

# The Chains of the Mind: Psychology, Politics, and the Colonial Remembrance

A comparative text on West Psychology and the attempts made to psychoanalyze Islam

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*“That is what I am doing here: I do symptom, I am the symptom, it’s a role I am playing, if not for each of you, then at least for a certain ego of the analytic institution. And if you want to understand the foreigner or the stranger very quickly, early in the morning, then perhaps it’s also in order to make the symptom disappear, as quickly as possible, to file away his discourse without delay, in other words, to forget it without ado.”*

*Jacques Derrida*

**ABSTRACT:** *‘The Chains of the Mind: Psychology, Politics, and the Colonial Remembrance’ aims to provide the reader with an introductory overview of some of the most important psychological approaches to Western politics and to comparatively investigate the attempts made to apply the above-mentioned theories to the comprehension of Islam. Particular attention will be given to the 19th Century Freudian Psychoanalysis and 20th Political Psychology, as notable perspectives in the understanding of political ideologies. Given the issue implicit in the title, this paper will attempt to discuss the precariousness of such application (Derrida, 1981; Khanna, 2003; Rothman, 2022), as implicitly reinforcing a colonial apparatus of knowledge (Foucault, 1972-1977). Influential examples of merging studies in Islamic psychoanalysis (Benslama, 2002; Stein, 2010; Mura, 2014) and Islamic psychology (Mohamad, Nooraini & Jaapar, 2020; Rothman, 2022) will also be accounted for to examine the most recent developments of the field.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a widely held view that the Psychoanalysis theory of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and the related theory of the Unconscious (1915), can be listed among the strongest ideas influencing the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western paradigm of thought, equal only to Marxism and Darwinism (Frosh, 1987). Based on the assumption that mental issues result from the tension between his patients’ tangible feelings and an inner and unintelligible psychological substrate called *Unconscious* (Roediger III, Capaldi, Paris & Polivy, 1991), Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalysis has been largely used as an interpretative key to unlock social behaviors, starting from his analysis of the mass psychology inspired by Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd* (1895) pseudo-scientific analysis of the concept of mass, and rediscovered in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* in 1921 (Veness, 2016).

The first section of this essay will try to account the critics and the acknowledgments to Psychoanalysis as interpreter of group behaviors in Western countries, while the second section will highlight the attempts made to apply the afore-mentioned perspective to Islam and Islamism.

Regarding mass behavior, and its consequential political meaning, it must be considered the role of the second object of this short analysis, *Political Psychology*, in interpreting and forecasting social outcomes from cognitive patterns. Political psychology investigates the role played by psychological and cognitive biases in the political

existence of the population, and addresses ‘all is known about human behaviors and politics’, from foreign policy, conflict resolution and elite decision-making, to intergroup conflict involving race, gender, nationalities, civic education, and international conflict (Sears, Huddy, & Jervis, 2003). According to Sears, Huddy, and Jervis (2003), political psychology does not exist *per se* as monolithic *unicum*, rather concerns multiple approaches applied to human psyche and political behaviors such as personality as key factor, Behaviorist Learning Theories, Developmental Theory, Incentive Theory, Intergroup Relations, and Social Cognition. The first section of this paper will also aim to highlight some of the studies led in political psychology related to group conducts and their proximity to previous political analysis. Regarding the comparison with Non-Western countries, it must be recognized that the research to date has tended to focus on Western samples rather than Non-Western ones, with the result of a lack of data available to submit, and the difficulty of using political psychology, as it is academically intended, to explain phenomena happening in Muslim countries (Mohamad, Nooraini & Jaapar, 2020; Rothman, 2022). According to Lahey (2012), the elephantine corpus of psychological theories currently *in auge* results consistent with the ‘dominant paradigm of psychology which developed primarily in Europe and the United States since the 19<sup>th</sup> century’. However, it will be made an attempt to put light on the most recent developments of *Islamic Political Psychology* through the work of Mohamad, Nooraini and Jaapar (2020).

