Political Shiisms

Call for Papers

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Throughout the 20th century, the paths taken up by Shia variants of contemporary political Islam were set within the broader movement in which the various "Islamisms" were constituted, responding to local authoritarianisms and foreign influences. With the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the Iraqi and Syrian wars since 2003 and 2013, respectively, these paths became increasingly distinctive¹. While these historic events affected regional political systems as a whole, they also combined to produce modes of political engagement, grammars and identities that share a Shia symbolic universe whose practices are not yet fully accounted for—according to different temporalities and modes, and within diverse social environments. The shift from the Lebanese Hezbollah's ideology of "resistance" to Israel to a regional "existential war"; the expansion and institutionalisation of Iraqi Shia militias; the development of political solidarities between Twelver Shia and partisans of heterodox trends that were doctrinally far apart: these are a few of the ideological and praxeological reformulations that call for the construction of new analytical frameworks able to overcome the simplistic paradigm of a "Shia awakening".

This thematic issue proposes to analyse these reconfigurations in the present, and to put forward, as a hypothesis, a concept of "political Shiisms", i.e. representations and political practices informed by reference to varieties of Shia Islam² and, as such, amenable to being constructed as an object of study. In so doing, we in no way take for granted the existence of a political Shiism of any specific or fixed nature. Quite the contrary: we take up the opposite stance to that of a confessionalised approach of socio-political realities, whose explanation, as has been well demonstrated, cannot be reduced to a religious variable (Amel, 1988; Burgat, 2006). Rather, we aim to account for it through the thoroughly political prism that the social sciences have come to apply to Islamism in general. What is the range of meanings of the mobilisation of the Shia religious variable by various partisan organisations, since 2003 and especially 2011-2013? We reinscribe these cases within the history of contemporary political Islam, whose other expressions they are intimately linked to—if only by virtue of their broadly shared ideological matrix, drawing, in particular, on the reformist Muslim thought of the early 20th century. This issue thus aims to elucidate the conditions and modalities of these uses of Shiism, both as a reference point for action and as a mobilising resource, within varied national and local configurations.

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¹ This issue invites contributors to give their analysis a certain historical depth. It is, however, primarily interested in the present-day expression of "political Shiisms". Special attention will therefore be paid to the framing role of violence to be witnessed today in Iraq and Syria. In this respect, 2013 marks the transformation of the revolutionary dynamic in Syria into a different type of conflict (albeit one in which the revolutionary dynamic did not disappear), characterised by militarisation, internationalisation, and the exacerbation of the identity variable.

² It is with respect to this "reference", that we allow ourselves to confer the adjective "Shia". We do not assume that these social facts are governed by the religious (or confessional) variable alone—nor therefore, that it would suffice to explain them. The use of quotation marks for "Shia" here is designed to underline this precaution.

The political practices of the players laying claim to Shia Islam are of course not unknown. The Islamic Republic of Iran on the one hand, the Lebanese Hezbollah on the other, are the two privileged case studies for research on "Shia" Islamism. Nonetheless, if Hezbollah has indeed been the subject of many welcome sociological studies³, research on the Iranian context has primarily focused on the revolutionary moment, then Khomeini's theory of velayat-e faqih, its constitutionalisation, its reformulations, and the types of resistance it has encountered, leaning towards the study of political ideas more than their embodiment in individuals and social groups. More pertinently, both of these case studies are rather exceptional. Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province have, on these issues and concerning the second half of the 20th century, drawn the attention of only a few researchers (among others, Louër, 2008; Matthiesen, 2010, 2015), as has Pakistan (e.g. Abou Zahab, 2007; Rieck, 2016). Where Iraq is concerned, the dawn of a new political era in 2003 did produce an important literature. However, on the subject at hand here, and leaving aside a few works (e.g. Nakash, 2006; Rizvi, 2010; Visser, 2006), this literature has shown a tendency to produce wide-ranging geopolitical sweeps or reports more than academic research. Within the social sciences, analysis of the Shia religious universe has for the last 15 years been characterised by remarkable dynamism. Its most contemporary political expressions remain, however, relatively under-examined, by contrast with the abundant literature produced by historians on a wide range of areas during the modern and contemporary eras⁴. This deficit of works in political sociology, and thereby of truly comparative approaches, is of course partly due to the difficulty of doing fieldwork in socio-political environments governed by the violence of armed conflicts or of situations of "neither war, nor peace" (Debos, 2013).

