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Islamic radical political thought and the struggle for a righteous society.

Sayyid Quṭb's *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fī'l-Islām*, (Social Justice in Islam).

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate if and how Sayyid Quṭb's social insights can be considered an example of *radical* political thought: not in an Islamic sense, but as one of those “counter-hegemonic articulations” within Egyptian political debate in the 1940s and 1950s. In other words, I wish to propose a less dichotomous vision of the Egyptian political and intellectual landscape in those years, throwing new light on intersections and overlaps between different currents of thought.

The essay also wants to re-discuss the widespread belief that Quṭb's intellectual production underwent a clear transition in two distinct periods of his life. In fact, Quṭb's political thought is generally described (especially by those who only consider him as the mentor of international jihadism) as initially characterized by a phase of nationalistic commitment and later by his “changeover” to extremist, fanatical and violent Islamism.

To underline how this transition is far more nuanced and gradual, my analysis will focus on his essay *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fī'l-Islām* (1949), its particular editorial history and its enormous resonance among Egyptian intellectuals.

Keywords: Sayyid Quṭb, Egypt, *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fī'l-Islām*, Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic radical thought.

But Islam is extremely eager to achieve respect and honour for people and fill their souls with a sense of pride in the truth and a commitment to justice, and to ensure by this means - as well as by legislation - absolute social justice in which no one misses out.

(S. Quṭb, *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fī'l-Islām*, translated by W.E. Shepard 1996, 1st ed., p. 46)

Introduction

The objective of this article is to investigate whether Sayyid Quṭb's thinking could be considered an example of Egyptian *radical* political thought (Carrè 1984; Khatab 2006). In other words, an example of those “counter-hegemonic articulations” within the lively Egyptian political debate at the end of the

1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, generally analyzed only in a nationalistic and secular context (Calvert 2010; Kepel 1984; Mitchell 1969; Mousalli 1992).

Quṭb's biography and intellectual production have recently been examined from analytical perspectives (De Michelis 2019; Gerges 2018; Mousallam 2005; Šabaseviciute 2018, 2021) that differ from past studies in which Quṭb is generally considered for the works written after his affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood and during his imprisonment in Tura jail. I mean his ponderous Quranic commentary *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* (In the shadow of the Qur'an, 1952, 1st vol.), and overall his short but explosive *Ma'ālim fi'l-ṭarīq* (Milestones, 1964), considered his political testament, which is still a reference text for the most radical Muslims, including the so-called jihadists.¹

I have chosen to refer to one of his previous works, *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fi'l-Islām* (Social Justice in Islam, 1949, 1st ed.) as a vital tool for better understanding his political and social thinking, a work that had enormous resonance among Egyptian intellectuals, not just those linked to the Muslim Brotherhood (Mitchell 1969; Shepard 1996).

It is a very strong denunciation of economic and social inequalities in Egypt and represents Quṭb's first analytical elaboration of social issues. He proposes his Islamic vision aimed at achieving a system based on social justice characterized by absolute freedom of conscience; complete equality of human beings, and firm social solidarity, as we will see later.

Al-'adāla – both for the period in which was written and published and for the substantial changes to the text in the following editions – can be read an excellent example of the author's shift to Islamic ideology, but at the same time as an example of Quṭb's consistency with his previous social and political reflections.

In this perspective we can use the term *radical* not only to refer to Quṭb's religious radicalization, but more specifically to his intellectual attitude towards strong political and social criticism.

He was a radical, uncompromising, outspoken thinker and writer, *before and after* his affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood in 1953. This is his main feature in all his writings, from the first novels and essays² to his journalistic articles up to his already mentioned and best known Islamic works, written during his imprisonment in Cairo (1954-1966).

The focus on *Al-'adāla* thus helps us to gain a better understanding of Quṭb's position within the Egyptian political debate in those years, with the aim of rethinking the traditional narrative of a clear separation between secular and Islamic thought.

¹ On *Ma'ālim fi'l-ṭarīq* see in Italian, Manduchi 1998.

² Before *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fi'l-Islām* Quṭb wrote: *Muhimmat al-šā'ir fi'l-ḥayāt* (The poet's responsibility in life), 1933; *Al-šātī' al-mağhl* (The ignored beach), 1933; *Naqd kitāb "mustaqbal al-aqāfa fi miṣr"* (Book criticism [by Taha Husayn] The Future of Culture in Egypt), 1939; *Al-taswīr al-fanni fi'l-qur'ān* (Artistic images in the Quran), 1945 (*Al-aṭyāf al-arba'a* (Four Ghosts), 1945; *Tifl min al-qary'a* (A child from the village), 1946; *Al-madīna al-maṣḥrā* (The enchanted city), 1946; *Kutub wa šakhsīyyāt* (Books and Personalities), 1946; *Ashwāk* (Thorns), 1947; *Maṣābid al-qiyāma fi'l-qur'ān* (Scenes from the Day of Resurrection in the Quran), 1947; *Al-naqd al-adabī: uslubu wa manābiğuhu* (Literary criticism: its foundations and methods), 1948.

The article is structured in three main parts: a short description of the political and social conditions in Egypt at the time and the important role of the Muslim Brotherhood therein; a focus on *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fi'l-Islām* and its complex but very significant editorial events in the following years; thirdly, some final remarks about how to read Qutb's *Al-'adāla* as an example of the intersections and overlaps between different currents of thought in Egyptian political debate in that period.