The second section of the essay will focus on the reverberations of psychoanalysis in Muslim countries and in the understanding of Islam, highlighting the importance of the construct of *identity* when defining Islam and the challenges that the Islamic identities face in the post-modernity. This argument will be primarily exposed through the studies of Ruth Stein (2010), Fethi Benslama (2002) and, partially, Andrea Mura (2014), and critically assessed with the contribution of Jacques Derrida’s (1981) and Ranjana Khanna’s (2003) perspectives on the topic. Concerning this section, it is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by Political Islam (or *Islamism*), Muslims, and Islam, in order to avoid generalizations in an already slippery framework, made of *psychology* and *politics* as general variables of understanding. Also, to say it with Mura (2016), the continuous interchanges of terms like ‘Islamists’, ‘Muslims’, ‘Islamic’ and such, has contributed to develop the idea of a *phantom Islam* which already penetrated the mainstream communication, leading to further cultural misunderstandings.

With *Political Islam*, or *Islamism*, it is defined a ‘set of practices which place the Islamic doctrine at the centre of any organization or social order’ (Volpi, 2011), addressing not only the personal life of the individuals but permeating the political existence of a nation and contributing to strongly define it on an identity level. More specifically, Volpi (2011) defines *Islamism* as “the political dynamics generated by the activities of those people who believe that Islam as a body of faith has something crucial to say about how society should be organized”. In this regard, Ismail (2011) argues that Islamists’ subjectivity can be largely classified into “militants, conservatives, and moderates”. *Muslims* is a term referred to those who profess the Islam creed (*al-Muslimun*, Mura, 2016). Finally, in general terms *Islam* is “the faith or belief that there is a God, and that He chose the Arab merchant Muhammad b. Abdullah of the Banu Quraysh (570-632 CE) to be His Messenger.” (Maqsood, 2008).

In the conclusion, the essay will try to summarize the afore-mentioned approaches and suggest different psychological perspectives, not mediated from a pre-tailored Western colossus of knowledge, to practice psychology in Muslims countries.

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## 2. PSYCHOANALYSIS AND POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY IN THE WEST

## 2.1 PSYCHOANALYSIS

It has already been stated the magnitude of Psychoanalysis' role in influencing 20<sup>th</sup> Western thought (Frosh, 1987), and its "substantial cultural importance in Western countries", quoting Burnham (2009). According to Frosh (1987), the revolution of psychoanalysis consisted precisely in the challenge to that previous psychological idea of 'consciousness' so deeply eradicated in the philosophical assumptions of *Cogito Ergo Sum* ("I think, therefore I am", Cartesio, *Discourse on the Method*, 1637) and personal responsibility which characterized basic humanity. In his theory of the unconscious (1915), Freud argued that mental struggles are supposedly originated from the repression of inner thoughts and instincts, with special emphasis given to the role of sexuality and libido (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920), and that the individual's consciousness was divided in a tripartite scheme which components were called Ego, Superego, and Id (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920). Despite the immense popularity and the countless followers, Freud' ideas were nonetheless largely criticized because of the lack of scientific basis (Eysenck and Wilson, 1973; Eysenck, 1985; Farrell, 1981; Wittgenstein, 1973; Timpanaro, 1976), proving itself as quite divisive for the total absence of empirical foundations, as he stated:

*What follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection. It is further an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead.* (Freud, 1920)

It has been already mentioned the role of the libido for Freud, which according to his theories on mass behavior functioned as glue to lead people's feelings towards a shared object of pleasure and consequently directing their actions through communal goals. In groups, Freud suggested, men "emotions become extraordinarily intensified, while his intellectual ability becomes markedly reduced" (1921). This component will be further explored, in the meantime it is mandatory to discuss which kind of groups Freud was referring to in his theories on a socio-economic level. According to Ward (1984), Psychoanalysis was "by nature a bourgeois discipline", because of the disinterest of psychoanalysts for political actions, and the implicit moralism of the doctrine (Frosh, 1987), while Brooks (1976), in regard to whether Psychoanalysis could or not be the basis for Marxist Psychology, clearly argued that Freud's theories "obscured the social part of human life and depersonalized the individual". Regarding Freud's idealist leanings, also Timpanaro (1976) stated how

