their former false selves. As it shall be shown later on, we may divide totalist typologies according to renovative-utopian and transcendent-immanent tendencies.

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12   Erik Homburger Erikson, Identity, Youth, and Crisis, New York 1968, p. 81.
13   Erik Homburger Erikson, The Problem of Ego Identity. In: Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 4 (1956), pp. 56–121, here 113.

Erikson tells us that the loss of cosmic wholeness and the "outworn or unfinished" nature of established identities is linked to the appearance, intensity and violence of holy wars, which are waged by individuals against the perceived enemies or rivals to their "unsafe" ideological bases.[14] The nature of these ideological bases is an important one, for it must be linked, as we shall see later on, with the inherent instability present in all charismatic ideologies and polities.[15] Indeed, it can be said that all totalist systems tend to be charismatic in nature, even if not all charismatic heterodoxies, whether quietist or politically active, are necessarily totalist. The fervour and ferment implied in the text also leads to the role played by the youth in the formation and growth of totalist ideologies and their enthusiastic and sudden impulse to join in destructive behaviour are part of a process of identity formation and its expectation of comprehensive, all-encompassing ideological answers.[16]

Starting with Erikson's own work, the literature dealing with the term "totalism" has remained limited over the past century, with only a few works explicitly and systematically referring to it. Perhaps the most important one belongs to Robert Jay Lifton,[17] a scholar greatly influenced by Erikson's own ideas on totalism. Since such works are focused on the psychological aspects of totalism, it is understandable that its historical and intellectual origins, along with the relationship between religious and secular influences, are given only limited coverage. Lifton, for instance, when distinguishing between totalism and totalitarianism, mostly limits his historical analysis of totalism to the preface.[18] One of Lifton's questions was about the source of ideological totalism and the origins of such extreme emotional patterns, connected as they are to man's quest for an ultimate solution and for a flawless law – whether religious or secular – which can explain the aspects of existence and, ideally, can offer both material and emotional fulfilment, bring "ultimate solidarity to all men and eliminate the terror of death and nothingness."[19] Lifton naturally concentrates on individual totalism, stating that it is a product of an early sense of confusion and dislocation which is later counterbalanced by a longing for the reinstatement of milieu control.[20]

I define totalism as a superordinate system of thought which possesses an absolute, singular view of human existence and pursues the shaping of public

14   Erikson, The Problem of Ego Identiy, p. 114
15   The literature on charisma is as enormous as it is contentious. I base my own approach on several theories, that is, partially on the Sohm-Weber dynamic and, in part, on Schweitzer's synergistic charisma and the dissipative theorem adapted by Smith and Falco. See Arthur Schweitzer, The Age of Charisma, Chicago 1984; Thomas Spence Smith, Strong Interaction, Chicago 1992; Raphael Falco, Charisma and Myth, London 2010.
16   Cf. Erikson, The Problem of Ego Identity, p. 117.
17   See Robert Jay Lifton, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "Brainwashing" in China, New York 1989.
18   Lifton, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism, pp. IX f.
19   Ibid., p. 436.
20   Cf. ibid., p. 436.

and private spheres in accordance to its soteriological-simplifying principle, which is, in turn, explained and legitimized by its claim to a monopoly of interpretation. By its very nature, such a system does not accept the validity of other truth-claims. In short, it offers the final answer to material and spiritual aspirations. We may thus call totalist all movements with all-encompassing ideologies, which seek to control and regulate all or most levels of public and private life in accordance with their ultimate goals, whose validity are based on claims to one sole truth. The term totalism is, in some respects, connected with the much more famous one of totalitarianism. One of the crucial differences is the fact that totalist systems may survive or even thrive without the presence or possibility of intense repression or coercion, whereas such a development would be problematic for a totalitarian state.[21] Of course, it is important that one differentiates between the ideals and goals of a regime and its structural realities. Last but not least, it is of primary importance to distinguish between the – at times overlooked – peacetime and wartime existence of such polities.

Whether in a conspicuously religious, hybrid or fully secularized form, totalism arises from the tension between idealized and lived reality, between transcendent and profane existence.[22] Of course, totalism is not by definition a direct path to political extremism or even political militancy for that matter. For example, quietist movements which were totalist in ideology could thus choose an apolitical path or complete withdrawal from the world in order to create an isolated virtuous community and wait for the fulfilment of their grand objective. Nevertheless, as a rule it is the politically active variants of totalist heterodoxies which – at times aggressively – pursue the complete restructuring of the here-and-now, whilst uniting ultimate aims with instrumental values.[23] These two terms – namely *Wertrationalität* (value rationality)[24] and *Zweckrationalität* (means-end rationality)[25] – function as pillars of the Weberian theory on charisma and the types of social action.