A methodological remark: I have decided to use William Shepard's (1996, 1st ed.) English translation of Qutb's *Al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fi'l-Islām*, first because it is considered the most complete and correct English translation of this work, a point of reference also for the most recent studies; but above all because Shepard's extremely careful comparative work between the various editions of *'Adala's* Arabic editions, as we will see later, served as an important starting point for my working hypothesis.

1. Between Tradition and Modernity

As is well known, Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966)³ was the Brotherhood's most famous *maitre à penser* and *ṣāhid* and certainly the most famous theorist of the movement. Indeed, according to many scholars he is one of the most influential intellectuals in postcolonial Arab-Islamic world (Shepard 1996; Toth 2013). First, let me underline that Quṭb is a child of his time, a child of the extraordinary and difficult times Egypt was going through.

The period in which the young Quṭb lived was politically speaking the end of one era and the beginning of another, not only for Egypt in particular, but more generally for the Arab countries, living through the long dramatic aftermath of World War I. An era that saw the political *reshaping* of the whole Near-Eastern area and – together with the entire Muslim world – the deep religious and cultural shock that followed the abolition of the Caliphate, in the hands of Muṣṭafā Kemāl Atatürk in 1924. The political and social tensions that emerged in Egypt after the end of the Second World War, caused by a general worsening of unemployment and economic conditions, determined new political dynamics and the spread of new ideologies. It was a period in which Egypt was undergoing great transformations, not only in the political and social arenas, but even in the cultural context. In a short while, the old world would die and a new historical phase would take place. As Musallam notes:

The period from 1919 to 1952 is the formative stage of Sayyid Quṭb's life and thought and the time when he emerged as an independent Islamic ideologue. It is a period of transition from tradition to modernity.

It is a colorful period full of vitality and contradictions. It is also the formative stage for contemporary

³ In addition to Toth 2013 see, among the others, the biographies by Haddad 1983; al-Khalidi 1991; Yunus 1995; Musallam 2005; Calvert 2010; al-Namnam 2014. In Italian, see Manduchi 2009. Quṭb has been the subject of other very recent studies. See Musallam 2005; Khatab 2006; Salama and Friedman 2012; Toth 2013; Tacchini 2014; Picchi 2016; Gerges 2018; Demichelis 2019; Šabaseviciute 2019; 2021, and many others.

thought, literature, theatre, and cinema, among other things, in modern Egypt. The Westernization process which had begun early in the nineteenth century was by now fully evident in all aspects of life in Egypt." (Musallam 2005: 5)

In particular, the period of the first publication of *Al-'adala al-iğtimā'yya fi'l-Islām* (1949), on the eve of the so-called Free Officers Revolution, was one of the most troubled periods in contemporary Egypt from a social and political point of view.

Egypt was halfway between tradition and modernity: the birth of nationalistic parties and workers' movements, of women's emancipation groups, as well as active students' associations, the development of an urban and modern *intelligentsia* and the spread of new media, namely press and radio, are simultaneously the cause and consequence of those great social and cultural changes.

From an economic point of view, living conditions for people in Egypt were dramatic at the time, mainly in the period between the end of the Great War and WWII. Egypt was a rural country, whose main export product was cotton. The moderate industrial development was subject to foreign capital (mostly British), which substantially continued to control the economic life of the country, from the times of the occupation (1882), under the Protectorate (1914) and even after the formal but not substantial independence granted by Great Britain (1922)⁴. A situation that gradually began to change only after the Free Officers' coup in 1952.

The tragic conditions of millions of *fallahin* and a sizeable urban proletariat were made even worse by massive urbanization, mainly during and after World War II: between 1939 and 1947 Cairo's population increased by more than 60% (Musallam 1993: 52).

All this led to outbursts of increasing violence, a complete breakdown in law and order, and huge protests against the inefficiency and corruption of the monarchic Government, King Fuad I and then King Faruq, the hated British presence and their interference in the political and economic field, even after the end of the British Protectorate in 1922.

The widespread discontent among the Egyptian population caused by the growing gap between rich and poor was also increased by the development of the bitter awareness in the 1930s that the representatives of the Nationalistic parties – namely the Wafd and most of the other parties in Parliament – often belonged to the privileged, rich, exploiting classes. Thus, midway through the 1930s, a part of the poor and often more religious oriented Egyptians distanced themselves from the traditional parties and directed themselves towards Islam, in opposition to every form of Westernization. This reaction became much stronger, more visible, and often violent, claiming respect for religious and cultural identity before or together with socio-economic rights.

⁴ In 1950, about twelve thousand landowners (less than 1% of the total) possessed the same amount of land as two and a half million small landholders. And even among these big landowners, a very small élite of about two hundred people, mostly linked to the royal family, owned the biggest slice of the pie (See among others, Abdelmalek 1967; Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot 1978).

So, among the new forms of mobilization sparked by the great social and economic changes between the “revolution” of 1919⁵ and the 1952 Free Officers coup d’état (the so called liberal-monarchical period), Hasan al-Bannā’s Muslim Brotherhood (*Ġamā’at al-ihwān al-muslimin*) played a very important role, as one of the mass movements in the 1930s. Their importance and their role in that period cannot be underestimated if we want to give a complete and not partial view of nationalistic, radical political debate in Egypt.

In fact, the extraordinary success of the movement was due to its charitable and welfare activities in the poorest neighborhoods, in the peripheral mosques, in free medical clinics, in helping poor university students, in boy scout teams etc. All this thanks to its very efficient organization: the Muslim Brotherhood was structured like a modern party and hierarchically well organized under the direction of the Supreme Leader, with a *šūrā* (advisory council), a secretariat, and various sections and committees that dealt with specific sectors, like propaganda or schools, the treasury, or women, and so on.

