

# Maxime Rodinson: Rationality, Islam, and Decolonisation

Sunday 14 April 2019, by [HAYNS Joe](#), [NADI Selim](#) (Date first published: 13 July 2018).

**The outstanding intellectual Maxime Rodinson is known above all for his magisterial study, *Islam and Capitalism* (1966), and for his intense militant activity, notably with the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), of which he was a member from 1937 to 1958. In this article, Selim Nadi addresses the relations between Rodinson's scientific work and political engagement, through an appraisal of Rodinson's analyses of the tactical and strategic possibilities that Islam offered to anti-colonial struggles. From the Algerian national liberation struggle, to the dialogue between Rodinson and Edward Said, to the Iranian Revolution, this article revisits the challenges faced by Rodinson in his efforts to think through and work with revolutionary processes in the Muslim countries.**

*I have always perceived a certain contradiction between political engagement and rationality [...] Experience and age help. I've realised that the more our activism advances, the more one sees, in each instance, that irrationalities drag on practical currents. (Maxime Rodinson, *Entre Islam et Occident. Entretiens avec Gérard D. Khoury* [Between Islam and the West. Interviews with Gérard D. Khoury.]*

It was in 1957, when he was 23 years old, that Mohamed Harbi - then member of the Algerian FLN - met Maxime Rodinson (1915-2004) for the first time. Harbi was already familiar with the works and interests of Rodinson. In an interview with Sébastien Boussois, Harbi explained that at that time, those researching the Arab countries were typically Islamologists who conferred an absolute role to religion, making it the Alpha and Omega of their analyses. Hence, according to Harbi, the principal 'radical scholars' ('contre-universitaires') of the time for the students and militants were Claude Cahen (1909-1991) and Maxime Rodinson. Harbi was like all his comrades interested not only in Maghreb societies, but more generally in the ensemble of the Middle East, his studies helped by an exceptional linguistic ability.

When Rodinson met Harbi, his position vis-à-vis the PCF, which he would quit two years later, was already critical. After his departure in 1958, Rodinson took more and more distance from political militancy, whilst remaining firmly convinced that Marxism proposed the most pertinent methodology for analysing non-European societies, notably for those colonised or previously colonised countries. It's this aspect of Rodinson's political thought that will most interest us here: his theorisation of anti-colonialism - and, in particular, his reflection on the strategic role Islam could play as an instrument of mobilisation. It seems that, beyond the colonial question itself, this aspect of Rodinson's thought allows us to return to what he named an 'independent Marxism', in his response to a question from Egyptian sociologist Ibrahim Sa'ad ad-Din, during a conference in Cairo, in 1969. Since an 'independent Marxism' should not be confounded with a sort of 'academic neutrality,' it is interesting to consider what this approach contributes to Rodinson's analysis - notably, during his dialogues with militants, like Amar Ouzegane, or intellectuals, like Edward Said. This should be done without attempting to mask the limitations of this 'independence', which was accompanied by Rodinson's distancing from any organisational engagement, albeit without his ever falling into an

apolitical neutralism.

An erudite polyglot of the first order, Rodinson published a number of works that became authoritative far beyond Marxist social scientist circles. Having published translations of Arabic and also Turkish, and taught Ethiopian and Old South Arabian, and as capable of writing on the poetry of Nazim Hikmet as on Arab cuisine, Rodinson published a number of foundational texts on linguistics (on the incompatibility of consonants in Semitic language root words, for example), and on the emergence of capitalism in Muslim countries (his work *Islam and Capitalism* remains without doubt his most known and discussed work) and, too, on the historical evolution of anti-Semitism, without counting his many reviews of works. Such erudition seems extraordinary, in the literal sense of the term, in the current context. But, Rodinson was also a political militant, a long-time member of the PCF, raised in a strongly politicised family (his father had, perhaps, played chess with Trotsky). In his memoirs, Rodinson recalled that he'd attended his first demonstration with his mother in 1927, following the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. From that moment, Rodinson never stopped having one foot in the sphere of militancy. It would seem, nonetheless, that throughout his lifework, he more and more took distance from the militant world, without ever depoliticizing either. Nor was he sparing in analysing the international situation, for example during the Gulf War of 1991. Rodinson was constantly gripped by the need for *scientificité* and *rationalité*.

It seems essential then for us to inquire into his analysis of tactical and strategic questions, especially into an element that was impossible to ignore in the revolutionary processes dynamising the 'Third World': the powerful tactical power offered by Islam for mobilising the masses against colonialism and imperialism. The present article explores Rodinson's debates with militants and intellectuals, as well as some texts that were - rather than mere reactions to burning questions - imposed by circumstance and that dwelt over first-order strategic problems.