For a totalist mindset, peace can only be achieved when the entirety of the community is won over to the principles of the totalist system, since all other worldviews are necessarily incorrect and thus inimical to the Sole-Truth claims of the totalist movement. This can be understood as the final, absolute triumph

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21   See Manus Midlarsky, Origins of Political Extremism. Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond, Cambridge 2011, p. 8.

22   Cf. Eisenstadt, Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Revolution, p. 25.

23   Cf. ibid., p. 63.

24   An action which is determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success. Cf. Max Weber, Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, edited by Guenter Roth/Claus Wittich, Berkeley 1978, pp. 24 f.

25   An action which is instrumentally rational (zweckrational) is determined by expectation as to the behaviour of objects in the environment of other human beings; these expectations are used as "conditions" or "means" for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends. Cf. ibid., p. 24.

of a distinct ethnos, race, class, or of a political or religious principle over every other possible conception of the good. If Lifton – understandably – argues for the importance of milieu control, I believe the answer to this question to be (for Europe at least) in the interaction between the monotheistic tradition, the creation of a unique telos-temporality dynamic[26] as well as the tension between the charismatic nature which lies at the doctrinal core of most, if not all, totalist systems and the impersonal nature of European institutionalism.

One of the most insightful approaches towards the evolution of totalist heterodoxies into totalist ideocracies can be found in the work of Peter Bernholz. While his model is necessarily opposed to some aspects of totalitarianism theory and occasionally makes an uneven use of historical evidence, its contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of totalist ideologies and their possible evolution is extremely important. For Bernholz, ideologies containing a Weltanschaung with supreme values must be, in accordance with their doctrine, lexicographically preferred to all other human aims, function as a necessary but insufficient condition in the development of totalitarian regimes, even if no totalitarian regime has ever existed without ideology playing a decisive role.[27] Indeed, while the drive to impose by any means necessary the supreme values of the ideology over all other values is central in establishing and stabilizing a totalitarian regime, other factors come into play:

"First, an organization supporting the ideology has to be established, with a leader or leadership having the monopoly to interpret its content. Second, the secular power of a state has to be 'conquered' and spiritual and secular leadership to be integrated in the hands of the same person or group. Third, such a takeover of secular power is only probable if the society of the respective state is undergoing a deep crisis. [...] An ideology with supreme values is necessary for the development of a totalitarian regime because such values, when truly believed by the adherents of the creed, justify any behaviour and command any action which could help to spread and to maintain the *Weltanschaung* and its prescriptions. For, since the supreme values contain the absolute truth and have to be lexicographically preferred to everything, enemies and even neutral non-believers of these truths have to be converted, to be forced into emigration, to be excluded from the community of true believers or even to be eliminated. For otherwise they pose a permanent danger to believers because they might contaminate them with their wrong (sinful) ideas."[28]

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26 What modern totalist movements have in common is a strongly teleological historical perspective integrated in a utopian rather than renovative socio-political project. For a number of researchers, ranging from Voegelin to Bloch, among others, there is a strong tendency in perceiving Western all-embracing ideational systems as secularized versions of the Christian futurist telos.

27 Cf. Peter Bernholz, Ideology, Sects, State and Totalitarianism: a General Theory. In: Hans Maier/Michael Schäfer (Eds.), Totalitarianism and Political Religions, volume II, London 2008, pp. 246–272, here 247.

28 Bernholz, Ideology, sects, state and totalitarianism, p. 248.

Several things stand out in such an approach. For a start, Bernholz rightfully points out the decisive role played by charismatic organisations in the formation and initial spread of a totalist ideology as well as its possible infiltration by outside forces.[29] For a totalist heterodoxy, namely a small cadre of followers utterly dedicated to bringing about the realization of the ultimate values of the totalist ideology, the implementation of the totalist ideology is not merely a case of prevailing against their secular rivals, it is, more often than not, a case of offering a saving solution to the overwhelming decay engulfing a fallen or corrupt society. At least in the initial phases of a totalist movement, when the influence of the true believers is stronger than that of other factions, the need to act this way is usually viewed with great urgency, which in itself necessitates decisive measures. This means a strong leadership, which is solely responsible for interpreting (sometimes recreating) the doctrine of the totalist ideology.[30]

The very existence of a politically active totalist heterodoxy and its successful achievement of local superiority can be considered clear signs of its ultimate intention of seeking to conquer the secular power of the state in the long term. Such a tendency is not only driven by the ideological imperative of the totalist doctrine, it is also driven by the charismatic propensity towards achieving absolute control. This does not mean that a quietist heterodoxy, which seeks to isolate itself from the rest of society, has completely and definitively abandoned the goal of winning secular power. It means merely that, for the time being, the preservation of the purity of the doctrine and that of the community has more importance than the imperatives of spreading the system of ultimate values to the rest of society. This attitude is usually due to the overwhelming advantage enjoyed by the secular state or by rival forces against which resistance would end in disaster. In such a case, if the totalist movement exists within a democratic polity, it will consistently make use of democratic liberties in order to ensure its survival and, if possible, the spread of its influence.