It is to this research effort that the present issue aims to contribute, by favouring analysis "from below" which, through the paths of women and men engaged in these movements, and drawing on fieldwork covering a wide range of "Shia worlds" (Mervin, 2007), allows for identifying both regularities, circulations and echoes on the one hand, and dissonances and idiosyncrasies on the other, in the various expressions of these political Shiisms.

We emphasise three broad themes with respect to which contributors are invited to construct their research object:

Theme 1: Power, State, Institutions

From protest mobilisation, through the exercise of power in government, to taking up arms in the name of the State or in parallel to it, partisan organisations laying claim to a Shia religious identity have had diverse relationships with political power. The aim here is to restore the diversity of these relations by examining the ways in which power is conceptualised, practiced and lived by these players. Depending on whether they find themselves in the political minority or majority: what conceptions of power and the State do they deploy? How do these partisan organisations mobilise their support? How do they relate the use of the religious variable to other kinds of resources, when building strategies to ally with the representatives of different political ideologies—as shown, for instance, by the Iraqi protest movement of the spring of 2016, led mainly by the Sadrist movement, joined by sections of "civil society"? How has the experience of governing affected the repertoires of action of those movements and organisations with a Shia variable that take part in them? In tandem, taking into account the specificities of the Shia clerical field: how can we conceptualise how these Shia Islamisms in power relate to religious institutions—and what effects have the greater or lesser proximity of

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³ To name only a few recent works in a rich literature: Abu Rida, 2012; Calabrese, 2016; Chaib, 2009; Daher, 2014; Jurdi Abisaab, Abisaab, 2014; Mervin, 2008. Note, however, that another "Shia" political movement, Amal in Lebanon, has not drawn the same level of scholarly attention.

⁴ In the case of Iraq, the historical process of politicisation of the *marja'iyya* is for instance well documented (Gleave, 2007; Abdul-Jabar, 2002; Litvak, 1998; Walbridge, 2001), as is the history of Iraqi Shia Islamist political groups from the 1950s (Abdul-Jabar, 2003; Nakash, 1994; Ru'uf, 2000).

these players to the *marja'iyya*'s centres of authority had upon their representations and political practices?

This issue hopes to account for both the religious action of the state and the political action of the religious institutions; as well as for the relations with each of political groupings that belong to neither one nor the other. In this respect, our hope is to explore the grey zone in which partisan organisations integrated in party politics, but whose mode of action is also, and primarily, violence, arise, in order to emerge from the analytical impasse of a strict distinction between parties and militias.

Theme 2: Forms and Figures of Engagement

Beyond institutional processes, this issue also aims to analyse the various *kinds* of political players of "political Shiisms." In the ongoing socio-political reconfigurations, and in particular due to the violence that sometimes characterises them, these types of players have diversified. Defining them is often complicated by their intermediary location, acting in hitherto compartmentalised social spaces and associating various types of capital, in complex regimes of action. These include *'ulama'* grounding an occasional political practice in their traditional religious authority; students of religion who double as fighters; militia leaders who are also ministers or elected figures within national political institutions; volunteer fighters; and activists, whether in party-political partisan structures or operating underground. All are part of an original political landscape.

Bearing this in mind, contributors are invited to address life histories, militant trajectories (Fillieule, 2001) within these partisan organisations, and the repertoires of action they deploy, to provide an account of the subjective incentive structures of political commitment, and of the meanings that activists confer upon it, both within political activity and outside of it. In parallel to analysis of the organisational dimension of partisan commitment (recruitment, training, discipline, the construction of loyalty, etc.), the study of the daily lives of activists could thus allow us to identify the favoured sites and moments in which the Shia symbolic universe is internalised, from annual religious processions to funerals and the commemorations of the deaths of martyrs.

