Fanaticism: A brief history of the concept

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The label "fanaticism" is increasingly attached to the perceived threat posed by religious fundamentalism. But rarely is the history of the term and the variety of its uses examined. Here, a philosophical history of "fanaticism" from Martin Luther to the present.

Since the spectacular arrival of the threat of terrorism put an end to our complacent post-communist interregnum, the Other of parliamentary democracies has been presented – in the media but also by ubiquitous psychological “experts” – as a “fanatic”. Prominent figures have identified fanaticism as a cultural syndrome, or even a deep psychopathology that could enable us to explain the supposed increase in supranational violence. Fernando Savater [1] and Alain Finkielkraut [2] (in El País and Libération, respectively) have recognized the emergence of a new global subject in the protests and polemics against the Mohammed cartoons published in Denmark – the “fanatic without borders”. While Savater’s text boasts an anti-clerical irreverence of a libertarian sort that spares no one, Finkielkraut, as shown in several of his recent works, shows an obsession for confrontation with “Islamic” intolerance, with “their” illiberal fanaticism. This seems again to reiterate, in French Republican guise, Huntington’s noxious theses on the clash of civilizations. In both cases, the spectacle of fanaticism, in its rapid circulation through the global media, is the object of observation and opinion, rather than the causes of fanaticism or the realities from which it originates (realities like that of the concrete intolerance towards Muslim immigrants in Denmark).

The introduction of the concept of fanaticism into the debate on today’s ideological conflicts indeed seems to lean more towards cultural and psychological causes than political, strategic, and material ones. Fanaticism often appears as an invariable that transcends historical events, or even, in an Orientalist and racist vein, a characteristic of fantastical entities such as “the Arab mind”. The anti-historicity of the concept in part allows for its often arbitrary and hypocritical use. Fanaticism, as we cannot help but notice with painful frequency, is often projected onto an enemy with which, by definition, one cannot negotiate. As Amos Oz writes in How to Cure a Fanatic, “it is enough to read the newspaper, or watch the news on television, to explain the ease with which people become fanatically anti-fanatic, anti-fundamentalist, with which they undertake an anti-Jihad crusade”. [3] Words that ironically gain weight when one notes that the very same
Oz, who advocates “imagining” the Other, was initially spurred by the recent war in Lebanon to abandon his own reasoning, proposing an apologia for Israel and a demonization of Hezbollah that fails any test, empirical or moral. Alone the Orwellian title of one of his recent opinion pieces gives us a sense of the dangers of partisan anti-fanaticism: “Why Israeli missiles strike for peace”. [4]

The growing use of the term “fanaticism” to identify the dangers of the present, particularly the exacerbation of religious politics and the terrorist phenomenon, is rarely accompanied by a reflection on the genealogy of the term and the variety of its applications. A look at its philosophical history allows us instead to view its many facets and to initiate a critique of its rhetorical and analytical functions. In this essay, I would simply like to assess a few moments in the history of this exquisitely polemical concept, moments that allow us to recognize the persistence of certain leitmotifs in the discourse on fanaticism, including the psychologization of politics, the problem of the universal, and the image of Islam.

**Luther: Fanatical anti-fanaticism**

The discourse on fanaticism emerged from the crucible of ideological, theological, and political battles that accompanied the Reformation. Born, more precisely, of Luther and Melanchthon’s ferocious polemics against the various urban and peasants’ movements against the German lords. Inspired or commanded by rebel preachers like Thomas Müntzer, and in part driven by a plebeian and millennial communism, these movements refused the authority of the princes and clerics. They tried, by defending the peasants’ modus vivendi from the first manifestations of that which Marx would call primitive accumulation, to avert the expropriation of the products of their labour. As we will see, the term *Schwärmer* (from *Schwärmerei*, sometimes translated as “fanaticism”), used by the founder of Protestantism to condemn the rebels, ended up playing an important role in Kant’s critiques. But what did this concept refer to in the midst of the violent battles of 1524-25? Following Augustinian terminology, the ideologues of the Reformation saw in this social movement an attempt to eliminate the key distinction between the earthly city and the City of God, or rather to push madly – through a politicized and plebeian millennialism – for the realization of the kingdom of heaven on earth. According to Melanchthon, who refers here to the translations of Aristotle’s *Politics*, this meant eliminating the role of “civil society”. For Luther, the attempt to overthrow the secular authorities was a sign of disastrous pride, a religious catastrophe.