*"With the exception of some inspired but fairly restricted conquests, psychoanalysis is neither a natural nor a human science, but a self-confession by the bourgeoisie of its own misery and perfidy, which blends the bitter insights and ideological blindness of a class in decline."* (1976)

Looking at the research of Ward (1984). Brooks (1976), Timpanaro (1976) and Frosh (1987), it appears then that Sigmund Freud, while analyzing and speculating on the processes that characterized the human psyche, had apparently only one scheme in mind: "his society as the only possible one" (Frosh, 1987). Also, always to say it with Stephen Frosh (1987), who has been quoted numerous times because of his contribution to Freudian and Post-Freudian studies, one of the limits of a psychoanalytical approach to politics also controversially relies on

the issue that, according to Freud, the repression of one individual's desires must happen for the good of the collectivity and this can hardly enact social change, thus "the society and the individual are inevitably in conflict". The role of emotions in politics has been debated long before Sigmund Freud. In 1651, Hobbes wrote in the *Leviathan* that a sovereign state was possible exclusively because of the sense of fear perceived by its citizens, who entered the social contract to feel protected by external threats. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Freud recognized the role of the emotions in driving our actions, but also argued that the rationality had nonetheless always to retain the master's role (Marcus, 2003), for the greater good of the pursuit of the civilization. On this account, George Marcus wrote in *The Psychology of Emotion and Politics* (2003) that "Civilization is precisely the achievement that results when humans find the institutional means of removing the passions and their power". Marcus (2003) also addressed the above-mentioned role of Hobbes in theorizing the fear of death, who in fact inspired that way of thinking championed also by philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza in his *Ethics* (1677). Spinoza agreed with some socially useful outcomes from individuals' passions such as pity and lust, but moreover argued how "insofar as men are subject to passions, they cannot be said to agree in nature" (IVP32) and thus can be evil for each other (IV P30d)" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). According to this studies, *Western civilization* seems thus possible primarily by choosing and applying rationality over emotions. Before dealing with the second part of this section, dedicated to some of the most recent applications of political psychology to groups relations, it seems important to briefly introduce the concept of *alterity*, previously addressed also by Sigmund Freud's idea of *the great foreigner* (Moses and Monotheism, 1939), as interesting comparative link in assessing the dynamics between groups of different ethnicities. In his book *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud argued that every culture, religion, and community need an alterity to exist, known as "the great foreigner", as previously mentioned.

## 2.2 POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Assessing the concept of alterity with the contemporary political thoughts of that time, with attention to foreign politics, it seems interesting to highlight the ideas of the influential German jurist and political thinker Carl Schmitt. In his 1932 book, *Concept of Political*, Schmitt wrote that the enemy cannot be conceived merely as a psychological and individual category, but that "an enemy exists when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity". The only thing that matters, according to Schmitt, is "the possibility of the conflict", and the political entity is essential "in the *orientation* toward the possible extreme case of an actual battle against a real enemy".

In an attempt to analyze this phenomenon through the lens of more recent studies in Political Psychology and foreign policy, concerning the conflict analysis and its resolution in a socio-psychological approach, Kelman and Fisher (2003) have recently explained how "international conflict is a process driven by collective needs and fears", and this factor apply primarily to ethnicity conflicts, but has a role in all international conflicts.

More interestingly, according to Burton (1990) the "implication of human-needs orientation" is that psychological variables, such as identity and security, are not to be seen as an only one party's gain. Group identification based on ethnicity can lead to positive outcomes, such as greater self-esteem (Phinney & Chavira, 1992) and ego identity (Markstrom & Hunter, 1999).