Papers should therefore combine "microscopic" observation (Sawicki, 2000) of activist trajectories with their insertion in the construction of "partisan milieus" (Sawicki, 1997) or "partisan societies" (Mermier, Mervin, 2012). What kinds of links do partisan organisations engender, and how do these translate into the lives of these political players? In contexts in which political mobilisation has often operated within pauperised and marginalised Shia communities, our interest is in religious formulations of class conflict and the tendency of political players to reach for the religious variable in the context of broader processes, aiming thereby to reconstitute communities of interest in the face of the weakening of state institutions.

Theme 3: Political Imaginaries and the Reformulation of Partisan Identities

Where reformist Shia Islamism in Iraq in the 1950s, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and the creation of the Lebanese Hezbollah in 1982 had opened up and nurtured a historical sequence marked by a revolutionary reinterpretation of the "Karbala paradigm" (Fischer, 1980), today's political Shiisms are part of worldviews which, while they are far from deserting that paradigm, make it far more complex. The figure of the *thâ'ir* (revolutionary) has become more nuanced, if not abandoned altogether in favour of the figure of the *muqâwim* (resister) with which it had previously been intertwined (Alhaj, Dot-Pouillard, Rébillard, 2014). How are these new political imaginaries constructed? What modalities govern the deployment of these repertoires of mobilisation—in particular, reference to the Shia doctrinal imaginary? The spaces in which political Shiisms express themselves today witness the coming-together of *a priori* mutually

exclusive referents. Shia doctrinal eschatology (apparent both in political iconography and in the development of a distinctive martyrology) is thus mobilised in the service of nationalist discourses, for instance in Iraq. Groups that openly subscribe to the Iranian Supreme Guide's wilâya simultaneously lay claim to deeply local constituencies. The "nationalisation" of movements founded under Iranian patronage is alternately characterised as inevitable or impossible. Beyond that debate, our concern is to examine the articulations between transnational allegiances (i.e. the resilience of an "Iranian model") and the territorialisation processes of these movements, often in tandem with their institutionalisation. More broadly, we invite contributors to combine various scales of analysis in order to think through the different spaces within which worldviews, political allegiances (Fillieule, Pudal, 2010) and partisan identities are constituted—understood as "the combination of characteristics which members of a party consider they share" (Dereymez, 1994), and "that give shape to the actors called upon to represent and serve the institution." (Pudal, 1994).

These reconfigurations of political imaginaries are accompanied by a genuine mutation of relationships to the religious variable. The militants of the Lebanese Hezbollah have thus had no hesitation in envisaging the birth of a "different expression" of Islam. This is understood as now encompassing all aspects of an individual's life—by contrast to the traditionalist practices of the previous generation, that are now considered to be disembodied, out of time or detached from a socio-political contemporaneousness that this "different expression" is now tasked with integrating (Calabrese 2016), in what Thurfjell (2006) has called, with respect to the Iranian Basij, an "all-encompassing religion". The aim here is to make this totalising iltizâm (engagement) concrete. At another level, a politically-driven polarisation of religious identities has become apparent. This has seen the members of streams of thought traditionally categorised as "branches" of Shiism—whether Alawis, Zaydis, Ismailis or Alevis—identify themselves politically, if not doctrinally, with the Twelver majority. Temporarily, and tentatively, what we hazard here is a certain simplification of identities through violence, expressed as the construction of a common Shia symbolic inheritance, if not, sometimes, a homogenisation of religious practices. Contributors are therefore invited to examine the causes and processes through which the self and the Other are redefined, in their profoundly relational dimension that is to say, how much identifying the self owes to identifying an Other or an enemy, and how the latter is represented, both within Middle Eastern societies and beyond.

Calendar

Authors should send a 300-word proposal, along with a short CV, to <u>rxbeaumont [at] gmail.com</u> and <u>erminia.calabrese [at] gmail.com</u> by **March 30th**, **2017**. The proposals will be reviewed over the following month. The deadline for submitting papers (in English or in French, not exceeding 45 000 characters) is **February 10th**, **2018**. Full guidelines can be found here.

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