The conflict between Luther and the peasant rebels demonstrates extremely well the plurisecular mechanism that turns the condemnation of “fanaticism” into the justification for exceedingly cruel (and fanatic) political and military repression. Mixing theological arguments and characteristically political calculations (such as allowing the Reformation to survive in the midst of the crisis caused by the peasants’ wars), in May 1525 Luther, who had earlier criticized the German principles very harshly, wrote the text *Against the robbing and murdering mobs of peasants*. In it, he exhorts with great enthusiasm the armies of the princes to exterminate the rebels “like dogs”, and claims, quoting St Paul, that whoever (on the princes’ side) dies in such battles couldn’t have “a more blessed death”. Luther saw in the “fanaticism” of the peasants, above all in the case of the fanatic *par excellence*, the preacher Müntzer, an assault against social order as such. It is here, at the dawn of the discourse on fanaticism, that the oppositional and biased
character of the term shows itself most clearly. Firstly, as one will see later with the sans-
culottes of the French Revolution – for example in Edmund Burke’s remarks on
“epidemical fanaticism” – the “fanatic” is always the rebellious plebeian; fanaticism is
often identified as the “mad” request for social equality. As many have noted, the
etymology of the German term shares this theme of “fear of the masses”, to quote
Etienne Balibar, inasmuch as the fanatics are a swarm (Schwarm), the plebs, a multitude
in revolt. As demonstrated by recent historical research, that which presented itself
largely as an articulated movement – with specific institutional and constitutional
demands (the maintenance of the peasant assemblies, the alleviation of levies and taxes)
– and which used the religious discourse (the Gospel) in minimalist and pragmatic terms,
is depicted by its detractors (in order to better justify an unsparing repression) as a
theological aberration, a disease of the spirit. [5]

Fanaticism in the Enlightenment

While the Other of the Protestant discourse is represented by the peasant in revolt, the
Enlightenment, which is often and rightly defined in large part as a battle against
religious fanaticism, suggests other, equally ambiguous figures of the fanatic. Take for
example Voltaire’s Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophet (1741), in which Mohammed
forces one of his hitmen (or séide – the incident is based in part on the stories that
circulated about the sect of the Assassins of Hassan-i-Sabbah) to murder the sheikh of
Mecca, who refuses to bow to the religion of the fanatic. The séide is, unknowingly, son
of the sheikh, which leads Dominique Colas to read the tragedy as a demonstration of the
profaning force of fanaticism, its destruction of all things sacred, including and above all
familial ties. [6] For others, the fact that Voltaire’s Mohammed is a “Straussian” figure,
who doesn’t believe in dogma and instrumentalizes fanaticism for his political ends,
constitutes the true reading of the tragedy. [7] More generally, Voltaire’s work
demonstrates the effects of a short circuit between an apparently abstract category,
fanaticism, and its identification with a particular culture. The persistence in equating
fanaticism with Islam in Enlightenment Orientalism cannot easily be set aside by arguing
that Islam is simply a mask, or a case among many others of a universal pathology.

