

ISLAM AND THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF MODERNITY

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The predicament of Islamic political thought involves the concept of modernity, which is the outcome of Western colonialist encroachment on the Muslim world and which is until now identified with “Western” civilization (based on sciences, technology and military power). The reaction was “Islamizing modernity” or “modernizing Islam”, two reformist trends both marked by excesses and rigidity. If religion cannot be deemed in itself guilty of the Muslim world’s decay, a number of Muslim intellectuals tried however to face it suggesting, as Burhan Ghalioun, that theology overwhelmed negatively secular knowledge, or, as Abd al-Salam Yasin, that modernity implies alienation of conscience which must be healed by a spiritual jihad. What it seems needed is a fresh understanding of the past heritage.

Ora che la verità dà battaglia alla millenaria menzogna, avremo degli sconvolgimenti, uno spasimo di terremoti, monti e valli che si spostano, come mai prima si era sognato. Il concetto di politica trapasserà allora completamente in quello di una guerra degli spiriti, tutti i centri di potere della vecchia società salteranno in aria – sono tutti fondati sulla menzogna: ci sarà guerra come mai prima sulla terra.¹

Apparently there is a predicament of Islamic political thought. Challenged by Western outlook but first of all by the internal transformation of classical tradition, Islamic political thought is seeking for a new assessment.² The predicament is not limited only to the classical approaches, no more fitted for contemporary issues, but involves the responses to strictly present situations. The so-called “Arab springs” with their flawed search for democracy, the emergence and strengthening of organizations like al-Da‘ish claiming to reconstitute the caliphate, the importance of issues like bioethical

¹ Friedrich NIETZSCHE, «Perché sono un destino», *Ecce Homo* (1888), Adelphi, Milano 2010.

² I dare to quote my own Massimo CAMPANINI, *Islam e politica*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2015; and Massimo CAMPANINI (a cura di), *Storia del pensiero politico islamico*, Mondadori Università, Milano-Firenze 2017.

or gender questions... - all this represents a seemingly inaccessible mountain to climb upon.

In 2005, reflecting on «Modernity and Muslim Politics», Robert Hefner argued still in favor of pluralism and democracy.³ This contention, however, remained within a Western perspective, putting problems in Western way and waiting for a Western-minded answer. Hefner was still conditioned by the 9/11, the disastrous and inconsiderate George W. Bush's wars on terror and export of democracy by arms with the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. Nowadays (2017) the perspective is different and has changed. The Muslim world, especially the so-called Middle East, seems in full disarray and disaggregation/disruption. The (neocolonial and anti-democratic indeed) dream of exporting democracy by arms and war, as such as the dream of a new Arab political resurgence in 2011, dissolved and upon the ashes of Iraq, Syria, Libya and Libya flourished terrorist groups.

Therefore, today issue is that of a (re?)foundation of Muslim politics and polity starting from Islamic categories and paradigms and this involves the challenging issue of modernity. First of all it is unavoidable to understand which kind of modernity we are speaking of. Actually, “modernity” is a polysemic noun involving many possible meanings. Modernity is in itself an abstract noun; if we want to give it concreteness, we can say that it is the outcome of modernization. Modernization, on the other hand, implies

un fascio di processi cumulativi che si rafforzano a vicenda: la formazione del capitale e la mobilitazione delle risorse; lo sviluppo delle forze produttive e l'incremento della produttività del lavoro; l'imporsi dei poteri politici centrali e la formazione di identità nazionali; l'estensione dei diritti di partecipazione politica, delle forme di vita urbana, dell'educazione scolastica; la secolarizzazione di valori o di norme, e così via.⁴

All these are forms of modernization producing modernity. This definition of Habermas, however, looks clearly at modernity from a Western point of view. The processes Habermas describes are characteristic of the historical evolution of Europe

³ Robert HEFNER (a cura di), *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005.

⁴ Jürgen HABERMAS, *Il discorso filosofico della modernità*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2003, p.2.

(or of the West in general): capitalism, nationalism, civil rights are the conquests of European history in the so-called Modern Era (16th to 19th Century).