On Rodinson, Pierre Vidal-Naquet wrote that 'not only was he a man with a great library - he read and interpreted the books he possessed. He was the greatest *érudit* that I ever encountered' [1]. It is essential we discover, or rediscover, this *érudit*, through restoring his thought in the debates and political issues of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Islam and the 'psychology of the masses'**

*The ideal is not remote, situated in another world; it is produced by earthly transformations. But, it requires the total devotion of the individual. As with Mazdeism, every thought, every word spoken, and every action has a cosmic value. It builds, on the earth, the Bonne Cité (the Good City). This had been, for Ouzegane, the Cité Communiste, interlinked with the international communist movement; it is now, for him, the Algerian Muslim Cité, with a socialist structure. The national addition, secondary and largely insignificant in the first ideology, has become primordial. (Maxime Rodinson, 'From Communism to the FLN')*

In his study of French anti-colonialism since the 16<sup>th</sup> century [2], historian Claude Liauzu explained that, during the Algerian revolution, the religious factor was largely underestimated by the French anti-colonialists, who principally perceived Algeria through the eyes of their laïcs (secular) Arab comrades. It was in this context that Rodinson appeared clearly as a dissonant voice, for his thinking that the Muslim religion's imbrication in social and political relations was a key element of anti-colonial struggles in Muslim countries. Rodinson never searched for an ideal-type of anti-colonial militant, revolutionary and laïc, but rather always began with the necessity of analysing actually existing society, rather than building a political analysis on an imagined social reality. The role that Rodinson confers on Islam in the anti-colonial struggles stands out especially in his dialogue with Amar Ouzegane (1910-1981). Ouzegane, an Algerian militant, was counted amongst the founders in 1936 of the Parti Communiste Algérien (PCA), before being excluded for 'nationalist deviances' in

1947. In a review, published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in 1962 (and re-published in *Marxisme et monde musulman*) of Ouzegane's book, *Le meilleur des combats* (The Best Battle) - in which Ouzegane lengthily responded to a 1960 text of Larbi Bouhali, who'd succeeded him at the PCA secretariat - Rodinson discussed the strategic role that Islam might play as a political instrument. In his book, Ouzegane did not invoke any theological argument to explain the importance of Islam in the context of revolutionary Algeria, but did, though, very much insist on the social role played by the Muslim religion. In his review, Rodinson cites Robespierre's appraising of atheism as an 'aristocratic' phenomenon during the French Revolution in order to comment on Ouzegane's claim that atheism was a kind of marker of the French labour aristocracy [3]. However, despite Rodinson having had a sincere political sympathy for Ouzegane, he remained no less critical of the role that religion can play as a political instrument and tactic.

Whilst Rodinson is largely known for his study of the development of capitalism in the Muslim countries, he was equally interested, in a profound way, in the 'use' that Islam might be put to towards non-religious ends - especially, the role that the Muslim religion might play in independence struggles. As Rodinson wrote, in an article published in the *Partisans* journal in 1963, the leaders of national liberation struggles, whether they were atheists or not, should not ignore the potential to mobilise the masses that religion offered. In the case of the Muslim countries, for example, it was clear that religious oppression played a central role in national oppression. In the article, Rodinson again mobilised Ouzegane's point of being less concerned about whether Muslim dogmas were true or false, than with seeing Islam principally as a social and political instrument. Thus - and it was on precisely this point that Rodinson made his critique - according to Ouzegane, militant atheists were not necessarily mistaken in the worldview, but rather in the mis-comprehension of the 'social psychology' of the Algerian masses. Rodinson considered Islam as neither a good nor a bad ideology a priori, but rather insisted on the need to produce analyses of the religion that account for its social conditions in which it developed. As he wrote at the beginning of his book *De Pythagore à Lénine*, 'the best way to comprehend nothing of a phenomenon is to isolate it, and to consider it, from either the interior or the exterior, as if it is the only one of its type' [4]

Nevertheless, in the case of the national liberation struggles, Rodinson was fairly sceptical of the utilisation of Islam as a primary 'mobilisation tool'; indeed, he considered such an approach to the religious question as potentially dangerous for the newly independent states, and rejected the concept of the 'social psychology' of the masses mobilised by Ouzegane. According to Rodinson, the danger resided in that, 'pushed to the limit by some peasant' - a politician like Ouzegane, for example, who later became a minister in the newly independent Algeria:

*would have to confess to believe the same thing as him. Maybe, by mental restriction, he would decide that he himself does not believe in what are, for the modern, rational spirit, the most shocking aspects of the peasant's faith, for example believing in the mare of Borâq [a Pegasus with a woman's head - Ed. Note]. But, he would have dispossessed himself of the right of critiquing these aspects. Practically, he would align himself with the peasant's faith. What's the import, one might say, of this half-spoken alignment, if the peasant is convinced to construct socialism, suffering and sacrificing, albeit whilst believing in following the precepts of Allah and of the Prophet Mohammed? We've sacrificed so many things for the revolution, among others, the search for the truth in its various guises. Why not go all the way? [5]*

Rodinson would write something similar some years later, at the end of his classic work, *Islam and Capitalism*, on the subject of the attachment of the Algerian poor to Islam, and the potential consequences of its political instrumentalisation:

*It must be seen that this attachment, before it being an expression of faith, and although it may indeed lead many souls towards values that are strictly religious in character, is nonetheless*