It is instead in the austerity of Kant’s Enlightenment that the theme of fanaticism
detaches itself clearly from a culturalist discourse. For Kant it is in the very structure of
subjectivity, in the relationship between knowledge and practice, that the fanatic bacillus
is to be found. In his Critique of Practical Reason (1788), Kant distinguishes between
“religious fanaticism”, which pertains to the supposed knowledge of God, and the much
more dangerous “moral fanaticism”, which, instead of making its actions right through a
simple duty, tries to base morals on sentiments, noble beliefs, and sublime faith. The
moral fanatic is a subject who, in refusing to submit himself to the universality of duty,
can easily turn into a well-meaning murderer. For Kant, fanaticism is always a
transgression of the limits of human reason, a metaphysical delirium. In the Critique of
Judgement (1790), fanaticism – which for Luther was caused by an excess of iconoclasm
(the anti-representational fury of the radical Reform) – is described “aesthetically” as a
desire to “see something beyond all bounds of sensibility”. This is almost a kind of
metaphysical idolatry (in fact, Kant praises Jewish iconoclasm here). Finally, in his essay
“What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” (1786), fanaticism – projected onto
Spinoza (who others regard, justifiably, as a sworn enemy of fanatical subjectivity) – is
identified with an ontological dogmatism that claims dangerously to have access to the
What is the political core of the Kantian discourse on fanaticism? Firstly, for Kant fanaticism is linked to an obsession which, although it believes itself to be universal, reveals itself to be particularist. This is the case in nationalistic fanaticism, which Kant sets against cosmopolitanism. In Kant, the defence of authority that we encountered in Luther reemerges: denial of any right to rebellion and the requirement in politics for a respect of authority, laws, and representative institutions. This is explained not only by Kant’s cautious disposition, but by one of his possible definitions of fanaticism, as the confusion of a regulatory idea (the republic, for example) with a constituent plan that may be affirmed materially and subjectively. This tendency to neutralize a “constituent fanaticism” can be seen clearly in Kant’s complex reaction to the French Revolution, well analyzed by Hannah Arendt in her lectures on Kant and judgement. While the rebel sans-culotte is implicitly seen as a fanatical and pathological figure, the revolutionary movement is saved and universalized through its effect on the spectator, who judges it in terms of human history and the sign of universality that it conveys. In this way, Kant’s Conflict of the Faculties (1798), paradoxically without justifying the actors of the revolution, sees the revolution as a test of the moral inclination of our species, and (repeating a dichotomy presented in the Critique of Judgement, the Anthropology [1798], and various other texts) distinguishes between fanaticism and enthusiasm, with the latter understood as a passion for the ideal that does not flow over into the “fanatical” effort to achieve it hic et nunc.

**Hegel and the excess of Islamic universality**

The concept of fanaticism (for which the German philosopher uses both SchwÄrmerei and Fanatismus) plays an extremely interesting role in the works of Hegel. While in Kant we are dealing with a cognitive and affective disposition, a spurious result of our inevitable metaphysical impulse, in Hegel fanaticism is depicted as a necessary passage in the progressive universalization of Spirit. As rightly noted by Domenico Losurdo, German thought from Kant to Hegel can be characterized as a philosophical response to the historical trauma and prospect of emancipation represented by the French Revolution. In the conceptual transcription of the revolution, fanaticism appears as a short circuit between the abstract universal and its concrete realization, a manifestation of subjective freedom in its pure negativity, in its active refusal of any determination. As is well-known, in the Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) Hegel recognizes in this negating movement of abstract, subjective freedom the spiritual force behind the Reign of Terror and its ruthless logic of suspicion – an idea that Alain Badiou has recently brought back in The Century [9] in order to summarize the essence of the twentieth century.