Obviously, the reality of Islam was different; Islamic history developed according to different parameters. Thus, put in a similar philosophical perspective, Islamic modernity (*hadātha*) acquired basically the characteristics of renewal (*tajdīd*) and authenticity (*asāla*). Renewal is finalized to the recovery of authenticity. This truth can be detected in *mujaddidūn* very different one from another: from Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī in the classical ages (1056-1111) to Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdī in Sudan (d. 1885) to Rūhollāh Khumaynī (1902-1989). They fought to achieve an Islamic *asāla* but how this renewed authenticity might have governed modernization in the epoch it was vindicated therein, depended from the contextual historical circumstances and appears today mostly a failed ambition.

Modernity becomes a ghost, or rather a nightmare, of contemporary Islamic thought and the Islamic thinkers of the 20th century considered modernity as a paradigm describing the *West*. As Gudrun Kraemer wrote quite recently: «Even authors expressing themselves strictly in Islamic terms, condemning the adoption of un-Islamic concepts, do so against the backdrop of a challenge posed by the West and modernity as defined by the West».⁵

Islamic thought, or maybe more precisely Islam *tout court*, faced modernity and its challenges during the second half of the Nineteenth century. Modernity was the outcome of Western/European encroachment on the Islamic world. Through colonialism and economical/political subduing, Western Europe imposed on Islam its superiority in science, technology and military power and conveyed new ideas and concepts like secularism (separation between religion and society), democracy, nationalism, freedom of expression and belief, individual liberty, liberation of women and so on. These concepts later became the common heritage of civilization all over the world and the fundamentals of the alleged universal human rights.⁶ Islamic outlook and thought – between the Nineteenth and the Twentieth Century – were overwhelmed by novelty and reacted either by modernizing Islam or by Islamizing modernity. This dichotomy is well-known and I do not need to explain it in detail but it is perhaps

⁵ Gudrun KRAEMER, *Pluralism and Tolerance*, in Gerhard BOWERING (ed.), *Islamic Political Thought. An Introduction*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2015, p. 170.

⁶ Alleged because also the “universality” of human rights is in itself a historical product.

useful to clarify briefly the terms in question. Modernizing Islam means to believe that traditional Islam is no more able and fitted to face and solve the problems of contemporary society; thus it must be “modernized” (especially denying its public, social and political role) and subordinated to secularism, technology and “progress”. Islamizing modernity consists in believing that Islam is in itself fully rational and modern; it is able to govern and orient society and history upon the very basis of the Qur’ān and tradition (the first, progressive, Salafism of al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh – 1849-1905 – promoted this worldview).

(Western) Modernity, with the capital “m”, as a category or better a whole system of ideas, institutions and paradigms, challenged the coming back of Islam on the scene of global history. Over many centuries, Islam remained at the edge of world history. While the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires were strong, rich and powerful, Islamic creativity was in huge decline. Marshall Hodgson argued that the zenith of Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires (16th - 17th century) witnessed an expansion of Islam especially in the Far East and sub-Saharan Africa exhibiting a hegemonic potential.⁷ Stephen Dale sketched a bright picture of the majesty of Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires.⁸ I continue to believe, however, that Islamic *creativity* was on retreat. It is true that thinkers like Mullā Sadrā Shirāzī (d. 1640) in Safavid Iran, magnificent buildings like the Taj Mahal in Agra, great sultans like Sulaymān al-Qānūnī in Istanbul (r. 1526-1566) illustrated Islamic culture and civilization after Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) and before Shāh Walīullāh Dihlawī (d. 1762) – during the Islamic “Middle Ages” as it were. But jurisprudence suffered heavily from the closure of the door of *ijtihād* (free reasoning on the sources); no further progress happened in science and technology; civil society closed the doors of external communication. While Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires flourished in their own terms, Europe witnessed the three major revolutions (the scientific, the French and the industrial) which opened such a deep gulf between the West and the Islamic world that it has not been filled up until today.

⁷ Marshall HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1974.

⁸ Stephen DALE, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavid and Mughals*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2010.