*fundamentally a national, and a class, phenomenon. The poor see in Islam that which distinguishes them from the foreign oppressor and from the Europeanized upper strata, infidels in deed or spirit. The Muslim 'clergy', in large part poor, discredited by the occupier, faithful to the values of the traditional society in which they lived, belongs to the poor, constitutes their leadership and speaks to them in their own language, a language at their level. But, with independence, however, the 'clergy' climbed step-by-step the social ladder. The more-or-less exploiting upper layers increasingly proclaim their attachment to Islam in their frenetic search for an ideological guarantee for their social and material advantages. The more 'clerics' rise in the social strata, or even simply integrate into the nation, the less Islam will be for the disinherited an exclusive ordering principle. [6]*

In such circumstances, if a conflict were to erupt in post-independence Algeria, for example, the peasant would, according to Rodinson, follow the religious over the political leader. It is here that the 'Frenchness' of Rodinson - something he revealed most in the last period of his life, when he would take against 'the communitarian plague' [7] - becomes explicit: according to him, it may be necessary, for the political education of the formerly colonised masses, to put into motion certain secular measures, as in the Christian countries, such as the separation of church and state. If there was nothing of the laïcard about him, at least in the sense we mean it today - he did not perceive Islam as a regression, [though] neither as more advanced - it is clear all that same that he wrote in a certain *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) tradition, for which scientific truth was above any political consideration. Thus, about *Islam and Capitalism*, George Labica wrote in 1967:

*One can't deny [...] the merit of his calling for and even provoking confrontations, like all authentically generous thought, where mutual loathing [anathèmes réciproque] and trials of motives might finally be replaced by the rigours of scientific examination. [8]*

This rationalism, sometimes a little tainted with Eurocentrism, does not however in any way signify either a 'war' against Islam, or against 'religion' as such, or a call to 'enlighten' colonial subjects. In his preface to James Thrower's book *Marxist-Leninist 'Scientific Atheism' and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the U.S.S.R.*, Rodinson suggests that the 'Western' critique of religion had merely replaced religion with a new ideology, which though conserved the same functions:

This critique of religion, practised in the West since the Enlightenment - the Marxist and Soviet theses are the latest form, sometimes coarse, sometimes refined - appear as no more than interested, practical politics, as some vulgar maneuver. It is also an effort towards replacing the traditional religions with a new ideology, endowed with the same functions. [9]

Rodinson's relationship with the enlightenment tradition, with atheism and with religion, is present in a number of his works - notably in his magisterial biography of the Prophet [10]. It was a point to which he returned in his preface of Kazem Radjavi's 1983 book, *La révolution iranienne et les moudjahédines*:

*I am myself a rationalist, a loyal son of the European tradition of the Aufklärung. But, I long ago renounced the idea, which flows quite naturally from this tradition, that religion is equivalent to an absolute night of the spirit, with the corollary being that to break from religion was to enter a world of true thought, demythologised, transparent, with an absolute equivalence between reality and the concept of it. Similarly, it is necessary to renounce the idea that an alienated vision of the world might not result from a class holding of proprietorship over means of production (or of men, or the earth), from the exploitation which results, and from the utilisation of religion towards better acceptance. [11]*

Thus, the amicable critique Rodinson addressed to Ouzegane's perspective was more concerned with the political consequences of the use of Islam as a tactic in the national liberation struggles

than over the Muslim religion as such. In the same way, according to Rodinson, there was never anything intrinsically anti-socialist in Islam, defending the idea that the only barrier to socialism in the Muslim countries would be to put in place anti-Muslim politics.

### **Communism and colonialism**

Rodinson's interest in the relations between Islam, Muslims, and communism is one of the explanations for his fascination for the Tartar Bolshevik Sultan Galiev, who opposed those revolutionaries who wanted to struggle against Islam, and defended the idea of the necessity of, so to speak, 'Marxising' Islam. As Matthieu Renault wrote:

*There is not for Sultan Galiev any incompatibility between socialist revolution and Islam: it is not necessary to work towards the destruction of Islam, but rather to its despiritualisation, to its 'Marxisation'. [12]*

In 1960, Rodinson had published a text on Sultan Galiev in *Les Temps Modernes*. This article was a presentation of a book, published by Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Quelquejay, on 'Sultangaliévisme', *The National Movements of the Muslims of Russia, Vol I: 'Sultangaliévisme' in Tartarstan*. The text in question is interesting for more than its title, notably for showing the fascination that Maoism exercised over Rodinson (he saw in Sultan Galiev a precursor to Maoism), and for the reference to the development of an African-Asian bloc that Rodinson compared with a Colonial International, which Sultan Galiev had called for, to 'assure the hegemony of the underdeveloped, colonial world over the European powers'. [13] If Rodinson was interested in the figure of Sultan Galiev, it was especially for Galiev's supporting the fact 'that there are contradictions in the socialist regime' [14], for example those concerning the question of national minorities within the USSR, in explicit reference to Mao's celebrated text of August 1937, *On Contradiction*. Rodinson's leaving the PCF, near the time he wrote the Galiev article, is particularly illuminated by the criticism he addressed to communist organisations [15] for the near-absence of a targeted struggle to overcome these contradictions:

*Every time someone puts a light on one of these contradictions, concretely, it is either denied or minimised. Naturally, the dogmatiques search not at all to analyse, to explain, or to find the causes and the repercussions. They represent the politics followed by Communist leaders (dirigeants) in every phase, as though determined by a superior wisdom which faithfully follows all the fluctuations of the national and global conjuncture, since they are armed with the infallible 'compass' of Marxist teaching. [16]*