In uniting secular and spiritual authority, the heterodox movement turned hegemon achieves the status of ideocracy. Yet this does not automatically lead to what is a recognizably totalitarian polity. In this respect Bernholz is right when differentiating between totalitarian regimes and mature ideocracies as *subspecies* of a generic ideocracy. This is the case because totalitarianism should be understood to suggest a transitory process rather than an end state in itself, whereas the mature totalist ideocracy has already achieved most or all the aims of its ideology.[31] Bernholz defines totalitarianism as "an ideocracy which has not yet reached the aims implied by its supreme values and which tries to pursue them with the spiritual and secular power available after it has gained domination of a state."[32]

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29   Cf. ibid., p. 251.
30   Cf. ibid., p. 252.
31   Cf. ibid., p. 253.
32   Ibid., p. 256.

One of the constants occurring in totalist movements is the duty, indeed the obligation to fulfil the soteriological-simplifying principle which sums up their ideology and sets it apart from other factions, in effect enabling them to perceive themselves in each individual case as pure islands surrounded by corruption.[33] This being the case, whether we are talking about a minor charismatic heterodoxy, a hegemonic mass-movement or an evolving totalist ideocracy, the fulfilment of its ultimate aims will take precedence over other aspects, if necessary even if it is detrimental to its own survival. In all such cases, the demand for maintaining purity, whether ideological or structural, remains an absolute imperative. Mark Juergensmeyer believes that when religious cultures portray warfare as something that is acknowledged and ultimately controlled, they are therefore presenting a veritable cosmological re-enactment of the primacy of order over chaos, with religion reaffirming the primacy of order, which requires that forms of disorder be conquered.[34] As it has been shown previously, such a perspective is, of course, valid for all militant totalist movements in general, regardless of the direction of their ideology. It is no surprise that several of Juergensmayer's conclusions on militant religious groups can be applied here, since the cases he analyses can be defined, without exception, as totalist heterodoxies.

Thus, in militant totalist groups the use of violence may take up the characteristics of a mythical struggle of the faithful, within an – at times – eschatological grand scenario. Such a struggle is perceived as defending the most basic identity, honour and dignity of a group. As already mentioned, if the struggle and the aims implied by the totalist ideology are believed to be of ultimate significance – a defence not only of individual lives and principles but of entire nations, cultures or value systems – there is always the possibility that it will be seen as a cultural-civilizational war with spiritual implications. Consequently, due to the nature of this struggle, the specific ultimate goals and the inflexibility of their supporters, losing battle would be simply rendered impossible or unthinkable. More often than not, the struggle against the impure enemies might be interpreted as being unlikely to be won in the present time or through normal ways, or it may even seem hopeless in such a regard that the resolution of the conflict could only be resolved through what amounts to divine intervention or the secular fulfilment of its telos, spearheaded by a chosen, pure elite. The alternative, if the totalist movement is still a heterodoxy, implies quietism, emigration or an unlikely adaptation to the host society.

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33 See Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: an analysis of concept of pollution and taboo, London 2002; Barrington Moore Jr., Moral Purity and Persecution in History, Princeton 2001.

34 Cf. Mark Juergensmeyer, Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence, 3. edition London 2003, p. 162.

3. Totalism: Appeal and Typologies

There are several themes which function as pillars of totalism and contribute to its power in the eyes of adherents. Firstly, there is the concept of totality, that is, the manifestation of absoluteness through the fulfilment of an all-encompassing ideology. More often than not the need for totality and the emergence of such an ideology are linked to a perceived degeneration and the peril of a spiritual sickness within the society which hosts the totalist movement. The appeal of totalist worldviews should not be sought primarily in their intellectual dimension but rather in the emotional effect they provide to the one who lives within its system. Especially from an emotional perspective, totalism has the potential to possess great importance for an individual who has been thoroughly won over to its system, offering a peak experience, a sense of transcendence and freedom from the encumbrances of human ambivalence and an experience of absolute truth.[35]