This is not the place to study «what went wrong»,⁹ but something went wrong. I do not share by any means the essentialist interpretation of Bernard Lewis who considered Islam unable to change because of religion. Many factors converged together to precipitate the crisis: the economic stagnation, the grip of jurisprudence over rational sciences like the natural sciences or philosophy, the supremacy of *taqlīd* or blind imitation of the ancients over original research, the failed development of an up-dated system of liberties and human rights, and so on. It is positive that all these factors cannot be ascribed to religion, though, because in the classical age of Islam, dominated by religion, economy was prosperous, mathematics and astronomy and philosophy were at their peak, society grew up more and more complex and differentiated, civilization was open to syncretism and creative. A man like Ernest Renan with clear racist leanings judged Islam refractory to reason, civilization and science; and Max Weber, a strict euro-centric thinker, established a strong nexus between modernity and rationality. But even an alleged lack of (Western) patterns of rationality in the Islamic reason (*‘aql*) does not seem enough to explain Islamic slowing down since the 14th (or perhaps even the 13th) century. After all, Muslim intellectuals in the Middle Ages exercised their own (Qur’an grounded) rationality and produced masterpieces like the *Revival of Religious Sciences* of al-Ghazālī or the *Risāla* of al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 820) or all the huge corpus of jurisprudence and theology that filled millions of volumes, not to say of the heritage of philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes, or of scientists like al-Khwarizmi, the inventor of algebra, and Ibn al-Haytham, the greatest optician of the Middle Ages. Reason follows very heterogeneous paths and Galileo’s reason and Mullā Sadrā’s reason are both “reason”, each of them in their respective domain. The Qur’ān spurs everywhere to “understand by intellect” (*‘aqala*) and to “reflect” (*tafakkara*).

So, there must be another philosophical explanation.

La ragione fa conoscere il suo vero volto e viene smascherata come soggettività assoggettante e al contempo soggiogata, come volontà di impadronimento strumentale. La forza sovversiva di una critica alla maniera di un Heidegger o di un Bataille, che strappa il velo della ragione dal volto di una pura volontà di potenza, deve al contempo far vacillare quella gabbia d’acciaio in cui si è oggettivato *socialmente* lo spirito della modernità.¹⁰

⁹ Obviously I paraphrase the title of the famous, controversial book of Bernard LEWIS, *What went wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Perennial, New York 2003.

¹⁰ HABERMAS, *op. cit.*, p.4.

This contention of Habermas deserves a short comment. The key words are «assoggettante» that is *subduing*; «impadronimento» that is *taking possession*, «volontà di Potenza» that is *will of power*. Western modernity subdues nature, takes possession of human soul and conscience and its will of power (Nietzsche) can tear the texture of reason. As William Watt argued,

At the root of [Muslim] attitude is a conception of knowledge different from that of most Westerners. For the traditionalist Muslim knowledge is essentially religious and moral knowledge, or, as I have called it elsewhere, “knowledge for living”, and this is really all contained in the Qur’an and hadith. For the Westerner, on the other hand, knowledge is mainly “knowledge for power”, namely, knowledge about the natural world and about human individuals and communities, since this knowledge makes it easier to control things and people.¹¹

Be it as it may, the raw fact is that between the 17th and the 19th century, Europe witnessed the three major scientific, French and industrial revolutions and at a certain moment the Islamic world discovered itself backward. Consequently, by the second half of the Nineteenth century, the Islamic world was subjected to the encroachment of Western colonialism and imperialism and indeed very few Islamic countries remained free from direct or indirect European control. The Western overwhelming superiority in science, technology and military power subdued Afro-Asian world, and previously unknown concepts and ideas took possession of Afro-Asian imaginary and alienated it.