He added further:

*Altogether, until a very recent time, and with some understandable excuses, the communist dirigeants have been as little lucid as to the capitalist world in regards the dreams of the colonised people. [17]*

Thus, to summarise the conception Rodinson had of the relations between communism and colonialism, it is evident that he wished to struggle against the white hegemony and the racial-colonial contradictions within socialism and communism, being reasons that revolutionaries ought to, according to Rodinson, study Sultan Galiev - but, he perceived that the direction in which Islam was developing in the newly independent countries was potentially dangerous politically. Rodinson had moreover never been a Third Worldist, as the movement had existed in France in the 1960s and '70s, writing in the prologue to *Islam et capitalisme*:

I do not subscribe to the mystique of the Third World, now so widespread in Left circles, and do not beat my breast daily in despair at not having been born in the Congo or somewhere like that. Nevertheless the problems of the Third World are indeed crucial [...] [18]

In the same way that he thought that scientific truth should not be sacrificed on the altar of anti-colonial revolution, Rodinson wrote in his small book *La Fascination de l'Islam* (1978) that the solution to problems that the Third World would face would not be found in the nationalist ideology of the former colonisers, ideology which, though Rodinson recognised its pertinence, involved a number of limitations, from a scientific point of view. [19]

Rodinson thus attempted to navigate across a political minefield when it came to discussing the relation between Islam and anti-colonial struggles. From 1958, the year in which Rodinson quit the PCF, through the 1970s and 1980s, he more and more evolved towards an 'independent' perspective, without ever becoming, for that, a 'renegade'. As Gilbert Achcar wrote in his preface to the English edition of *Marxism and the Muslim World*:

*[...] While remaining very much involved in political discussions [...] [Rodinson] developed a critical open brand of Marxism, which he labelled 'independent'. His relationship to Marxism evolved into an effort to salvage Marx's method of enquiry along with key tenets of his thought, while engaging in provocative, iconoclastic debates with organised Marxists: from seeking at first to convince or influence them - the perspective that informs the essays gathered here - to an increasingly disenchanted and mordant attitude as the Communist movement went deeper into agony. [20]*

## **The Islamic Revolution**

*Multiple cases of spirituality have existed. All have finished very quickly, in general, by subordinating worldly ideas, posed initially as flowing from a spiritual or ideal source, to the eternal laws of politics, which is to say the struggle for power. (Maxime Rodinson, *L'Islam politique et croyance*)*

Another major event which inspired Rodinson to reflect on the relations between revolutionary processes and Islam was the Iranian Revolution of 1979. To properly grasp Rodinson's interventions over Iran, it is essential to briefly return to the origins of the revolutionary uprising of 1979.

From the beginning of 1960s, the Shah's Iran had known an economic crisis, coupled with a political crisis, without precedent. Faced with the aggravation of political crisis, the government of the Shah ordered in 1963 a series of reforms which entered into posterity under the term the 'White Revolution'. These reforms had as objective the establishing of a stable economic, social and political base for the regime, favouring two groups: middle class peasants and the petite bourgeoisie of functionaries. The objective of the Shah, and of his Prime Minister Ali Amini, was to 'modernise' the country. The big losers of the reforms were, in the first place, the traditional middle class of the bazaars. Their position was constantly menaced by capitalist development of Iran. In parallel, the rural exodus was accelerated, and a large number of agricultural workers migrated towards the towns, in search of the 'grand civilization' their radios said was in full expansion, without finding, in fact, work there. There was a huge gulf between the promises of the regime and Iranians' expectations. This development was visible, on the one hand, from the modernisation of Iranian economic life by the state, involving a process of cultural development and, above all, of the productivity of the working class, and on the other, the persistence of older forms of exploitation. The Shah's modernising force was also strongly marked by a will towards 'secularisation' - a centralised forced march - that progressively turned religious authorities against him, especially an Ayatollah who would become leader of the Islamic Revolution: Ruhollah Khomeiny. The Shi'ah

'clergy' would come to marshal the majority of the opposition, taking the lead from 1975 onwards, from a left opposition affected by state repression. In effect, despite the façade of political liberalisation, political repression increased, with the economic modernisation of Iran paired with a reinforcing of the repressive apparatus. In the 1970s, the assassinations and torture were the everyday lot of the greater part of the opposition. According to Maryam Poya [21], the state's repression led to the crystallisation of the opposition into two tendencies: a guerilla movement on the one hand, and a Shi'ah 'clergy' on the other. In 1975, those existent political parties were dissolute, and only SAVAK-supervised trade unions were authorised. The Shah announced the establishment of a single-party system, financed by 'the free world'. Over the 1970s, it was thus the Shi'ah clergy that took the leadership of the opposition, and who called for a massive mobilisation against the regime of the Shah. The 'clergy' organised the opposition around the rejection of 'Westernisation' and of the submission to the imperialism incarnated in the Shah. The Islam mobilised as a means to speak with the masses was an Islam of liberation, directly addressing the political and social conditions of the majority of the population. It was without a doubt Ali Shariati who furnished the most important theoretical formulation of this liberation struggle, in defining Islam as revolutionary praxis. It was this revolutionary role conferred to Islam that provoked a number of European intellectuals to respond - including Rodinson.