It may seem that one of the reasons for the emergence of totalist ideologies and the crossing of the totality threshold is alienation. Alienation functions as a term which may explain, for instance, the acts of militant movements as rebellions against modernity, fuelled by poverty and ignorance. Nevertheless, this three-way combination, alienation-poverty-ignorance, often has little to do with the principles behind the totalist message and ideology. To reiterate, the most important pillars of a totalist mindset lie in a series of ideatic conflicts, dividing existence and problem solving according to a dichotomous pattern – foremost of which is the conflict between purity and impurity and that between truth and untruth. Such a necessarily all-encompassing vision is supported by the totalist reliance on the relation between the pursuit of a soteriological-simplifying principle and the implicit belief in their own ultimate values. It is thus very important to not underestimate the ideological component of such a worldview. It is even more important to refrain from masking it, by explaining the violent manifestation of militant totalist heterodoxies (or what is usually defined as terrorism) by deflecting blame from the crucial relation between individual and group self-perception and ideology to that of economic and social exclusion. The predisposition for violence should be sought, first and foremost, in the ideology of the politically active totalist movement and in the nature of the soteriological-simplifying principle they stand for. Indeed, the ultimate totalist triad which came to affect European existence – Communism, National-Socialism and, as of late, Islamism – possesses a common structural pattern, as Hansen and Kainz point out: "History is always interpreted as a process of decline, in which a fundamentally evil power has brought mankind to the verge of disaster and threatens its very existence. A particular group of people is the standard-bearer of hope and, as the personification of good, has the mission of saving humankind from doom and ridding it of evil. This group will then realise the utopia of the classless soci-

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35   Cf. Lifton, Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism, p. 439.

ety, the natural race struggle, or the purified society of followers of the true faith."[36]

What follows is a series of totalist categories, ranging from their dominant manifestations, their typology and their expansionary potential. Due to space constraints these will necessarily have to be presented in a very brief manner. Dominant Manifestations: We can tentatively identify several general ideal-type manifestations of totalism:

- Hierarchical
- Collectivist
- Theocratic

Naturally, these ideal categories rarely function completely independently of one another and are often interrelated in the context of a process of (partial) interdependence. Theocratic totalism, such as Islamism, is also strongly hierarchical in its perception of the various ranks of non-believers – namely those existing outside the redeemed community of mankind. Collectivist totalism, such as Russian Communism, quickly became linked with Russian ultra-nationalism, whilst the hierarchical principles of National-Socialist racial supremacy and racial stratification possessed the structures and especially the legitimization strategies of a theocratic type. Interestingly, virtually all possess collectivist traits, whether it is the ultra-nationalist ethnic community, the Muslim Ummah, the racial Volk, or the Communist working class. For this reason a categorization has been chosen according to which feature functions as the dominant one in the totalist system.

4. Typologies and Goals

Time lies at the heart of the most successful totalist ideologies of the 20th century. The conquest of time and the fulfilment of history drove the doctrinal core of National-Socialism on the one hand and of Communism on the other. They did this in a somewhat greater fashion than Italian Fascism which, nevertheless, could symbolically fall back on the almost immeasurably distant, yet still visible remnants of the Golden Age of Rome.[37] Indeed, the Italian Fascists could erupt into history at the point between decline and fructification, between corruption and renewal, between impurity and purity. National-Socialism and Communism in particular were fixed first and foremost on attaining the promised future state and the fulfilment of their historical destiny. There are three main ideal typologies of totalism:

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36 Hansen/Kainz, Radical Islamism and Totalitarian Ideology, p. 68.
37 Cf. Romke Visser, Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità. In: Journal of Contemporary History, 1 (1992), pp. 5–22.

Renovative: An ideal type which is predominantly focussed on the restoration of
a pure, idealized past – usually that of a distinct community.

Hybrid: Hybrid totalism represents an ideal type where renovative tendencies
and utopian tendencies are of similar importance.

Utopian: Utopian totalism is an ideal type which is mainly focussed on a teleolog-
ical narrative, involving the future political or spiritual supremacy of the
movement.

III. Renovative Totalism

1. The Case of Mahdism

Since Antiquity, two great traditions have been shaped and conceptualized by
the many different Eurasian civilizations in their attempt to understand history –
the cyclical temporality and the linear teleological temporality. The relevant liter-
ature is usually split between analysing temporality purely as a philosophical con-
cept and, more importantly for the present work, as an impact for social real-
ity.[38] Although both models managed to coexist and even to adopt features from
one another, the underlying tension between these traditions has remained
important. For quite some time the role of religion and eschatology[39] in the con-
text of pre-modernity and modernity has been re-evaluated,[40] related to institu-
tional effects as well as to ideological frameworks. Issues remain, however. For
instance, eschatological thought, despite the gigantic literature dealing with it,
has generally not been consistently studied in connection to modernity and the
emergence of totalist heterodoxies, with some exceptions.[41] One feature com-
mon to all consistently successful totalist movements is their start as a charis-
matic minority struggling against the dominance of the state – or of another
group – into a mass-movement which attains political dominance at state level.
Since they are usually heterodoxies which cannot be institutionally integrated –
if the institutional background is present at all – the structure of totalist move-
ments must primarily take into account the impact of charismatic authority as

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38   See Ralph M. Rosen (Ed.), Time and Temporality in the Ancient World, Philadelphia
     2004; Andrea Brady/Emily Butterworth (Eds.), Uses of the Future in the Early
     Modern World, New York 2010.
39   See for instance Arthur Bradley/Paul Fletcher, The Politics to Come. Power,
     Modernity and the Messianic, London 2010; Arthur H. Williamson, Apocalypse Then.
     Prophecy and the Making of the Modern World, Westport 2008.
40   See Karl Löwith, Meaning in History, Chicago 1949; Hans Blumenberg, Legitimacy of
     the Modern Age, Cambridge 1999; Michael Allen Gillespie, The Theological Origins
     of Modernity, Chicago 2008.
41   See John R. Hall, Apocalypse. From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity, Cambridge
     2009.

well as the importance of charismatic ritualization and transformation in the development of a movement.