Islamic outlook and thought were struck by novelty and the reaction of Muslim intellectuals was either modernizing Islam or Islamizing modernity, as I have said. We could choose many examples, but Burhan Ghalioun and ‘Abd al-Salām Yāsīn (Abdessalam Yassine) are perhaps meaningfully exemplar of this polarization. Ghalioun (b. 1945) – Syrian, University professor in France and thus fully “Westernized” so to speak, for a short time leader of the opposition to Bashār al-Asad in the so-called Arab spring – spoke of a «*trahison de la modernité*», while ‘Abd al-Salām Yāsīn (1928-2012) – Moroccan, founder and ideologue of the Islamist party *Justice and Right Behavior* (*al-‘Adl wa’l-Ihsān*) – proposed an *islamisation de la*

¹¹ William M. WATT, *Muslim-Christian Encounters. Perceptions and Misperceptions*, Routledge, London-New York 1991, p. 42.

modernité claiming (perhaps not rightly) to have been the first to formulate the paradigm.

Trying to explain why - in the Nineties of the past century when global Islamist terrorism (especially in Algeria and Egypt) was raging for the first time - the Muslim world lived an incurable break between secularists and Islamists, Ghalioun wrote that

L'Islam è trasformato in un *paspartout*, una sorta di mito totale che offre la chiave per penetrare tutti i segreti del funzionamento della società musulmana, della loro storia, della loro morale, della loro cultura, della loro politica, della loro economia e anche del loro avvenire. Con la rappresentazione fantomatica di un Islam che ignorerebbe la separazione tra sfera temporale e spirituale, lo studio delle società musulmane è praticamente ridotto allo studio della loro teologia. E siccome essa è percepita come rudimentale, la storia dell'Islam, religione e società, si risolve, molto spesso, in un'esegesi del Corano e niente più. Rompendo con queste speculazioni, un approccio critico negli ambiti della politologia e della islamologia presuppone un cambiamento totale di prospettiva. Brandire a ogni istante un sapere sclerotizzato è una soluzione di comodo che permette di non prendere in considerazione il vissuto delle società. Su questo bisogna insistere: si può cogliere e analizzare il politico e il religioso solo partendo dall'esperienza concreta delle società e della loro propria storicità cui spetta di svelare gli specifici significati dei discorsi, delle pratiche e del funzionamento delle istituzioni.¹²

Therefore, according to Ghalioun, modernity has been betrayed

- 1) because everything has been explained through religion;
- 2) because theology has been used as the unique tool for understanding society;
- 3) because a sclerotic and by now surpassed knowledge obstructed the management of the social and historical world in its real living experience.

Ghalioun's implicit idea is that it is necessary modernizing Islam. Nevertheless, Ghalioun did not overemphasize the secularist dimension of such a modernization as personalities like Fu'ād Zakariyya or Muhammad Sa'īd al-'Ashmawī did. Condemning violent Islamism, they – especially the hyper-secular Zakariyya¹³ – arrived at the condemnation of Islam on the whole. Although refusing the idea that history is determined and conditioned by God and His intervention, Ghalioun acknowledges that the Qur'an can still provide positive inputs to Muslim political action:

¹² Burhan GHALIOUN, *Islam e islamismo. La modernità tradita*, tr. it. Laura Bottini, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1998, pp. 4-5.

¹³ Fouad ZAKARIYYA, *Laïcité ou islamisme*, La Découverte-al-Fikr, Paris-Cairo 1991.

La storia conosce cambiamenti e mutamenti. Essa non è prescritta nella rappresentazione che i popoli ne hanno, e non è, a maggior ragione, chiusa, prima di cominciare, dal Verbo di Dio che l'avrebbe caricata di senso. Né le conquiste, né la fondazione dell'impero e la sua divisione, né la decadenza, né la rinascita attuale dell'Islam sono scritte nel testo coranico. Contrariamente, l'Islam, così come noi lo conosciamo e così come è vissuto oggi, è il Testo (cioè i valori e i principi) arricchito, deformato, a volte sfigurato dall'esperienza e dall'avventura continua dei popoli musulmani. Se il Testo resta attuale, è per il fatto che le società musulmane non ne hanno ancora esaurito il significato; esso è ancora capace di ispirarle, aperto com'è all'arricchimento.¹⁴

For

il più grande ostacolo alla realizzazione [del] progetto [laicista] nelle società [musulmane] o altrove, non è oggi la religione, ma un'idea mutilata e perversa della modernità, una politica economica, sociale, culturale, ovvero religiosa, concepita dalle élite attuali e imposta da poteri raramente eletti, sempre impopolari o antipopolari.¹⁵