In the Philosophy of Right (1821), Hegel returns to this subject, speaking of a “fanaticism of destruction” that is exemplified in the elimination of suspected individuals, in the rejection of the stabilization of the revolution in any determined institutional order. In the field of politics, if the fanatic strives for the realization of an ideal, he at any rate ends up fatally undermining any particular organization, inasmuch as his “negative freedom” manifests itself only in the destruction of the particular. In an addition to the Philosophy of Right, Hegel associates this “nihilistic” rage with the injection of religious subjectivity into the objectivity of the State. Insofar as religion is characterized by a strict impetus towards totality, and the State instead depends on the differentiation of its “organs”, the
introduction of religion into politics is destructive. “The wish to have the whole in every particular”, writes Hegel, “could be fulfilled only by the destruction of the particular, and fanaticism is just the refusal to give scope to particular differences.” [10] When devotion enters into the State, it reveals itself as pure, explosive intolerance. This could give the impression of a simple refutation, liberal or conservative, of a radical politics of principle. Transferring our attention to Hegel’s more specifically historical reflections, we can instead note that this fanaticism of destruction, this terror of the abstract, can represent an inevitable passage, and not simply, like Kant, an inclination against which we may be immunized by a healthy dose of Enlightenment. At this point it is useful to note that Hegel’s use of the concept of fanaticism, even if it plays an extremely specific role in the development of Spirit, shares a notable plasticity with its more recent usages. One can even say that the specificity of the concept of “fanaticism of destruction” goes hand in hand with its extension to apparently disconnected cases – the rituals of the tribes of Dahomey, Hinduism, Islam. Or better, in the Hegelian discourse on fanaticism there is a strange short circuit between an exquisitely immanent moment of the European spirit and the appearance of its non-European and ahistorical Other. Leaving aside the stereotypical images of a savage and frenetic Africa, and of an India that drowns in the tepid waters of the Absolute, the discourse on “fanatical” Islam, which seems to retrace the worst of eighteenth-century Orientalism, contains interesting and at times surprising ideas.

Firstly, it is worth noting that in Hegel Islam appears as a spiritual and political phenomenon. In a symptomatic phrase, Hegel defines it as the “Revolution in the East”. Far from the fashion for “Oriental despotism”, [11] he sees in Islam a movement of universalization, although one that, dominated by the “Oriental principle”, is centred around abstract unity (monotheism without trinity), thereby leading to the abandonment or forcible dissolution of particularity, differences, and multiplicity. In the *Philosophy of History* (1830), Islam appears as a triumph over Jewish particularism, the birth of a true and proper universal character. Therefore it is not in a pathological obsession for the particular – as in the case of nationalistic fanaticism condemned by Kant’s cosmopolitan thinking – but in the *excess of universality* that Hegel recognizes the spiritual and political limits of Islam, whose subject is without predicates, without qualities. It is therefore on the basis of his theory of fanaticism as abstract and negative subjectivity that Hegel ends up revitalizing Orientalist discourse: Islam is “expansionist”, because it cannot stabilize itself in a differentiated manifold; Islam decays into “sensuality” (another element of the Orientalist discourse, present in the fantasies of an Orient made of harems and opium), because social cohesion is granted only by the One, by Allah, and not by institutions of the State. So, though recognizing the universalizing force of Islam (also embodied, according to him, by the dignity and courage of its warriors), for Hegel its spirituality necessarily issues into a “desolate destruction”.

Setting aside the utter neglect of Islamic political, legal, and scientific thought, which conditions such verdicts, and remaining within the bounds of Hegel’s discourse, is it possible to treat Islamic “fanaticism” as a mere dead end of Spirit? Inasmuch as it portrays it as a movement of radical universalization, I do not believe that Hegel’s thought permits a simple expulsion of Islamic “fanaticism”. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1821-31), the “pure formalism” of Islam is explicitly flanked with the French Revolution and its “terrorist” dissolution of the pre-revolutionary ties. Insofar as the Hegelian State aims to integrate subjectivity and freedom into an organic and
differentiated system of institutional determinations, Hegel’s historical thought cannot ignore the inevitable, and in a certain sense “progressive”, nature of the “fanatical” moment. We are reminded of this political power of abstraction, for example, in the experience of the African-American leader Malcolm X, for whom conversion to Islam functioned as a break in the particularism of black nationalism. As he wrote in a letter from Jeddah in 1964 (during the hajj dramatized in the famous film by Spike Lee), for him Islam represented “the one religion that erases the race problem from its society”. [12]