Al-Bannā and the Brotherhood were strongly convinced that a real Islamization of the society could only be achieved by this social work, emerging from below, in the strong belief that hearts and minds would be really Islamized only in this way, and that Islam would govern the entire society fairly, starting from each single home, family, office, school. For this to happen, a continuous and large-scale work of *da’wa* (propaganda) was necessary in the field of information and education and the amount of work that the fervent Muslim Brothers (and Sisters) accomplished in a few decades was formidable.⁶

It is undeniable that the Brothers have become an important reality in the Egyptian political landscape, participating in the political debate alongside the other nationalists to the point that it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear line between the political and social collocation of Leftist militants’ writings and those of Brotherhood’s theorists, except for the latter’s appeal to Islam as a solution to all Egypt’s ills.

The issues were very similar: condemnation of the pro-British monarchy; denunciation of colonial policies; references to international issues and solidarity with Arab countries, and overall complaints about the socioeconomic conditions in which the Egyptians were forced to live.

To conclude, it is not so difficult to understand why claims of recovering an Arab-Islamic identity were so strong in a context in which social-economic conditions were so dramatic, and tradition and modernity were trying to find ways to coexist. A strong conservative Islamic movement spread

⁵ The so-called Egyptian Revolution of 1919 broke out after the arrest and exile to Malta of Sa’ad Zaghlūl and other members of the Wafd party. The uprisings forced Great Britain to issue a unilateral (and rather bogus) declaration of Egyptian independence on 28th February 1922.

⁶ Propaganda was implemented through the press: a few months after the Supreme Leader’s Letter, published in Cairo in December 1932-January 1933 (which can be considered the first document printed by the Society), the first newspaper was published (*Mağalla al-ihwān al-muslimin*, Magazine of the Muslim Brotherhood, subtitled “The voice of the message of truth, strength and freedom”), a weekly magazine that was published for four years, to then be followed in 1938, by another political weekly, *Al-nadīr* (The Warner). And, moreover, Al-Bannā resumed the historical magazine of the Salafiyya movement founded by Rashīd Ridā, *Al-manār*, from 1939 to 1941, for a total of seven numbers, until the definitive closure at the behest of the Egyptian government.

alongside secularized ideologies like Nationalism or Pan-Arabism, as well as Left movements linked to Socialism and Communism. To mention again Musallam:

The resurgence of Islamic sentiments in the late 1920s, when examined within the larger intellectual trends of the period, can be seen as an integral part of a more active and general concern to return to the cultural roots of Egyptian society and to reject the blind mimicry of Western civilization. (Musallam 2005: 7)

In this regard, the connection between Qutb's *Al-'adala* and the Brotherhood's mission is extremely clear, but at the same time the analysis of this writing needs to be narrated in a broader context.

If Qutb certainly continued the path inaugurated by Ḥasan al-Bannā's message (which however was destined to never become a completed and published work but rather a collection of speeches and letters), he was able to elaborate a new revolutionary political Islamic thought that had extraordinary success in inflaming the souls of millions of Egyptians and other Arabs.

Thus, if he can certainly be considered an excellent example of a "counter-hegemonic" Islamic thinker, some points must be highlighted to better place his figure in the intellectual panorama of the time.

2. Sayyid Qutb and social justice

Sayyid Qutb was certainly a keen observer of social and economic injustices in Egypt which he had openly denounced even in his first works, in a context of crises of the liberal nationalistic order in the period between the two World Wars and then after the WWII.

Al-'adala al-iğtimā'yya fi'l-Islām, written and published for the first time in 1949, after the end of the WWII and the first-Arab-Israeli War, provides interesting food for thought and analysis, for at least three reasons.

Firstly, because it is Qutb's first specific analytical elaboration of social justice, in which he focused on and thoroughly explored this topic starting from a global re-thinking of the Egyptian social-economic situation. His idea of social justice is obviously *religion-based*, but not exclusively. In fact, if Qutb continuously refers to a social justice that can be achieved by applying the Islamic will of God, at the same time he uses more general values and principles, taken from a liberal, even socialist vision of social injustices. He states that Capitalism leads to the unhappiness of mankind, because of the dramatic divisions and the sense of alienation involved in the economic and social system it advocates. Communism and other Left ideologies that claim to fight Capitalistic order are based on materialistic principles that do not consider human beings in their entirety. To overcome the Capitalistic system one must find the right instruments to regulate the relationship between rulers and ruled, rich and poor, employers and workers, and only the Islamic system (*nizām*) can reach this goal.

The wide scope of the Islamic view of life and the fact that it transcends purely economic values to include the other values on which life is based enable it to create balance and equity in society and to realize justice in all areas of human life. They save it from the narrow interpretation of justice that one finds in communism. Justice in the communist view is an equality of wages that prevents economic disparity, even though it has been thwarted in practical application and has not been able to achieve arbitrary and mechanical equality. Justice in the Islamic view is a human equality in which all values are kept in balance, including the purely economic ones. More precisely, it is equality of opportunity and then allowing free play to people's natural talents within limits that do not conflict with the highest goals of life. (Quṭb's *ʿAdāla*, translated by Shepard 1996: 36)

Secondly, *Al-ʿadāla al-iḡtimāʿiyya fi'l-Islām* is interesting because it is generally considered a turning point, marking Quṭb's *shift* from his “secularized” period to his “Islamic” affiliation (Carrè 1984; Khatab 2006; Mitchell 1969).