The ultimate development of the classical Abrahamic world was shaped by its diverging branches, namely the Western(European) branch with its gradual departure from religious arguments and religion itself as a centre of the political discourse, and the Islamic branch with its stricter reliance on religious tenets and, perhaps most importantly, its vision of the absolute oneness of God (tahwid). It is the very concept of tahwid as the fundamental essence of the Islamic faith which can function as a crucial element in the tension between ideal expectations and experienced reality.[42]

One of the core aspects of Islam, exemplified by the Mujaddid traditions, is the process of purification of the faith and the tendency towards a total reconstruction of society based on its perception of the religious community from the time of Muhammad. These principle transcended tribal or ethnic differences and manifested itself in the self-perception and organization of many different peoples which converted to Islam. These new converts sought to legitimize their new status by imagining their descent from the original community, as was the case with the Turanic tribes. It is important to note that the early conflicts within the Muslim world were waged first and foremost about appointing leadership and the exercise of power in a religious community, since Islam in itself possessed no constitutional theory of rulership but rather focused on dealing with ritual and religious law, which includes the Haddith and the early Jurists.[43] Indeed, despite its periods of increasing sophistication especially after the early centuries of Muslim expansion, political thought in Islam has remained overwhelmingly fixated on its inception, since perfection had already been achieved by Muhammad's infallible commandments and judgements.

The Mujaddid tradition and the Mahdist movements as a whole manifested as actions undertaken by totalist heterodoxies, either quietist or militant in nature, which sought the overturning of the status quo and the reversion to God's original law. This came to assume a cyclical structure in the Muslim world, with tribes united by charismatic movements toppling corrupt governments and forming dynasties of their own, thus setting the stage for the new cycle.[44] The very existence of such powerful renovative tendencies was based on the belief that the original community and its model represented the perfect embodiment of God's

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42   An interesting case in point is made by Marranci in his analysis of the part of those Muslim inmates in British prisons who reject the authority of the state as being amoral, since it is not based on God's laws but on human laws. Cf. Gabrielle Marranci, Faith, Ideology and Fear. Muslim Identities within and beyond Prison, London 2009, pp. 123–125.

43   See Antony Black, The History of Islamic Political Thought. From the Prophet to the Present, Edinburgh 2011, p. 15.

44   Many centuries later, Ibn Khaldun's overall thesis on the tribal dynamics and the charismatic cycles which set into motion the many totalist heterodoxies of the Muslim world remains both fascinating and relevant.

law. The notion of absolute, unconditional submission before an omnipotent, unique deity who is responsible for all possible events permitted the faithful to achieve, in their eyes, freedom from human tyranny which had distorted or usurped God's original laws. This enabled the community to set itself apart from all non-Muslims. Even if it nuanced its perception of outsiders to include Christians and Jews an abject existence as "protected" citizens, the fundamental aspect of the faith was focused on a simple, utterly uncompromising division, which could never be approached in a rational debate, as portrayed, for instance, by the highly influential Ash'arite school: one is fully moral, and thus fully human, only if one is Muslim.[45] Arising as a response to the Mu'tazila school, the Ash'arite perception on the oneness, omnipotence and uniqueness of God led to its disregard of intellectual coherence and reason. Together with al-Ghazali's work, it eventually achieved the destruction of whatever influence the Muslim philosophers might have had on their societies, marking a dramatic impact on Muslim theology and the history of Islamdom as a whole. In this respect it is, perhaps, particularly telling that the famous Muslim philosophers, from Avicenna to Averroes or Ibn Khaldun, made a great impact on the European scene, yet they remained little known or read in the Muslim world and forgotten after their deaths. Such tendencies ultimately went on to play a large role in the all-encompassing worldview of the movements which repeatedly rocked numerous dynastic foundations and in the holy wars which followed in the wake of their success.