In a *Nouvel Observateur* article on the 19<sup>th</sup> February 1979, entitled 'Khomeyni et la "primauté du spirituel"' ('Khomeyni and "Spiritual Primacy"') Rodinson elaborated not only on the significance of the Iranian revolution, but also on the reactions that it provoked amongst French intellectuals. In the introduction which accompanied the re-publication of the article in *L'Islam, politique et croyance (Islam, Politics and Belief)*, Rodinson wrote that:

*The hope, dead or moribund for a long time, for a global revolution, one which would liquidate the exploitation and oppression of man by man resurged, timidly at first, then with more assurance. Could it be that, in a most unexpected fashion, this hope is coming to be embodied now in the Muslim Orient, up until now hardly promising, and more precisely, where man is lost in a universe of medieval thought? [22]*

Returning to the fervour that the revolution had provoked in a number of intellectuals, Rodinson noted, as he had in his debate with Ouzegane, that 'the mobilising force are Islamist slogans', adding later that 'the Iranian liberal democrats and Marxists were asking more and more whether they had been mistaken in dismissing the traditional religious fervour of the people' [23]. 'The Iranian revolution seemed, indeed, to justify the disquietude expressed by Rodinson on the subject of post-independence Algeria, and added to the *désillusion* of many of its most fervent supporters - Iranian and Europeans - faced with a new regime, and with the utilisation of Islam by the state.

The essay which Rodinson particularly addressed was Foucault's. In their work *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson somewhat caricature Rodinson's critique of Foucault when they write:

*While we find many of Rodinson's critiques of Foucault compelling, we certainly cannot agree with his argument for the advantages of a purely socioeconomic approach to the realm of the political over a philosophical one.*

In this study, we have argued that there were particular aspects of Foucault's philosophical perspective that helped to lead him toward an abstractly uncritical stance toward Iran's Islamist movement. If a philosophical perspective per se were the problem, how then could equally philosophical feminist thinkers like de Beauvoir and Dunayevskaya have succeeded in arriving at a more appropriately critical stance toward the Iranian Revolution? [24]

Indeed, whilst it's true that in *Islam, Politics and Belief* Rodinson wrote that 'the spirits of philosophical formation (...) are the most exposed to seduction by theoretical slogans' [25], Afray and Anderson never referenced Rodinson's other texts - those which would have allowed them to nuance their criticism. One issue is that the question of philosophical grounding of Foucault, occupied no more than a limited place in the criticism they addressed to Rodinson; another is that Rodinson was far from arguing for a 'purely socio-economic' approach. Rodinson, who was considered as, in part, philosophe-like [26], aimed at professional philosophers - French, above all - the reproach of writing on every subject without being properly informed, and of a certain form of idealism:

*The culture currently fostered in the universities - and especially the École normale supérieure - houses philosophical dissertations without much information or serious argument: they keep clear of concrete problems, and even of more general problems* [27]

Rodinson's reproach of Foucault was above all for the weak knowledge of the subject he dealt with. But, beyond Foucault, Rodinson's essay in the *Nouvel Observateur* at the moment of the Iranian revolution was part of his more general reflecting on the place of Islam in revolutionary processes. Much ink was spilled on the role of Islam and religious leaders in the revolutionary processes at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s. Hence, in his classic *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982), the great American theoretician of modernity Marshall Berman (1940-2013) made several references to the Iranian revolution, notably when he wrote, on Act Four, Part Two of Goethe's *Faust*:

The alternatives, as they are defined in Act Four, are: on one side, a crumbling multinational empire left over from the Middle Ages, ruled by an emperor who is pleasant but venal and utterly inept; on the other side, challenging him, a gang of pseudo-revolutionaries out for nothing but power and plunder, and backed by the Church, which Goethe sees as the most voracious and cynical force of all. (The idea of the Church as a revolutionary vanguard has always struck readers as far fetched, but recent events in Iran suggest that Goethe may have been onto something.) [28]

This question - how to position oneself vis-à-vis revolutionary processes in motion? - is essential in the thought of Rodinson. In his much-cited preface to Kazem Radjavi's book, Rodinson did not condemn the revolutionary process for its religious references - this argument had long been central to his reflections. He was interested above all in the practices of the Khomeinist government post-revolution:

*It is often very difficult to appreciate the moment when the justifiable defence measures of a new regime degrade into cruel, barbaric procedures. These are able also to co-exist so easily with continued, important ameliorations for the great masses. We ought to hesitate before compromising these ameliorations through denouncing these cruelties. We are here before terrible dilemmas. But, experience has taught us that there are lines which we should not allow to be crossed without doing all we can to prevent it, a point beyond which the cruelty of means irredeemably corrupts the best of ends. I believe this point has been reached in Iran.* [29]

For Iran, as for Algeria, far from making Islam an explanatory factor of the revolutionary or postrevolutionary process, Rodinson rather attempted to apply a rational analysis - 'the only relatively certain guide we have' [30]

As Gilbert Achcar notes in *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*, the end of the 1970s marked 'a major turning point in Oriental and Islamic studies' [31]. Achcar gave three principal reasons for this evolution: the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the establishment of the Islamist Republic; the development of the armed Islamic rebellion against the left-wing dictator of Afghanistan; and the publication of Edward Said's classic *Orientalism*, in 1978. On the first two points, we have seen that Rodinson did not at all see either the religious or the 'Oriental' character of these processes as



determinant. However, the theoretical interventions of Rodinson were not limited to an analysis of social process in the Muslim world; he also debated the most important intellectuals of the time, foremost among whom was Edward Said.