Quṭb wrote *Al-ʿadāla* and gave the draft to his brother Muḥammad to submit for publication, just before his departure from Alexandria to New York in November 1948 (Toth 2013: 58; but note that Musallam 1993: 61 gives his departure as September 1948).⁷

According to the most widespread narrative, soon after his return from the USA (in August 1950), he gradually turned his secular political vision – previously near to Arab Nationalism and Third Worldism – into an Islamic outlook and militancy. In my opinion, this narrative needs to be partially revised because, in those circumstances, Quṭb's thought changed far less than it seems.

It is a matter of fact that, when Quṭb authored *Social Justice in Islam* he was not yet a Muslim Brother but rather a known writer and poet, a literary critic, an employee of the Ministry of Education, a rigid moralist, and a radical anti-Western and anti-establishment intellectual; last but not least, he was a passionate nationalist, who had already left the Wafd party (and the Saʿadi party too), accusing them of being too moderate and of compromising with the monarchy and British rule.

There is no real gap between two different Quṭbs as the two periods of his life and literary production are not so distinct: he never denied his belonging to Islam in the first period of his editorial production, just as he never distanced himself from social issues and political denunciation after 1950.

Shepard had already underlined that *Al-ʿadāla* is sound evidence of this:

During his secular period, Islam was important to Sayyid Quṭb, as to many nationalists, as part of his cultural heritage, and while his decision to write *Social Justice* was probably closely connected with his

⁷ See his reportage *Amrika allatī raʾaytu*, published in 1951 after his return from his trip to the United States. See the Italian commented translation by Tacchini 2015.

decision to turn away from this secular approach, considerable traces of it still remain in the earlier editions (Shepard 1996: XXIX).

Some recent and newsworthy essays follow this perspective, contesting the idea of a real change in Quṭb, underlining that it is not correct to isolate him from the literary and intellectual context in which, like most of his contemporaries, he used to move between nationalism and Islamic political thought (Gerges 2018: 175) “to new politicized conception of intellectual practises” (Šabaseviciute 2018: 86).

Thirdly, I have chosen to examine *Social Justice* as it had a significant impact on Arab cultural and political debate, especially among the youth in Egypt, and not only among Islamic circles, because the book had enjoyed great editorial success since 1949.⁸ The book sparked a public debate, involving a large number of Arab intellectuals. It was then quickly translated into numerous languages of the Muslim World (Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malay etc.) and also into Western languages.

This is not surprising seeing that in that period the topic of “social justice” was an extremely sensitive matter throughout the developing World and not only in Egypt, where living conditions, as already mentioned, were terrible for most of the population; the corruption and weakness of the monarchy had definitely been exposed and the British presence was increasingly unbearable. Social unrest, demonstrations and strikes heralded the Free Officers’ *coup d'état* of 1952.

Quṭb’s political and social approach in *Al-‘adāla* was really appreciated by both individual intellectuals and Islamic groups in much of the Arab world, along with his program for moral and political reform claiming that “the governed were clearly correct in opposing, perhaps even overthrowing, a state that ruled without social justice” (Toth 2013: 59).

The book appeared in six editions during its author’s life and its complicated and interesting history is extremely useful for understanding how the separation between the two ideological contexts – nationalism / socialism, on the one hand, and Islamic thought, on the other – is much more nuanced than it seems.

Incidentally, the sales success of *Al-‘adāla* shows us how Quṭb’s writings were also undoubtedly a commercial and editorial business (Shepard 1996; Toth 2003) since every new edition increasingly captured the curiosity of readers, especially after the author’s imprisonment (1954) and hanging (1966).

3. An increasingly Islamic social justice

A brief overview of the various editions of this book is necessary to underline the numerous links between the most relevant points of this analysis: the moment when Quṭb wrote this essay, which

⁸ Even though the book was, as we will see, initially confiscated and removed from store bookshelves, accused of being dedicated to the Muslim Brotherhood because of an initial dedication to "Islamic Youth", dated Rajab 1373. After Quṭb amended the dedication, the book was soon put back on sale (1950) and enjoyed a wide and rapid circulation (later, the initial dedication was actually replaced).

coincided with the time he joined Muslim Brotherhood after his trip to the United States (1949-1951) and the editorial process related to the transformations of the text in the following years.

Social Justice appeared in six editions during Qutb's life and his imprisonment. After the first two releases (April 1949 and soon after in 1950), published *before* his affiliation to the Brotherhood, the third edition was published in 1953, edited by a Muslim Brotherhood publishing house (*Šarika al-tabā'ūt wa'l-šabāfa li'l-Iḥwān al-muslimin*); the fourth in 1954, just before the final break between the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasser's government. The fifth edition came out in 1958, when Qutb had already been in prison for a long time and after the massacre at the Liman Tura jail in June 1957, in which 21 Brothers were killed during an uprising.⁹

The sixth and last edition, the most "Islamized", was printed in 1964 (the same year as *Ma'alim fi'l ṭarīq*) and then reprinted several times from 1972 by the *Dār al-šurūq* publishing house. Not surprisingly, it is the most widespread and read edition until now.