If the beginnings of Christianity were shaped by debating the nature of divinity rather than that of rulership and state, the situation had markedly changed by the 11th century. A series of momentous transformations led to the increasing impact of the – uniquely Western European in its intensity – impersonal institutionalism and the gradual differentiation between secular and sacred spheres of activity, legitimacy and conduct.[46] This was made possible by a series of events and cultural peculiarities, among which the gradual destruction of European tribal identity, the marked individualism present in European family life and the formation of the European university stand out. It was due to such transformations, as well as due to its own cultural and historical circumstances, that Western Europe alone succeeded with abandoning the divine cosmocratic monarchy as the most legitimate form of government and replace it with new forms of governments which were both rooted in law and at least partially accountable, long before the advent of democracy.[47] This does not mean that the concept of totality and the pursuit of its absolute fulfilment did not make their

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45   Black, The History of Islamic Political Thought, pp. 83 f.
46   Indeed, the Roman model which dominates the formation of European political culture (alongside Germanic infusions) can be contrasted with the Persian model which, eventually, came to influence Muslim polities in Asia.
47   See Francis Fukuyama, The Origins of Political Order. From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution, New York 2011.

impact felt. Yet, their progress became intimately linked to the development of new conceptions of historical telos and historical time and the eventual triumph of the scientific method and the decline of religion from the centre of the public space. Its militant manifestations were usually successfully kept in check, among others, by a combination of factors including the alliance between secular and spiritual factions as well as the rule of law and the successful penetration of varied societies by institutions. These repeatedly acted more or less as a barrier or at least as a buffer against charismatic movements whose ideology and goals were linked to the concept of totality.

One example of renovative totalist heterodoxies may be found in the various Mahdist figures which arose and occasionally built successful polities throughout Africa. The essentially renovative movements which they led represent, in many ways, an ideal convergence between charismatic authority and totalist ideology, unaffected by institutional constraints or even, to an extent, local traditions.[48] The figure of the Mahdi has emerged in the eschatology of Islam as a result of a combination of Judeo-Christian influence, the tension between the authority of the Ulama and charismatic sainthood, the Mujaddid tradition,[49] and the strife engulfing the Umayyad Caliphate with increasing regularity after the early decades of conquest. Already from the 7th century onward recognizably Mahdist heterodoxies would manifest themselves throughout the Arab world, establishing themselves especially on the edges of Islamdom. There is considerable controversy regarding the eschatological dimension of such an important figure in Islam, with researchers being divided into two major camps. The mainstream camp considers it an addendum to the body of Islamic doctrine. The second camp asserts that Islam itself is built on messianic expectations and that Muhammad did not intend to build a worldly community but merely to prepare the believers for the final hour. This would, in effect, mean the return of Muhammad through the avatar which the Mahdi represents.[50] Yet Mahdism

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[48]   See Richard H. Dekmejian/Margaret J. Wyszomirski, Charismatic Leadership in Islam. The Mahdi of the Sudan. In: Comparative Studies in Society and History, 2 (1972), pp. 193–214; Peter Malcom Holt, The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881–1898. A study of its origins, development and overthrow, Oxford 1977; William F. Tucker, Mahdis and Millenarians. Shi'ite Extremists in Early Muslim Iraq, Cambridge 2008; Mercedes Garcia-Arenal, Messianism and Puritanical Reform. Mahdis of the Muslim West, Leiden 2006; Paul E. Lovejoy/J. S. Hogendorn, Revolutionary Mahdism and Resistance to Colonial Rule in the Sokoto Caliphate, 1905/06. In: The Journal of African History, 2 (1990), p. 217–244.

[49]   The Mahdi, who is meant to be a unique eschatological figure, and the Mujaddid, which essentially represents a cyclical renovative tradition, were sometimes combined into a synthesis, such as during the jihad which established the Sokoto Caliphate. See Peter Heine, I Am Not The Mahdi, But ... . In: Albert I. Baumgarten (Ed.), Apocalyptic Time, Leiden 2000, pp. 69–78.

[50]   See Paul Casanova, Mohammed et la Fin du Monde. Étude critique sur l'Islam primitif, Paris 1911; David Cook, Muslimapocalyptic and jihàd. In: Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam, 20 (1996), pp. 66–104.

remained especially important in North Africa, with several heterodoxies managing to overthrow existing states and create their own, based on a very strict interpretation and implementation of Muhammad's laws and commandments. Time and again, in different Muslim societies, the coming of the Mahdi would signify the overthrow of the existing government or the present order of affairs and the restoration of the primitive purity of the faith. The Quranic principle of commanding righteousness and forbidding evil served as one of the primary tools for the preachers which shook or even toppled various states throughout Islamdom. For instance, the revival of pure faith, the destruction of all religious innovation and the annihilation of all evil behaviour[51] were the main goals pursued by one of the most successful Mahdis, Ibn Tumart. His message represents a desire for a complete and total renovation of society, a moralistic and puritan vision, yet compatible and echoing Ghazali himself.[52]