### **The Fascination of Islam, Orientalism, and the theory of two sciences**

In 1980, the same year of the French publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Rodinson published a collection of texts under the name *La fascination de l'Islam*. Rodinson was considered a major intellectual by Said, though he was not his principal intellectual reference. Hence, when Said addressed the 'canonical theses supported by the Orientalists, whose ideas on the economy never go beyond affirming the fundamental incapacity of Orientals for industry, commerce, and economic rationality' [32], he mobilised Rodinson's book *Islam and Capitalism* as a counter-example, and affirmed the work as marking a rupture from those clichés about the 'Orientals'. In the same manner, he called Rodinson amongst 'the *érudits* (...) and the critics who have received an Orientalist education [and who] are perfectly capable of freeing themselves from the old ideological straightjacket of orthodoxy.' [33]

In the introduction of the 1993 edition of *The Fascination of Islam*, Rodinson seems to have also held Said in high esteem:

*I implore my readers to read Edward Said's book, Orientalism, the French translation of which, appearing near the time of the first edition of my small book, had a great success.*

The work of this Palestinian, now professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Columbia in New York, greatly cultured in English and French literature, has had a large success in the Anglo-Saxon world. He has provoked in the professional Orientalist milieu something close to a trauma. They certainly had the habit of seeing criticism of their work [as being] 'ethnocentric', and of being denounced by the 'indigenous' publications as agents, conscious or unconscious, of Euro-American imperialism. But these works didn't affect the very milieu in which they were developing. But here suddenly were all the same accusations reprised in English, by a professor of well-known value, familiar with Flaubert and Coleridge, invoking the ideas of Michel Foucault! [34]

Yet, as intellectually beneficial as this 'trauma' might have been, Rodinson maintained nothing less than a critical attitude vis-à-vis the central work of Said. The principle problem in *Orientalism* did not reside, according to Rodinson, so much in Said's interpretation of *Orientalism* as such - despite certain limits he pointed to [35] - than in the use that might be made of the methodology deployed by the book's author. Rodinson defended, indeed, the idea that 'taken to the limit certain analyses and, still more, certain formulations of Edward Said fall into a doctrine that is, by all appearances, the Zhdanovian theory of The Two Sciences'. [36]. Rodinson wrote too that 'pushed to the extreme', such a theory 'leads to more Lyssenko'. It's necessary to note that, despite the fact that Rodinson's warning is apparently self-evident, one could say, without risk of being anachronistic, that it anticipated certain contemporary debates between Marxists and proponents of post-colonial studies. Rodinson then not only warned against Said's book itself, but against the uses it might be put to:

*Whatever the importance of the deviations caused by the colonial situation to either reason or data, whatever the necessity to fight them, and however important the entrance onto the scene of the judgement of colonised and ex-colonised experts is, using their usual sensitivity against these deviations, it is indispensable to not slide carelessly towards the doctrine in question, that of the Two Sciences.* [37]

Still, in the *The Fascination of Islam*, Rodinson devoted an entire chapter to the development of Arab and Islamic studies in Europe. He criticised the rejection of certain aspects of the social sciences,

too quickly accused of Eurocentrism in his eyes. As we have seen before, despite all the sympathy that Rodinson had with the decolonisation movements, he refused this accusation, and went further:

*It's necessary all the same to keep in mind that, for reasons which have nothing to do with a spurious racial superiority, it is Europe which has most advanced (until now) the application of the refined scientific methods, even if the practice of these methods was previously initiated in the civilizations non-Europeans studied. [38]*

If the criticism of Rodinson should however be considered in quite a different way from the flood of criticisms that duly faced Said around the publication of *Orientalism*, it is since Rodinson entirely agreed with Said's anti-colonialism, without having drawn at all the same 'scientific' conclusions. The critiques of Rodinson concerning the risks of opposing an anti-Orientalist science with an Orientalist left Said unmoved ('laissé Said de marbre'), as recalled by Gilbert Achcar, who cited an interview of Said with Hassan Arfaoui and Subhi Hadidi's, dated 1996, in which Said inveighed against Rodinson in these terms: 'I was hardly surprised by an ex-Stalinist [being] incapable of comprehending the nature of the criticism, and the critical method more generally' [39]

In *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*, Achcar cites an article published in the Autumn of 1985 in the review, *Cultural Critique*. According to Achcar, Said seemed to appreciate certain warnings formulated by Rodinson, without however explicitly referencing him:

*Whether in identifying and working through anti-dominant critiques, subaltern groups - women, blacks, and so on - can resolve the dilemma of autonomous fields of experience and knowledge that are created as a consequence. A double kind of possessive exclusivism could set in: the sense of being an excluding insider by virtue of experience (only women can write for and about women, and only literature that treats women or Orientals well is good literature), and second, being an excluding insider by virtue of method (only Marxists, anti-Orientalists, feminists can write about economics, Orientalism, women's literature). [40]*

If Said had perhaps taken Rodinson's remarks to heart - at the beginning of the article, he notably made reference to certain 'hostile and sometimes (...) injurious' comments towards his book - it's necessary to not lose sight of his citing in the same article a number of other intellectuals who all held a similarly anti-Orientalist view, but that did not seem to fall into the same trap as Rodinson. It remains nevertheless the case that Said regretted such a splitting of thought, and ended his article in pronouncing the necessity for interdisciplinary intellectual activity. He concluded with these words: 'I believe that the criticism of Orientalism is only an ephemeral hobby.' [41]

— -

We have not dwelled on the relation of Rodinson to anti-Semitism and Zionism - themes that are too vast, that would merit dedicating an entire article to - and on which Rodinson not only published a number of works, but also was clearly invested politically. The object of the present article was, above all, the concrete discussion of what the appellation 'independent Marxism' meant for Rodinson, and focused principally over his analysis of revolutionary processes in Muslim countries.

The stakes are high in (re)-making Rodinson a theoretical reference for new generations of activists - referring to his political debates over the colonial question, and to his magisterial study, *Islam and Capitalism*. At a time when a militant fervour seems, sometimes, to annihilate all rigorous analyses of problems as they play out, and when the university milieu remains outside the militant arena, the work of Rodinson seems - despite its limits - as one methodological remedy to the false choice dilemma between the perspective of the thinker and the militant.

*Translator's note on quotations and bibliography:* When Nadi quotes English-language works, or French-language works with well-known or easily available English versions, I've deferred to the original and to the translation respectively; their titles are in English.

---

**Selim Nadi**

**Joe Hayns**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

---

## **P.S.**

This piece was originally published in *Revue*

*Période*: <http://revueperiode.net/le-savant-et-le-militant-rationalite-islam-et-decolonisation-chez-maxime-rodinson/>

Selim Nadi is a French PhD Student and a member of the editorial board of the French journals *Période* and *Contretemps*.

Joe Hayns would like to thank Ian Birchall, Selim Nadi, and Maïa Pal for their help and encouragement. All mistakes are his. You can follow him @JoeHayns

Historical Materialism

<http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/thinker-and-militant>

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'En guise de préface', in Maxime Rodinson, *Souvenirs d'un marginal*, Fayard, 2005, p. 16.

[2] Claude Liauzu, *Histoire de l'anticolonialisme en France du XVIe siècle à nos jours*, Armand Collin, Paris, 2007.

[3] In a work he dedicated to Robespierre, Georges Labica explained that the view of Robespierre towards religion constituted, for the Robespierriens, the 'exquisite point of all pains'.

[4] Maxime Rodinson, *De Pythagore à Lénine. Des activistes idéologiques*, Fayard, Paris, 1993, p. 22.

[5] Maxime Rodinson, 'L'Islam et les nouvelles indépendances', *Partisans*, n° 10, May-June 1963, p. 112-113

[6] Maxime Rodinson, *Islam et capitalisme*, Seuil, Paris, 1966, p. 234

[7] See Maxime Rodinson, *Souvenirs d'un marginal*, Fayard, Paris, 2005, pp. 393-398.

[8] Georges Labica, 'Une discussion sur Islam et capitalisme de Maxime Rodinson', *La Pensée*.

[9] Maxime Rodinson, *De Pythagore à Lénine*, op. cit., p. 194.

[10] "I am concerned with a religious founder, a man who, during most of his life at least, was profoundly and sincerely religious, with a keen sense of the direct presence of the divine. It may be objected that I, as an atheist, cannot possibly understand such a man. That may be so; after all, what actually constitutes understanding? However, I am convinced that, provided he takes enough trouble, and totally excludes any contempt, pharisaism or sense of superiority, an atheist can in fact understand a religious outlook [...] certainly as well as an art critic can understand a painter, an adult a child, a man of robust health an invalid (and vice versa) or a scholarly recluse a businessman. Certainly a religious man would understand my subject differently, but better? I am not so sure. [...] Founders of ideologies have given men reasons for living, and personal or social tasks to fulfill. When the ideologies are religious they have declared (and generally believed) that their message came from beyond our world, and that what they themselves represented was something more than merely human. The atheist can only say that this extra-human origin remains unproved. But that gives him no reason for denigrating the message itself; indeed he may even place a higher value on it, as being an admirable effort to surpass the human condition." *Maxime Rodinson, Mohammed*, translated by Anne Carter, Penguin, London, 1971, p. xiii

[11] Missing Footnote

[12] Missing Footnote

[13] Maxime Rodinson, 'Communisme et Tiers Monde : sur un précurseur oublié', in Maxime Rodinson, *Marxisme et monde musulman*, Seuil, Paris, 1972, p. 382.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 383.