Ghalioun is right: the secular élites – especially the military élites – that managed the transitions from colonialism to independence, at least in the Middle East, enforced by violence an authoritarian modernity peoples often rejected. It would be enough to remember Sādāt in Egypt (killed in 1981), the Asad dynasty in Siria (overthrown by the Arab spring of 2011) or Reza Pahlevi in Iran (overthrown by the Khomeini's revolution in 1979). Consequently, according to Ghalioun, extremist Islamism would be the outcome of the distorted development of modernity.

Sotto l'apparenza di una domanda religiosa spesso confusa, il “ritorno” all'islam esprime la reazione di una modernità in frantumi, abortita. Dissimula l'ascesa di aspirazioni represses alla libertà, alla dignità, al riconoscimento dell'individuo e alla partecipazione alla vita politica, grandemente in contrasto con gli antichi valori rituali e di pietà.¹⁶

On the other hand, 'Abd al-Salām Yāsīn (1928-2012) claimed a reformist-revolutionary role for Islam in the book, written directly in French in order to be more widely read, *Islamiser la modernité*. First of all, he says that Islam is not a religion in the Christian sense because unites worship and social and practical action:

¹⁴ GHALIOUN, *Islam e islamismo*, cit., p. 5.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 131.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 144.

L'Islam n'est pas une "religion" au sens dévalorisé et ravalé du mot, mais une soumission à Dieu notre créateur. L'Islam n'est pas une "religion", il est obéissance à la Loi révélée. L'Islam est participation pleine et déterminée à l'aventure humaine, à l'histoire humaine, au fait humain.¹⁷

Given this difference, it is of no surprise that Western modernity is deemed by Yāsīn involving an alienation of conscience. This alienation leads, on its part, to agnosticism or atheism:

La modernité est donc la "sacralisation" de la loi naturelle de la raison et la soumission à ses injonctions. Ce qui suppose que pour être moderne on doit se rebeller contre le sacré divin.¹⁸

Islam must react to this alienation and falsehood, communicating a message of justice and peace. This message arises hostility because of islamophobia and because it proposes *the Truth* to mankind reconciling it with modernity in terms contrasting with the Western dominating outlook:

Indésirable est l'Islam sur l'arène politique mondiale ; le présent, l'actuel, l'insistant Islam qui frappe aux portes de la modernité, porteur du message de paix avec Dieu et avec les hommes, message de justice et de fraternité entre les hommes.¹⁹

Islamization of modernity is therefore necessary, and it is a sort of spiritual *jihād* reviving human life:

Islamiser la modernité commence par un cri d'alerte adressé à l'homme moderne dont la vie est fiévreusement amputée par l'instantané. Islamiser la modernité, c'est le secouer de sa torpeur et l'empêcher de trébucher et de basculer dans le néant du nonsense qui le guette à chaque instant.²⁰

At the end, Islam will triumph and the triumph of Islam will produce a new civilization under the banner of a renewed and revitalized caliphate:

L'avènement d'une nouvelle civilisation islamique, dans l'unification islamique, est dans l'ordre de la logique cyclique, et elle est avant tout une vocation annoncée par notre Prophète Mohammad – béni soit Mohammad – qui nous parle d'un second califat.²¹

¹⁷ Abdessalam YASSINE, *Islamiser la modernité*, Private Edition, Dar Al Afak 1998, p. 28.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 41.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 15.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 27.

²¹ Ivi, p. 52.

Unfortunately the alluring idea of the caliphate rallied many Muslims around the flag of IS. But the caliphate represents the dream of Islamic resurgence and cannot be deleted in broad Muslim imagination.

Ghalioun and Yāsīn discussed modernity and Islam from a biased point of view, secular the former, religious the latter. Beyond the *pacatezza* of discussion, however, I should like to stress that both modernization of Islam and Islamization of modernity suffered from extremism and excess. Modernization of Islam led some people to believe that Islam was “dead” and should be given up and abandoned. Islamization of modernity led some people to fight the Western World even with arms until terrorism. The middle way – admittedly the largest – emphasized the need for Muslims and Islamic thought and Islamic societies to re-appropriate modernity and to elaborate a thorough *Islamic* modernity.