Towards the end of the 19th century a man named Charles Gordon came down the Nile to help with a rebellion which had been steadily growing in strength and threatened to bring down Egyptian governance of the Sudan, tenuous as the latter was.[53] His opponent was called Muhammad Ahmad,a man of the desert and slave of God.[54] They exchanged letters. The man of the north offered terms, negotiations and even worldly power. The man of the desert wrote back*:* "it is plain that I am the one who invites to God, and the Khalifa of the Apostle of God (God bless him and give him peace) and that I am the Mahdi, the expected one, and this is no boast. God has authorized me to proclaim mercy upon whosoever obeys him and follows the direction of his prophet Muhammad (God bless him and give him peace), and vengeance upon whosoever rebels against him and disobeys him and follows his devil, his own inclination and desire, and cleaves to this world."[55]

This represents a good example of the immense difference in the worldviews separating the two men and, symbolically, their respective cultures. General Gordon attempted to negotiate with the Mahdi in the way one negotiates with a political opponent, by offering concessions and arrangements in the secular understanding of power. The Mahdi on the other hand could merely continue to proclaim his message of complete dominion over believers and unbelievers alike, staying true to his principles. In many ways the rise of the Sudanese Mahdi can

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51 Garcia-Arenal, Messianism and Puritanical Reform, p. 165.
52 Ibid.
53 Indeed, Gordon's primary role in the Sudan was to oversee the gradual evacuation of the Egyptian presence. On the effects of Egyptian rule in pre-Mahdist Sudan see Anders Bjørkelo, Prelude to the Mahdiyya. Peasants and Traders in the Shendi Region, 1821–1885, Cambridge 2003.
54 See Haim Shaked, The Biography of the Sudanese Mahdi. In: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, 3 (1969), pp. 527–540.
55 George Sverdrup Jr., "A Letter from the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad to General C. G. Gordon". In: Journal of the American Oriental Society, 4 (1911), pp. 368–388, here 378.

be called a classic example of a charismatic cycle, when social, political, economic and psychological realities converged in the leader's message, whilst his "performance" attracted increasing numbers of followers. When Muhammad Ahmad revealed himself as the true Mahdi and started preaching his message, the Sudan was in an increasing state of social, political and ultimately spiritual chaos. For many Sudanese the conquest of their lands by Egypt and their – more often nominal than not – integration within the political and religious structures of the House of Osman was nothing short of confirming the decadence of "Turkish"[56] Islam. Not only had the original teachings been corrupted by the administration in Cairo, but the "Turks" had been thoroughly compromised by their dealings with Christian foreigners who had repressed the slave trade – sanctioned by Islam and very profitable for the tribes.

The Sudanese tribal society was predominantly oral, with literacy being largely confined to wandering holy men and mystics. For such men, who promoted the vision of the Muslim Ummah as the "embodiment of divine expression",[57] the trauma of perceived European Christian hegemony and of Christian involvement prompted a strong reaction which crystallized itself, in the case of Muhammad Ahmad, into a return to the primal nature of Islam, a sort of sacred re-enactment of the time of Muhammad. Even before his revelation, when he was still a dervish, Muhammad Ahmad was known for his piety and asceticism, a reputation which only increased as the years went by, culminating in his ascension as the sheikh of his last religious order and, finally, as the Mahdi. After revealing himself openly in 1881, the Mahdi proceeded from the very beginning to re-enact several key events in the life of the founder of Islam. Thus, he announced himself and his divine mission by sending dispatches to the tribal chieftains and other notables. Ultimately, by a combination of political and economic arguments, promises and force of will, the Mahdi was able to unite the various strata of Sudanese tribal society and integrate them (at least nominally) within a single community whose direction and future he ostensibly commanded and for whom death in battle was but a path to paradise.[58]

Having already preached in the western part of the Sudan to test his appeal, the Mahdi astutely called for a hijra, so that all true Muslims could be part of his new community. In doing so he was, at the same time, trying to deny the increasingly political nature of his movement, as well as attempting to establish a secure powerbase before he moved on, whilst still emulating the prophet Muhammad. Just as Muhammad had eluded his enemies by fleeing to Medina, the Mahdi

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56 Although Egypt had been de facto independent since 1821, when Albanian born Muhammad Ali came to rule, it was still nominally part of the Ottoman Empire. This, along with Muhammad Ali's extensive modernization attempts and his reliance on foreigners, only served to worsen the perception of the Sudanese towards Egypt.

57 Said. S. Samatar, Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism. The Case of Sayyid Muhammad 'Abdille Hassan, Cambridge 2009, p. 94.

