

Bruno Latour - **Two Lessons from an Old Imam**

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Kindly translated by Timothy Howles

Sometimes artists supply the key to current events before they happen. I'm not referring to the novel of a certain *Michel Houellebecq*, but rather to the film *Timbuktu* (directed by Abderrahmane Sissako). In that film we find a local imam resisting jihadists who have come from outside the country. Is this Islam against Islam? No, what we have here is a very ancient Islam confronted by foreigners who show themselves incapable of understanding the history and values of the country on which they have laid their hands, claiming to liberate it by violence, in an act of exploitation. If all this sounds somewhat familiar, it's because the jihadists are acting towards this venerable city in exactly the same way as the colonizers did in a previous era. Both speak with the indisputable authority of modernizers: 'you must change your life, radically, right now'. These poor residents, ground down first by colonisation, and then once again by jihadists.

But there are two very important differences. When the colonisers wrought destruction it was done in the name of a future, albeit a wholly imaginary one; whereas these contemporary terrorists do so in order to return to a past, albeit likewise a wholly utopian one. And, more notably, the various factions of the modernizers of the previous era were not all in agreement: missionaries, administrators, the military, adventurers and those interested in exploitation wrangled with each other incessantly. The jihadists occupying Timbuktu, on the other hand, have unified the demands of law, power, God and profit as one absolute certitude. For them, judgement and execution are by the same hand: God's, and by extension their own. The attempt of the old imam to differentiate sources of authority fails because the jihadists have managed to telescope them all by means of a single whip, which they now wield without hesitation. Don't speak to these people of pluralism. They are the ones who know, they are the ones who decide, and they are the ones who kill. They are the whole package.

The imam allows us to extend these two lessons to what has recently happened to us. Unlike the murderers themselves, we're not entitled to claim that a 'war of the civilisations' is underway: this is our civilisation; these are our children; they belong to us; they have been captured by our own dreams of

radical transformation, albeit taken to an extreme, dismembered and inverted. We have to face up to the facts: these killers were good French folks. Yes, we've received a wound, but not one that has come from the outside. After all, can it be said that those who marched, with good reason, in protest at the crimes committed by these murderers have never in turn acclaimed the 'necessary sacrifices' that have been imposed upon us all by 'the inevitable march of modernisation', even if this also had to involve violence?

If we are to declare war, then, it must be declared against ourselves. After all, what is the origin of the dream (even if it is a dream that long since turned into a nightmare)? It has always had the same source, a source that has not yet run dry: it comes from certain people who believe they possess a knowledge that is so absolute that they have the right to impose it without having to take into account the necessary brakes of law, of politics, of morality, of culture or of simple good sense. It comes when certain people in the name of the utopia of a paradise on earth assume to themselves the right to impose hell on those who hesitate or don't obey fast enough. We will not be able to fight against these new criminals until we understand that, behind their archaic appearance, they are above all fanatical modernizers.

We might object by saying that we should not compare the ideal of a continually-progressing modernisation with these archaic and bloodthirsty militants, because they act in the name of God, and religion, as the modernizers well know, is finished. Yes, religion is a factor. It's possible that the idea of 'the only God' might act as a catalyst for the telescoping of sources of authority – that would be something for the experts to ponder. And yet, it is not so much the amount of religion that counts, but rather how much *differentiation* a civilisation may sustain. The old imam is much more religious than those he is fighting. Above all, he is much more articulated. He may also see himself as being in the hand of God, but he does not confuse that with his own hand. That's the important difference. Jihad, as he explains to one of the fanatics, is being carried out *on him*, and that gives him no certainty. On the contrary, it makes him afraid.

As Eric Voegelin has shown, modernity begins in earnest when religion loses its uncertainty and becomes the realization on earth of that which should be kept for the beyond. The modernizer is one who is convinced that he can achieve the goals of religion by means of politics. But eventually, as once again Voegelin has shown, religion is cast aside: all that remains is politics – whether

of the left or of the right – claiming for itself the absolute certainty borrowed from a religion that did not possess it.

Why are we so surprised to see the return of the religious in these politicized murders? The reality is that religion had been there all along: the anti-religious modernizers and revolutionaries were religious through and through insofar as they understood the direction of history and the violent contortions with which the recalcitrant and the infidels had to be handled. The old imam of Timbuktu indicates by a nod of his head that God might know, but *he doesn't*; and that he does not wish to risk committing the legal offence, the religious sin or the political error of confusing those two things.

When it comes down to it, his lesson is about how to remove religion from politics, but it's a question, or even an exercise in examining one's conscience, that is addressed to everyone – to revolutionaries and modernizers just as much as to our home-grown jihadists. We must re-differentiate sources of authority, something that will come probably by expecting less from politics. Against nihilism, paradoxically, we must be ready to say 'no'. No, politics cannot create a paradise on earth. No, it's not up to the State to provide a protectionist identity. No, religion's job is not to facilitate certitudes. No, there is no modernization front. No, there is no direction to history. Such disappointments are necessary if we are to give meaning to the word 'civilization' as a fundamental *modus vivendi*. Is this too little? In wanting more, we always end up being worse off.

Something the imam does not show us is just how uninteresting these episodes of violence really are. For as well as sorrow and tears over the dead, we must also add our despair at seeing such actions taking place at precisely the wrong time. For ultimately, while the jihadists threaten us with apocalypse, they hardly seem to notice that another apocalypse is looming, compared to which, just like their predecessors, they have no weapons at all. So if we are to march *en masse*, this ought also to be a march against climate change – something for which this time every single modernizer must be held directly responsible. Is our civilization articulated enough to do that – in the sense modeled to us by the old imam?

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