It seems adequate then to report Jervis's (1967) mentions to Levy's studies (2003) on cognitive biases' and how they influence the "perceptions and misperceptions in international politics". Although Levy states that psychological variables, being originated from individual perceptions, cannot be completely exhaustive in

explaining foreign policy, he also supports the thesis that they can “explain significant additional variation in outcomes”. Concerning the perception of threats, Levy states that the most important misperceptions are those related to the capabilities of enemies or third parties and are based on prior beliefs that led individuals to develop assumptions out of their “selective attention”. If a negative perception is established regarding something recognized like a threatening and hostile enemy, is then expected that any action undertaken by that enemy will be thus perceived according to this prior belief, as per Holsti’s “inherent bad faith model” (1970). On a positive note, it appears that those assumptions can be modified when repeatedly subjected to inconsistency but, according to Tetlock (1991), this is difficult to happen and is solicited only “in conjunction with major change in personnel or regime” - when the “principle of least resistance” occurs (McGuire, 1985; Tetlock, 1998). Jervis highlights those changes in beliefs are more likely to happen as consequence of something that has impacted an individual on a personal level, more than because of ‘learning from history’.

As preliminary stated, although the effectiveness of these studies is not questioned, the weakness of the political psychological approach seems to consist in holding on to a unilateral perspective, based uniquely on Western countries. To say it with Murad (2022), Western psychology is an important tool. However, its foundations rely on a sample of the Western population, and ‘cultures tend to generate very distinctive inner lives’. Western theories are ‘deeply enrooted in philosophical and neurological debates and are more attempts than universal truth, especially in a supposedly scientific field such as Psychology’ (Murad, 2022).

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### 3 PSYCHOANALYSIS, POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY, AND ISLAM

Regarding the possibility of applying psychoanalytical theories to Muslims countries, it will be now explored the work of some of the scholars who made an attempt in doing so. Returning (briefly) to the main argument of the introduction, it is here questioned whether, in light of previously mentioned references to the work of Frosh (1987), Ward (1984), Brooks (1976), and Timpanaro (1976), psychoanalysis may or not be the best practice for psychologically analyze the inner lives of Muslims.

Before approaching this topic, it is important to highlight how the research explored looks at psychoanalysis and psychology as tool to understanding very different patterns within the Islamic society framework. However, the *fil rouge* individuated, more than related to the core concept of *alterity* as per the Western political thought, it is interestingly related to the concept of *identity* (Benslama, 2002). According to Ismail (2011), identity is a construct made from different variables of an individual life, such as gender, religion, lifestyle, socio-economic status, and language, and “identity politics asserts differences in terms of distinctions in tastes, lifestyles and modes of representation in the public sphere”. Always according to Ismail (2011), this detail is important for the “intersection of religion and identity is complex when it is assessed how influential is religion in the public sphere” and, in the case of Muslims, research has investigated that “the prioritization of religion over any other feature makes them different from any other social beings” (Ismail, 2011).

There are numerous approaches currently being adopted in research into the construct of Islamic identity.

In an attempt to give an overview, two are the perspectives considered to assess the topic. On the one hand, the first one concern the *Orientalism* theory by Edward Said (1978), as an angle from an external point of view (in terms of perception), which points to the responsibilities of Western colonizing apparatus to reduce Islamic culture