However, apart from excesses, both modernization of Islam and Islamization of modernity involved an idea of change, revival and reform and expressed themselves in renaissance, *nahda*. At this end, I shall introduce the interpretative paradigm of *ontology of modernity* nowadays emerging in contemporary Islamic thought.²² Modernity has been already discussed. With “ontology” here I mean the (re)construction, the (re)building of Muslim being and consciousness. Being is not simply “to exist”, to be something. Being is dynamics and transformation. As Hegel would put it

Das Sein ist der Begriff nur an sich, die Bestimmungen desselben sind seiende, in ihrem Unterschiede Andre gegeneinander, und ihre weitere Bestimmung (die Form des Dialektischen) ist ein Uebergeben in Anderes. [...] Das Fortgehen des Begriffs ist nicht mehr Uebergehen noch Scheinen in Anderes, sondern Entwicklung.²³

Obviously, although being is dynamics, ontology of modernity implies a strong emphasis on identity. Philosophically, ontology is (some people would say “was”) the

²² Many books have been written on Islamic contemporary thought, although the topic of ontology of modernity is new, as far as I know. I remember only Suha TAJI-FAROUKI and Basheer M. NAFI (a cura di), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2004; Kari VOGT, Lena LARSON and Christian MOER (a cura di), *New Directions in Islamic Thought*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 2009; Massimo CAMPANINI, *Il pensiero islamico contemporaneo*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2016.

²³ Georg W.F. HEGEL, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, §§ 84 and 161.

<http://gen.lib.rus.ec/search.php?req=hegel+ency&open=0&view=simple&phrase=1&column=def>

science of being, the science of “what exists” (*ens* in Latin, but *ὄν* in Greek, from Parmenides to Aristotle the fundament of Western metaphysics). Nevertheless, in my view ontology is not only the mere picture of the *datum*, but also the comprehension of its meaning. Ontology is also the setting out of a system of relations, the grasping of being in its historical development. Hegel would say

Die Idee [that is the last outcome/step of Begriff] ist wesentlich Prozeß, weil ihre Identität nur insofern die absolute und freie des Begriffs ist, insofern sie die absolute Negativität und daher dialektisch ist. Sie ist des Verlauf, daß der Begriff als die Allgemeinheit, welche Einzelheit ist, sich zur Objectivität und zum Gegensatz gegen dieselbe bestimmt, und diese Außerlichkeit, die den Begriff zu ihrer Substanz hat, durch ihre immanente Dialektik sich in die Subjectivität zurückführt.²⁴

Applied to the Islamic world and to Islamic political thought, it allows for a fresh understanding (*tajdīd*) of old patterns (*turāth*), grasping Islamic true reality in its historical development. Many thinkers moved or are moving on this path: from Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) and his Qur’anic hermeneutics to Hasan Hanafi (b. 1935) and his Islamic Left; from Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jābrī (d. 2010) and his critique to the Arab reason to Nasr Abū Zayd (d. 2010) and his Islamic humanism. Important is to fight the prejudice, because «the idea that Islam is internally plural and that modernity is a process not entrenched in a singular culture seemed alien to most Western observers, while it gradually became a main avenue of reasoning for key Muslim thinkers».²⁵ We have to recognize that Islamic intellectual and political renaissance (*tajdīd* or renewal) began much time before Western colonialist and imperialist encroachment: it is enough to remember Shāh Walīullāh (d. 1762), the Wahhabi movement in 18th century Arabia, Usumān Dan Fodio (d. 1817) in Nigeria and so on. If reformation (*islāh*) and renaissance (*nahda*) cannot but confront European ideas, the basis of self-consciousness of Muslims must be reconstructed in Islamic terms.

²⁴ Ivi, §215.

²⁵ Armando SALVATORE, *Modernity*, in BOWERING (a cura di), *Islamic Political Thought. An Introduction*, cit., p. 138.

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