58 Dejmejian/Wyszomirski, Charismatic Leadership in Islam, p. 206.

made his own hijra to Kordofan, where he set up the base for his own Ummah. This strategy of legitimization was the closest the Mahdi could get to a form of mass-communication, for his gestures would have been recognized by the faithful everywhere, whilst Egyptian failures to capture or defeat him served only to increase his fame and the power of his message. As in the case of any successful charismatic figure, the crucial unity between doctrine and practice, which had been a constant companion of Muhammad Ahmad's formative years, represented one of his greatest strengths.[59] Ultimately, his miraculous powers were proven in the eyes of his followers when his poorly equipped forces triumphed again and again over modern Egyptian armies, reaching a climax in the capture of Khartoum in 1885. By that time, his Ansar[60] had become renowned for their fanatical zeal and bravery, whilst the Mahdi's message led to an increasing number of Egyptian soldiers to desert or even defect to his cause. The state which came after his death was built on his vision, a vision meant to outlast the brief British colonial presence and gradually evolve into the strands of Islamism which still dominate North-Sudanese society to this day.[61]

2. The Case of Sayyid Qutb

We have already seen how, at its greatest level of effectiveness, totalism offers a "peak experience" to the true believer, uniting within it a sense of purpose, harmony and freedom from the limits of the material world. It is then not altogether surprising that the concepts of concord and freedom lie at the core of most totalist ideologies. Take, for instance, Sayyid Qutb[62] and his analysis of the battle between the world of *jahiliyya*[63] and the world of purity and good, or *Hakimiyyat Allah* – God's Rule:

"Whenever Islam stood up with the universal declaration that God's Lordship should be established over the entire earth and that men should become free from servitude to other men, the usurpers of God's authority on earth have struck out against it fiercely and have never tolerated it. It became incumbent upon Islam to strike back and release man throughout the earth from the grip of these usurpers. The eternal struggle for the freedom of man will continue until the religion is puri-

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59   Ibid., p. 205.
60   Yet another action emulating Muhammad, calling his followers Ansar, or "helpers", using the same term as the first Muslim converts in Medina.
61   See Abdullahi A. Gallab, First Islamist Republic. Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan, Hampshire 2009; Kim Searcy, The Formation of the Sudanese Mahdist State. Ceremony and Symbols of Authority: 1882–1898, Leiden 2011.
62   On the thought of Sayyid Qutb see Sayed Khatab, The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of jahiliyyah, London 2006.
63   The term is used in the Qur'an to define the "age of ignorance", namely the pre-Islamic era, which Qutb elevates to a key position in his view of a fallen, corrupt world.

fied for God. The command to refrain from fighting during the Meccan period was a temporary stage in a long journey. The same reason was operative during the early days of Hijra, but after these early stages the reason for Jihad was not merely to defend Medina. Indeed its defence was necessary, but this was not the ultimate aim. The aim was to protect the resources and the centre of the movement – the movement for freeing mankind and demolishing the obstacles which prevented mankind from attaining this freedom."[64]

For Qutb, the ultimate goal of jihad is the destruction of *jahiliyya* and the establishment of a final Muslim hegemony over the earth, wherein the laws made by man are replaced by the only laws which can allow for the fulfilment of humanity, the laws of the divine. In a manner similar to other cosmocratic ideologies, Qutb's virtuous community is free of constraints in its victorious march towards a world of peace under the banner of the creed, with its enemies being described as impure agents of evil and as rebels against God's commandments who justly deserve their punishment.[65] The conflict is thus clearly drawn, the world neatly and irrevocably divided into the impure usurpers of divine authority and the pure community which seeks, which must, at any cost, do God's will and bring about universal freedom for mankind.

IV. Conclusion

Alongside totality, the concept of freedom is especially important in all totalist ideologies, especially so in the cases which have been at least partially shaped as a response to modern Western liberal democratic domination and its perceived negative influence on the progress of history and of mankind's ultimate destiny. The danger of militant Islamism and its challenge to democratic societies and to non-Islamic culture as a whole does not necessarily represent a rejection of modernity in itself but primarily a reaction to some of its debilitating effects, alongside the recurrent tension between a pursued ideal reality and a lived reality. Nevertheless, the focus of Mahdism, similar to Qutbism itself, deals with the renovation of the pristine faith as a precondition for the restoration of the world to a condition of bliss and a re-emergence out of decadence. Here the purity of the past functions as the single most important aspect, even if steps are taken for the creation of a new community which would sweep away the remnants of the old corrupt order and ensure its domination over the entirety of mankind. Indeed, whether we speak of the Mahdi of Sudan or of Qutb's vision of

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64 Sayyid Qutb, Milestones, IV, p. 50; Apart from the often, more or less, clandestine publications of the book throughout the Muslim world, there are a number of online publications available. http://www.izharudeen.com/uploads/4/1/2/2/4122615/milestones_www.izharudeen.com.pdf; 11.1.2014.

65 Cf. Qutb, Milestones, IV, p. 59.

Hakimiyyat Allah, such interpretations of Islam are defined, first of all, by the renovative nature of their totalism and their uncompromising claims to ultimate meaning. In this respect, they both represent stages in the ideal development path of a totalist movement, from heterodoxy to hegemony and, finally, to a mature ideocracy.