into a 'monolithic ontological entity' (Mura, 2016), reinforcing a stereotypical approach to Islam in Western countries that still survives. The second one, which is very cautiously approached at this point because of the magnitude of its complexity, concerns an internal struggle of Islam and it is related to the challenges that Muslims countries – and governments – face in our post-modernity society. In these regards, the words of Egyptian Islamic scholar and political thinker Sayyid Qutb can be accounted: "*According to our unvarying definition of civilization, the Islamic society is not just an entity of the past, to be studied in history, but it is a demand of the present and a hope of the future*", emphasising in these lines the concepts of *demand* and *hope* for the present and defining the Islamic society as a "absent object of desire" (Mura, 2016). Returning to the use of the psychoanalysis as helpful instrument for assessing Islamic identity, then, according to Benslama (2002), Islamic men and women can use it to deal with their contemporary switch of *subjectivity* (within a post-modernity framework) for the formation of a new subject. Sigmund Freud called this process "the cultural work" (*Kulturarbeit*) and consider it able to reinforce a *deconstruction* of the subjectivity itself (Benslama, 2002). Because of psychoanalysis, Islamic subjectivity can thus be considered under a perspective more fluid than what Benslama (2002) defines as the 'Self through one religion (Islam), one language (Arabic) and one text (Koran)', concept applicable to numerous countries, from India to Sub-Saharan Africa, the shared characterization of these countries with Islamism (or fundamentalism) strengthening what Benslama (2002) defines as "the resistance to the intelligibility of Islam". Trying hence to connect the concept of identity as briefly assessed (the Western Orientalist perspective, and the contemporary quest of Islamic men and women to culturally deal with the post-modernity's assumptions while still relying on "one religion (Islam), one language (Arabic) and one text (Koran)"), with the concept of alterity as advanced in the first section of this essay, once again it is considered Fethi Benslama's book *Psychoanalysis and challenge of Islam* (2009). Taking inspiration from Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Benslama (2002) focuses on what he defines "the torment of the origin". Based on Freud's assumption that every culture, religion, and community need an alterity to exist, the above-mentioned "great foreigner", the author highlights how this dynamic leads to "original impropriety" at the origin of the Self. Ruth Stein in her publication *For Love of the Father, A Psychoanalytic Study of Religious Terrorism* (2010), also develops Freudian psychoanalysis as an interpretative scheme of Islamism (with particular attention to religious terrorism) and argues that Islamic identity politics can be defined as *Spiritual Politics*, manifesting in the hostility of Islam towards a Western lifestyle intended as poisonous and deeply corrupted (Buruma and Margalit, 2004). Stein (2010) also defines the notion of *religious rationality* or *religious rationale*, characterised by "the religious rephrasing of death as life and life as death", and re-establishes a connection with the notion of Freudian death and life instincts.

Regarding these theories and the application of what Jacques Derrida called "the figure of this becoming-worldwide (*mondialisation*) of Psychoanalysis" (1981), it is now analysed the limit of the method and the precariousness of the psychoanalytical application outside of what at the beginning of this essay has been defined, with Frosh's (1976) words, "Freud's own society". By taking as example psychoanalysis' approaches in South America, on his lecture delivered at the opening of a Franco-Latin American meeting in Paris in 1981, Derrida advocated that Latin America was seen as a unique and monolithic concept from the Psycho-Analytic Association, supporting a psychoanalytic perspective of this cultural entity which resembled the one already seen in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). In his own words:

*“It suggests that for psychoanalysis there are continents, half-continents, peninsular units some peninsulas thickly populated by psychoanalysts and psychoanalysis, and then virgin peninsulas, some black or white semi-continents; and it suggests that there is more or less than a black continent, more or less than a black one, black as in the uncleared, the unexplored, the feminine, black also, like a sex, like some people’s skin, black like evil, black like the unspeakable horror of violence, torture, and extermination.” (1981)*

Derrida (1981) claimed also that in psychoanalytical Paris the aim was to understand what the foreigner would say or think “as quickly as possible”, mentioning Freud in his definition of *the foreign body* (New Introductory Lectures, nos.30-31, the term is used twice as *Fremdkörper*), and linking his assumptions to those previously discussed by other thinkers, although conversely blaming the IPA of “psychoanalytic colonization” on *the rest of the world*, meaning “a Far West or no man’s land”. Derrida made also other geographical references, first by stating how Africa, Asia, or Oceania were places where Psychoanalysis “has never set foot, or in any case never took off its European shoes”, and then by referring to his own country, Algeria, and saying that Psychoanalysis only took the shape of the manifestation of the “metropole”, arguing that the African psychoanalysis was nothing more than another ramification of the colonialism’s apparatus.