Remaining closer to Hegel, the inevitability and the local necessity of “fanaticism” (as a movement of radical universalization) were noted by the young Hegelian Arnold Ruge in a text entitled “Hegel’s Philosophy of Right and the Politics of Our Times”, published in the Deutsche Jahrbücher in 1842. In which sense does “fanaticism” appear necessary to Ruge? Reflecting on the key problem of his time, the relationship between Church and State, Ruge declares that religion manifests itself as desire (Lust) for liberation, and that fanaticism represents an “intensified religion”, or rather a passion (Wollust) for liberation that is born from a prior failure, from a blockage of the routes to emancipation. Again the example of France returns, with its “insane” but comprehensible repeated attempt to destroy the obstacles to social equality. It is in his phenomenology of the “practical pathos” of the fanatic that Ruge shows himself to be one of our contemporaries. Indeed, he writes: “When there is something to explode, one goes up in smoke with it, so that ultimately, while not sparing oneself, one also sacrifices others horribly to one’s purposes”. [13] But while many of our intellectuals might read this pathos (or this pathology) in an abstract sense, for Ruge it was a consequence of the failure to incorporate the passion for liberation into the mechanisms of the State. That is why he declares that “as long as there are batteries to man and positions to defend with one’s life, we will have no history without fanaticism”. [14]

**Conclusion: Beyond liberalism and fanaticism**

Today it is good to keep Ruge’s considerations in mind. During the Cold War, the discourse on “totalitarianism” operated for a long time with an extremely impoverished version of the concept of fanaticism that had already been articulated in German philosophy. This is especially evident in this discourse’s desire simply to nullify the egalitarian force of the French Revolution, often read (by authors like Talmon and even Arendt) as the remote, but fundamental source of all the ills of our time. State socialism too was often read in a psychological and religious key, leaving aside serious historical and sociological analyses. Sensationalist texts on the psychopathology of Stalin, for example, have obscured the institutional mechanisms of terror and their material and economic context, ignoring for example the eminently pragmatic and opportunistic character of the decisions that led to the gulags, as well as the Machiavellian role of ideological “moderation” in Stalin’s political trajectory. [15]

The anti-communist thought of the twentieth century, which has often regarded “fanaticism” as the cause rather than the effect of social evils (see for example the reflections of Emil Cioran [16] and Raymond Aron [17]), has given rise to the purely ideological dichotomy between a liberalism of scepticism and compromise, on one hand, and fanaticism, on the other. According to such thinkers, “fanaticism” is not simply an erroneous but inevitable tendency of human reason (Kant) or a necessary phase of extremism in the development of humanity (Hegel). It is a pathology to be eradicated.
Such a vision of fanaticism not only forgets that sceptics and liberals are perfectly capable of causing enormous harm, or indeed evil (especially when legitimated by a “just war”, which wars against “fanatics” are by definition), and that not all reactionaries can be classified as “fanatics”, but it also ignores the lesson of Ruge: a “history without fanaticism” can only be the result of a politics of real emancipation and not of an abstract battle of ideas. Does this perhaps signify that the term “fanaticism” should simply be abandoned? That the fanatic is an illusion, a chimera?

Not necessarily, but, following the traces of the great thinkers who wrestled with it, it is up to us contemporaries to rethink fanaticism as a precise historical, political, and psychological concept for the present and not simply as a talisman for exorcising or eliminating absolute enemies. Perhaps a first step would be to treat fanaticism as predicate of certain actions and political discourses, refraining from defining political subjects as “fanatics sans phrase. For, as the case of Luther and the rebel peasants shows, the designation of one’s enemies as “fanatics” is often the sinister prelude to treating them “like dogs”, or like “unlawful combatants”.

**Footnotes**


14. Ibid.


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