As Shepard's translation and deep analysis explain most accurately¹⁰, as we move from one edition to another, *Al-'adāla* was gradually transformed from an essay in which the socio-political analysis greatly prevails over the Islamic connotation into Qutb's first "Islamic" writing, in which his social claim against inequalities and injustices was outclassed by the emphasis given to Islam as the only solution for oppression and exploitation. This solution is clearly a return to the Qur'ān and *šarī'a* principles, namely Islamic Law.¹¹

These changes (in subsequent editions) undoubtedly reflect a shift from the enthusiasm for socialism that was prevalent in many circles in the 1940s and 1950s to a disillusionment with the state socialist policies later introduced by Abdel Nasser, probably out of a sense of their economic failure as well as for the political reason that they make things hard for the opposition and the theological reason that they tend to make the state or the ruler into a God. (Shepard 1996: XXXVIII)

The best proof of this change in Qutb's perspective is the lexicon used in the different editions: to give some examples, the word *ša'ab* (people) used in the first editions with a secular and socialist meaning, is regularly replaced by the term *umma* (Islamic community); or, likewise, words such as *sultān*, *ḥākim* and *walī* or *amr* (Arab terms for ruler, governor), are replaced in the following editions with a more generic

⁹ The first and second editions (1949 and 1950) were published by *Maktabāt Miṣr*; the third (n.d. but probably 1953), by *Šarika al-tabā'ūt wa'l-šabāfa li'l-Iḥwān al-muslimin*; the editor of the fourth release (1954) is unknown; the fifth (1958) edited by *Dār Iḥyā' al-kutub al-'arabiyya*; and the sixth (1964) by *Maṭba'at 'Isa al-Babi al-Halabi* (reprint 1967).

¹⁰ Shepard 1996. Shepard's long introduction to his English translation of *'Adāla* last edition (but with detailed references to the main changes in the text of the previous editions) gives an extremely accurate explanation of the development of Qutb's writing. Shepard was not the first to translate this volume into English: John B. Hardie translated the first edition in 1953 for the American Council of Learned Societies; in 1970 the book had a new edition, for Octagon Book, New York; then, a third edition in 2000, extensively revised by Hamid Algar, by Islamic Publications International. For a French translation, see: *La justice sociale en Islam* (tr. par l'arabe par Diah Saba Jazzar), Beyrouth, al Biruni ed. 2003.

¹¹ However, it is important to underline that it is a very different Islam from that of the '*ulama*' linked to the Egyptian government, which he considered as false religious guides. "In *al-'Adalah al-ijtima'iyya fi'l islam* the criticism of the Westernization of Egyptian society is put in parallel with that of the religious '*Ulema* and their privileges to preserve a power-dynamic of control over society". (Demichelis 2019: 59).

imām, a proper Islamic guide; finally, noteworthy is the increasing use of the term *ġahilī* or *ġāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic ignorance), so important in his next writings.¹²

However, even with these lexical differences, the original strong political engagement never changes; in other words, Quṭb really continued to write and rewrite about the same topic: he denounces the injustices, the never-ending suffering, the illusions of the Egyptian people.

Neither does his goal change; no doubt he proposes a new way of *re-thinking* Egyptian society and *preparing a political revolution*. Quṭb's strong underlying conviction is that no ideology borrowed from the outside will be able to obtain better results than the Koranic message in its integrity that safeguards the link between the spiritual and material needs of a person, between the individual and society, the rulers and the ruled.

If we consider Quṭb's writings in a diachronic perspective, we see that *Al-'adala* is rather coherent, following a thematic continuity with his previous and subsequent editorial production. In fact, it represents the synthesis of his previous journalistic activity: Quṭb had already written dozens of articles and editorials on social and political issues regarding poverty, tyranny, corruption, the need for a land reform, marginalization, and the extreme poverty of a vast part of the Egyptian countryside.

It is important to remember that at the end of 1940s he was also the editor of a new, thirty-six- page, illustrated weekly journal, *al-Fikr al-ġadīd* (*The New Thought*, January-April 1948), focused on political, economic, and social issues and specifically addressed to workers and students. The journal already aimed at presenting an Islamic alternative to the Egyptian political, economic, social, and cultural crisis.¹³ Its main purpose was clearly to avoid the spread of Communist ideology among Egyptians, in open competition (even in the title) with the Leftist journal *al-Faġr al-ġadīd* (*The New Dawn*) the journal of the Egyptian Communist Party since 1945.¹⁴

The leading idea was to persuade Egyptians that Islamic values, teachings, and prescriptions were superior and more suitable for them than Western ideologies (mainly Communism), because Islamic justice is addressed to the human being as a whole, and therefore not only to their material needs, but also to their spiritual growth. So, differently from the concept of justice in Communist ideology, Islamic social justice is “essentially an all-embracing justice”, which takes account of the human being's

¹² Quṭb's later writings were undoubtedly influenced not only by his living conditions in jail but also by the writings of the Indo-Pakistani Abul 'Alā Mawḍūdī, available in Arabic in the 1950s. Of some 1,063 paragraphs in the last edition, only 443 are identical to the first edition. The most extensive and significant changes take place between the fifth and the last editions (Shepard 1996). Obviously, the latest edition is the best known and utilized by those radical Islamic militants called “Qutbists”. These extremist groups have certainly drawn inspiration from Quṭbian thinking, but at the same time they have given it an extremely radical and restrictive interpretation, which does not do justice to Sayyid Quṭb's thought (Picchi 2016: 115-6). Finally, the doubt that editorial changes have also been made by the various publishers is not entirely unfounded, even though there is no evidence.