In these regards, in her book *Dark Continents, Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Khanna (2003) sustains Derrida’s idea of the “blindness of Psychoanalysis to most of the earth”. The author also highlights the inconsistency of the IPA in the words of his former president, Professor Daniel Wildlöcher, that, despite the IPA’s claim of not pursuing a political agenda, released a statement addressing the Pentagon and to the Trade Centre which not only stand politically but also, again, reinforced a dismissive and colonial language in the choice of words such as *primitive*:

*“In addition, given the present terrorist assault on the United States, and the growing concern of the international community on the relationship between fundamentalist ideologies, terrorism, and the outbreak of primitive violence, psychoanalysis has an important role in contributing to the understanding of the psychodynamics of violence at the level of the individual and social groups”*

On the side of political psychology, as previously mentioned, further research is needed. It is important to mention the work of Mohamad, Nooraini & Jaapar, *Islamic Political Psychology* (2020), who made the ground-breaking efforts to create a dialogue between the Islamic Law and Islamic psychology. In their article *Preface to Islamic Political Psychology: Siyasah Syariyyah Meets Psychology* (2020), the authors stretched the importance of theorizing an Islamic Psychology especially to “develop good Muslim political personality”. Mohamad, Nooraini and Jaapar (2020) make an attempt in defining Islamic Political Psychology by stating:

*Islamic political psychology could be defined as the application of Islamic psychology to ‘siyasah syariyyah’ towards achieving the ‘maqasid syariah’ to ultimately produce ‘khayra ummah’ and ‘hadharah’ (civilisation).*

*The higher objective in Islamic politics should be about building civilisation. The civilisation built by the ‘khayra ummah’ will certainly be a model civilisation.*

It remains unclear what the scholars meant with *civilization*, while their assessment and the choice of the word appear important and consistent with the previous studies on Islamic identity, especially related to Ismail's work on Political Islam (2011).

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#### 4 CONCLUSION

*The Chains of the Mind: Psychology, Politics, and the Colonial Remembrance* is an attempt to open the discussion on new forms of Islamic Psychology and Political Psychology. The essay adopts a comparative approach to investigate the most influential psychological theories in politics in Western countries (seen as Psychoanalysis and Political Psychology) and try to start an assessment on whether those theories might be utilized to understand Islamism. Research has shown that, while political psychology represents an almost completely new field in the study of Islamic politics, some scholars have utilised psychoanalysis to analyse it, with the result of reintroducing colonial dynamics of power and creation of knowledge. What is the prospect then for "Indigenous Islamic Psychology" (Murad, 2022)? Abdallah Rothman in his book *Developing a Model of Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy* (2022) shares the result of his recent studies in the development of new psychological categories – extrapolated and operationalized with the contribution of 18 Islamic psychologists who took part to the research - and the list appears as follow: Nature of the Soul, Structure of the Soul, Stages of the Soul and Development of the Soul, where the focal point results being the concept of *fitrah*, defined as human disposition or nature (Rothman, 2022). In his research, Rothman (2022) highlights that "Muslims do not seek for professional psychologists because they do not engage with their religious beliefs in an informed and open way" (Amri & Bemak, 2012; Killawi, Daneshpour, Elmi, Dadras & Hamid, 2014; Mayers, Leavey, Vallianatou, & Barker, 2007), and it has already been discussed how the Christian inherited but secular approach of Western psychology cannot be considered as approach with Muslims with strong religious beliefs (Abu – Raiya & Pargament, 2011). To conclude, it is recognised the decisive role of Western psychoanalysis and psychology. However, its precepts cannot and should not be used as speculation tool either to interpret political scenarios or clinically analysing individuals which do not come from the same cultural background. It seems then not only that further studies in the theorization of Islamic Psychology and Islamic Political Psychology are due, but also urgently needed.

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