[15] Jean Suret-Canale was particularly critical towards the critique Rodinson addressed at the PCF, writing: 'Maxime Rodinson is a former member of the Parti Communiste Français. He accuses it of having been 'Stalinist'; he explains that he participated in certain oppositional groups where he found the same shackling of his freedom, and that he chose finally to be an *homme seul*. I do not put in doubt the passion of Maxime Rodinson for the truth. But is this 'disengagement' a sure guarantee of objectivity? When Maxime Rodinson devoted an article in *Le Monde* to discussions of the Asiatic mode of production, he did not mention the C.E.R.M [Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Marxistes; one of the PCF's intellectual groups], which was the cadre of that research, and presents it as the work of a group of intellectuals in struggle against the direction of their Party, when this research was pursued with his support, is he true to the intentions that he proclaims? Isn't it that, under the pretext of rejecting an ideology, he falls into another, about which his former comrades have a right to be severe? There is an 'anti-Stalinism' fanaticism which is worth no more than the other fanaticisms and which is often the inverted form of that which it pretends to condemn.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 383.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 384.

[18] Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, translated by Brian Pearce, 1966/1977, p. vii, Pelican, London.

Translator's note: Rodinson wrote 'de n'être pas né dans quelque Congo', literally, 'for not being born in some Congo' - perhaps this is more dismissive than Pearce's 'the Congo or somewhere like that'.

[19] Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l'Islam*, La Découverte, Paris, 1993, p. 138.

[20] Gilbert Achcar, 'Foreword', *Marxism and the Muslim World*, Zed Books, London, 2015, p. ix.

[21] Maryam Poya, 'IRAN 1979. Long live the Révolution! Long live Islam?', in Colin Barker (ed.), *Revolutionary Rehearsals*, Haymarket, Chicago, 2002.

[22] Maxime Rodinson, *L'Islam politique et croyance*, Fayard, Paris, 1993, p. 301.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 302.

[24] Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution. Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and Londres, 2005, p. 135.

[25] Maxime Rodinson, *L'Islam politique et croyance*, op. cit., p. 305.

[26] 'If I absolutely had to wear a badge, it would be that of a philosopher - without having, however, all the required philosophical instruction. All things considered, I would prefer that of a sociologist or a general anthropologist, since I have excluded from my studies that which goes beyond the social or human world. I have also some claim to be a qualified historian, since it is the evolutionary, diachronic aspect that has always most interested me. And, what's more, I have done specific historical studies, limited in time'. Maxime Rodinson, *Entre Islam et Occident. Entretiens avec Gérard D. Khourry*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1998, pp. 201-202.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 205.

[28] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, Verso, Londres-New-York, 2010, p. 63.

[29] Maxime Rodinson, 'Préface', in Kazem Radjavi, *La révolution iranienne et les moudjahédines*, op. cit., p. XVI.

[30] Maxime Rodinson, *L'Islam politique et croyance*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

[31] Gilbert Achcar, *Marxisme, orientalisme, cosmopolitisme*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2015, p. 53.

[32] Edward Said, *L'Orientalisme. L'Orient créé par l'Occident*, Seuil, Paris, 2005, p. 291.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

[34] Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l'Islam, suivi de Le seigneur bourguignon et l'esclave sarrasin*, pocket, Paris, 1993, p. 13.

[35] « Le mérite de Said est d'avoir contribué à définir mieux l'idéologie de l'orientalisme européen (en fait, surtout anglo-français) au XIXe et au XXe siècle et son enracinement dans les objectifs politiques et économiques européens d'alors. L'analyse qu'il en donne est intelligente,

sagace, souvent pertinente. Il me paraît s'égarer quelquefois dans l'interprétation qu'il fait de certains textes d'orientalistes, avoir parfois sa perception troublée par sa naturelle over-sensitiveness aux réactions des autres, des Européo-Américains installés. D'où quelques formulations excessives. Mais une large part de ses critiques à l'orientalisme traditionnel sont valides et l'effet de choc de son livre se révélera très utiles s'il pousse les spécialistes à comprendre qu'ils ne sont pas si innocents qu'ils le disent et même qu'ils le croient, à essayer de détecter les idées générales dont inconsciemment ils s'inspirent, à en prendre conscience et à porter sur elles un regard critique. »

[36] 'All science [...] has a class character. This class character do not only affect, as the first sociologist came to see, the material-social conditions of research, but, something which is more radical, the concepts and the theories which are the results [...] The science which exists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is 99% 'bourgeois science': all it's productions are marked with a seal of it's class origin; they express the interest of this class in knowing reality in order to transform it to its advantage' Dominique Lecourt, Lyssenko. *Histoire réelle d'une « science prolétarienne »*, Maspero, Paris, 1976, p. 33.

[37] Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l'Islam, suivi de Le seigneur bourguignon et l'esclave sarrasin*, op. cit., p. 15.

[38] Ibid., p. 111.

[39] 'Entretien avec Edward Said. Propos reueillis par Hassan Arfaoui et Subhi Hadidi', *MARS*, n° 4, hiver 1995, p. 18, cited in in Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*, op. cit., p

[40] Cited in Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism*, Saki, London, p. 53

[41] Edward Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', *Cultural Critique*, n° 1, automne 1985, pp. 89-107.