¹³ The Muslim Brotherhood tried to get Quṭb to officially transform *al-Fikr al-ġadīd* into the Association's journal, but he always refused and publicly claimed that the journal was independent from any party or group; this led to their decision to boycott the journal (Musallam 1993: 58-60; 2005: 94-96). Musallam (1993:59) quotes a direct note by J. Heyworth-Dunne (1950: 97 n. 63).

¹⁴ The journal was launched in 1945 by a group of Marxists (chief editor Ahmad Rushdī Sālih) and dedicated great attention to social issues but also to culture and folklore. *al-Faġr al-ġadīd* promoted a very tough campaign against Arab bourgeois intellectuals, subservient to Capitalism and far from the needs of the people.

body and soul and not merely their material and economic needs (Musallam 2005: 100). It is the same message that we find in *Al-'adāla*.

Quṭb's journal *al-Fikr al-ġadīd* was closed by the Government after only a few issues¹⁵ (Musallam 1993: 58), and his personal position became very difficult, because of his open denunciation of government corruption, foreign domination, imperialism, and tyranny. This is why he was sent on a "study mission" to the USA, from 1949 to 1950, officially to observe the American educational system, but actually to avoid a likely prison sentence.¹⁶

After this long trip, from 1951 onwards he also collaborated with some Muslim Brotherhood periodicals, such as *al-Risāla* (*The Letter*), *al-Da'wa* (*The Propaganda*) and *al-Liwā' al-ġadīd* (*The New Flag*) and then became editor-in-chief of *al-Iḥwān al-Muslimūn* (*The Muslim Brotherhood*), the official journal of the association, until its ban in 1954.

We can thus conclude that there is clearly a strong link between the 1964 *Al-'adāla al-iġtimā'yyia fi'l-Islām* and Quṭb's previous publishing and journalistic activity, and the same continuity is evident with Quṭb's subsequent Islamic writings, not only with *Ma'raka al-islām wa'l-ra'smaliyya* (*The Battle between Islam and Capitalism*, 1951) which focused on very similar topics and was published soon afterwards (Picchi 2016), but also with all his other publications, including the aforementioned *Ma'ālim fi'l-ṭarīq*.¹⁷

To return to the topic of contents in the *Al-'adāla* text, the structure of the volume was the same in the different editions, except for an additional last chapter in edition, written after his ten years of imprisonment (1954-64).

Islam is of course very present in all the chapters of the book¹⁸, with more than two hundred Qur'ān quotations. An Islam used as a guide for Muslims to implement the "Islamic revolution" against an un-Islamic Egyptian society. An Islam very far from governmental '*ulamā*' and official religious centers, being a political message addressed to the poorest and claiming to struggle against all kinds of "power of man over man".

The entire volume (just like the entire thought of the author, we can say) is based on the idea that:

Islam is a stable, comprehensive (relates not only to government but also to belief, ethics, knowledge and art), balanced (between spiritual and practical needs) and integrated religious and social system

¹⁵ Eleven or twelve, according to Musallam 2005: 94; or six, according to Algar 2000.

¹⁶ The Prime Minister Mahmūd Fahmī al-Nuqrāshī Pascià (later assassinated by a Muslim Brother in December 1948), former associate of Quṭb in the Wafd and Sa'dist parties, convinced King Fārūq to send Quṭb to the USA on an official mission to study English and American curricula.

¹⁷ It should be remembered that in the last edition of *Social Justice* – as happens in all Quṭb's works – there are many direct references to his other works, and sometimes entire pages are taken from other volumes. His writing style is, for an unaccustomed reader, redundant and repetitive, full of the typical assonances of the Arabic language.

¹⁸ The chapters' titles are: 1. Religion and Society in Christianity and Islam; 2. The Nature of Social Justice in Islam; 3. The Foundations of Social Justice in Islam; 4. The means of Social Justice in Islam; 5. Government in Islam; 6. Management of Wealth in Islam; 7. The Historical Reality of Islam; 8. The present and Future of Islam; and finally: 9. At the Crossroads (as already said, the last chapter is only present in the last edition).

(*nizām/manḥağ kāmil*), distinct and independent from other ideologies (in particular capitalism and socialism), from which the Islamic “conception”, *tasammur*, is independent. (Shepard 1996: XXXIV)

The Islamic message is simple and clear, mainly because it is a fixed and “reified” Islam. Quṭb is, in the end, “a scripturalist who believed that classic texts are fixed truths with fixed meanings” (Akhavi 1997: 380).

Here we can only summarise the main points of Quṭb’s theoretical elaboration in *Al-‘adāla*:

Quṭb opens *Social Justice* stressing that Arab and Muslim peoples do not need any external solution to solve their problems, as Islam is a complete system, with a heritage of values, laws and theories absolutely suitable to setting Muslims’ lives on the right path, even in contemporary societies, thus expressing “a clear anti-hegemonic feeling against the cultural influences of the Western world in Egyptian and Arab society” (Demichelis 2019: 59-60).

Quṭb’s Islam doesn’t need to be replaced or integrated by intellectual theories and political ideologies coming from outside because it is a *wāqī‘i*, actual (realistic) and *‘amali*, (practical) system¹⁹.

People look and see a social situation which is unsatisfactory and social conditions which do not bring about justice. Then they turn their eyes to Europe, America, Russia, China, Yugoslavia, and they import from them solutions to their problems just as they import from them their material needs. (Quṭb’s *‘Adāla* translated by Shepard 1996: 1)

A social system based on justice is possible simply by following the Islamic message and it is ensured by three Islamic tenets:

These foundations upon which Islam builds social justice are: 1. Absolute liberation of the inward soul (*al-taḥarrur al-wiğḍānī*); 2. Complete human equality (*al-masāwat al-insāniyya*); 3. Firm social solidarity (*al-takaṭṭul al-iğtimā’i al-waṭiḳ*). (Quṭb’s *‘Adāla* translated by Shepard 1996: 40)

These principles are very similar to the ones in *Ma‘ālim fi’l-ṭariq* (but also, incidentally, to the French Revolution’s *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité...*).

For Quṭb, the first one, *al-taḥarrur al-wiğḍānī*, the “liberation of the inward soul”, means “freedom of conscience”, which is only possible if people are free from concerns about material necessities. Thanks

¹⁹ In an interesting passage, Quṭb states that there is an underlying difference between Christianity and Islam in the separation between spiritual and temporal (that derives from the different contexts: Roman Empire *versus* Bedouin society). And starting from this (Christianity’s shortcomings, the history of its struggles against the Empire, the repression of freedom of thought, etc.), he states that the Church gradually becomes an enemy of workers. That is why Communism struggles against (Christian) religion. Moreover, if the Christian Clergy derives their investiture from God, on the contrary, in Islam *Imams* are legitimized by the community and this leads to a complete and total relationship between the Muslim and God.

to Islamic institutions like *ṣakāt* and *ṣadāqa*, people are freed from servitude (*‘ubūdiyya*) to anyone but God.

Freedom, in Quṭb’s opinion, does not only mean economic security or political liberty or spiritual freedom: it means *all* these aspects, as Islam teaches.

After obtaining freedom of consciousness, people must achieve *al-masāwat al-insāniyya*, that means “equality” among human beings, a situation in which each person is equal to another, without racial, ethnic, national, class or gender differences, as happened in the first Islamic community. Only Islam provides this possibility because, even if it does not eradicate class differences, it aims to reduce the extremes: leaders and slaves, rich and poor, white and black, men and women, are all the same in God’s view. It is not just a question of economic equality: even if topics such as wealth redistribution and the nationalization of public utilities are frequently present in *al-‘Adāla* (mainly in the first two editions), it is continuously stressed that social justice is not a merely economic concept.

Before anything else, it is a human justice which includes all aspects of human life and its components, and not merely a justice limited to economics. Thus, it deals with all the phenomena of life and aspects of its activity, just as it deals with feelings and behavior and with conscience and emotions. The values that this justice deals with are not just economic ones or more generally material ones, but they are these mixed together with mental and spiritual values. (Quṭb’s *‘Adāla* translated by Shepard 1996: 33)

As for the third tenet, *al-takaṭful al-iğtimā‘i al-waṭi‘q*, solidarity and mutual responsibility, Islam sets the principle of individual responsibility over that of individual freedom (Shepard 1996: 80).

Every individual is obligated to watch out for the interests of the community as if he were appointed to be its guardian, for life is a vast ship and its passengers are all responsible for its safety and no one may make a hole in his section of it in the name of individual freedom. (Quṭb’s *‘Adāla* translated by Shepard 1996: 75).

Quṭb lists five sets of mutual responsibilities (to oneself; to family; to society; to other communities; between generations).

According to him, a social or political revolution cannot be achieved without first having fully understood the deep meaning of the Islamic profession of faith (*ṣabāda*), which is a declaration against any human institution or political leader or ideology that takes the place of God’s power (*hākimiyya*). This is the only way that corrupt and unjust power, man’s power over man, can be overthrown (Picchi 2016: 67).

So, in Quṭb's analytical perspective, oppressed people must come back to Islam to conquest freedom, dignity, social rights. If necessary, they must do so not only by means of pacific propaganda, *da'wa*, but explicitly by personal engagement, a tough struggle (*a ḡibād*).²⁰

The Islamic political system to which Quṭb's revolution must lead is characterized by justice of the ruler, obedience of the ruled, and consultation (*shūra*) between them. Property will belong to the community and personal property is subject to conditions and limitations. A redistributive justice can be achieved by the correct use of *zakāt* and *sadaqa* and the two legal Islamic principles of *al-maṣāliḥ al-mursala* (public interest) and *sadd al-dhara'i'* (blocking of means) in case of illegitimate ends.

At the end of the book, he comes back to the huge difference between Islam on the one hand and Capitalism and Communism on the other, "both philosophies depending on the preponderance of a materialistic doctrine of life." (Quṭb's *Adāla* translated by Shepard 1996: 77)

4. Final remarks

To conclude, we can make three brief considerations which may be useful to summarize what was said above but also to open further analytical paths.

Let's start from the very concept of "social justice", because it is precisely in focusing on this that we can highlight the difficulty of clearly distinguishing the two ideological perspectives, the secular and the Islamic one, which we talked about at the beginning.

In fact, despite what Quṭb himself continuously says, it is impossible to avoid stressing that his concept of social justice is neither Qur'ānic nor traditional in Islam but largely borrowed from the contemporary Brotherhood experience, from the *Nahḍa* tradition and from Western political and philosophical thought. This is not surprising because the nationalistic, social, and political narrative in 1940s Egypt was really influenced by Western thought, from Aristotelian notions to Socialist ideology. Even the Arabic *Al-'adāla al-iḡtimā'yya fi'l-Islām* is a neologism, very far from Islamic traditions (in Qur'ān or Sunna the term *'adāla* has a very different meaning) (Akhavi 1997: 383-384).

It is important to stress again that the matter of social justice was at the core of the political debate in Egypt at the time, both secular and Islamic: in this respect, it is worth noting that Quṭb probably wrote *Social Justice* in response to Ṭaḥa Ḥusayn, who had just authored two important works focused on inequality and social justice in Egypt: *Mir'at al-ḍamīr al-ḥadīth* (Mirror of the New Consciousness) and *al-Mu'addabūn fi'l-ard* (The Tormented of the Earth, banned in Egypt), both published in 1949, in which a secular liberal and perhaps socialist ideological approach predominated.

²⁰ When he wrote *Social Justice* for the first time, Quṭb was thinking of *da'wa*, religious education and propaganda, to bring about a new just Islamic society. Only many years after, and mainly in jail, he conceived a *ḡibād* theory to be implemented by a vanguard of militants (*ta'li'a*).

Social justice was an important topic also within the Brotherhood's debate, first thanks to Ḥasan al-Bannā', but also thanks to Muḥammad al-Ghazālī²¹ (the first Brother to use the term) and 'Abd al-Qādir 'Awdā,²² who published their works in the same years (Carré - Michaud 1983: 233)

Thus, in this politicized cultural context, Quṭb's *Social Justice* is one of "the earliest as well as the most influential of a cluster of works that have been devoted to the same subject. Sayyid Quṭb can thus be seen to have articulated for the first time a major and widely felt concern of the Muslim world" (Algar 2000: 12).²³

... reformers, following the opening provided by Muhammad 'Abduh's argument that reason could constitute a basis for judgement in Islamic law, sought to work out an Islamic concept of social justice. To do so, they addressed elements of social democratic theory, with its roots in the Enlightenment, Locke, Hobbes, Roman law, and the Greeks. The seeds of the concept of social justice are already to be found in the writings of Hasan al-Banna, founder of Muslim Brotherhood (Akhavi 1997: 386)

A second final remark is that, starting right from his *Social Justice* we can highlight Quṭb's position in the context of Islamic radical thought, moving away from the Manichean vision that sees him only as the *maître à penser* of contemporary jihadism.

From what has been said so far, the intellectual trajectory of Quṭb up to the publication of *Social Justice* and beyond is dynamic and non-linear, complex and articulated. Ḥasan Ḥanāfī,²⁴ the most influential representative of the so-called Egyptian Islamic Left, even if he is very far from Quṭb's position, declared that if Quṭb had lived, he would have become a member of the "Islamic Left", and that his apparent extremism stemmed directly from his imprisonment and torture. (Ḥanāfī 1988: 167-300).

Interviewed by Fawaz Gerges, Ḥanāfī also told that Quṭb:

pioneered a leftist, progressive Islamic discourse that challenges the dominance of reactionaries and ultraconservatives. (...) His works lay the foundation of the Islamic Left, an egalitarian spirit that shows the fundamental role that justice plays in Islam. Quṭb reminded Muslims of the most important moral message of Islam – social justice and freedom. (Gerges 2018: 221)

Finally, if *Social Justice* is not a revolutionary manifesto like *Milestones* for example, it can no doubt be seen as a political and revolutionary program. It is not just a mere product of an Egyptian intellectual

²¹ Muḥammad al-Ghazālī 1949.

²² 'Abd al-Qādir 'Awdā 1951.

²³ Two years later Mustafā al-Siba'i (lead figure in the Syrian Brethren) published *al-Iṣṭirakiyyat al-Islām* (Socialism in Islam), the Indonesian Hamka published in 1951 *Keadilan sosialdalam Islam* (Social Justice in Islam); in Iran first the manifesto of *Fida'iyyan-i Islam* in 1950, and then *Iqtisadūnā* (Our Economics) by Ayatullāh Muḥammad Baqir al-Sadr, all strongly influenced by Quṭb's *Al-'adala*. See Algar 2000: 13.

²⁴ For a very interesting comparison between Quṭb's and Ḥanāfī's thought, see Akhavi 1997.

on his path to Islamic radicalization, in which he expresses all his hatred of the West and everything coming from it.

It is rather a significant document of the Islamic movement entering into the Egyptian intellectual and political debate, by focusing on Islam's relevance in the struggle to recover their own identity and to solve Egyptian concrete socio-economic problems. Last but not least, it is also a conscious attempt to fight the appeal and vitality of Marxism in several Muslim countries at the time.

A deeper analysis of *Social Justice* is thus important not to underline Quṭb's shift "from being an Egyptian liberal intellectual into a radical Islamist" (Tooth 2013: 64) but overall, as an excellent example to better testify to the internal complexities of the sociopolitical debate in a developing Arab society like Egypt, in which, alongside a widespread secularism, the first signs of a rebirth of political Islam were unfolding. The two political tendencies were not always opposing and detached, but often linked to each other, with some surprising points of contact. In the new analytical perspectives that have emerged in recent years, Quṭb's thought is an emblematic example of this fluid transition.

Quṭb's criticism of political, economic, and cultural elites stands in the context of an emerging generation of critical intellectuals. It is important to shed light on intellectual cooperation between Quṭb, MB, Marxists, and independent writers. In this perspective, the Islamist project is perfectly inside the Egyptian intellectual field in that time. (Šabseviciute 2018: 85)

Sayyid Quṭb's urgency on the comprehensiveness of Islam as a worldview, a civilization, and socioeconomic order; his emphasis on cultural and educational reform; the moral rectitude, the revolutionary inspiration underlying his book, retain all their validity today for those Muslims who interpret his message far more correctly than the jihadists do.

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