

Conservatism, democracy, and a decolonial option: Reading Fethullah Gülen as a political thinker

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Abstract

Fethullah Gülen has no political ambitions, and he has never aspired to lead a movement or to gain political power of any sort, he says. In that respect he is a non-political thinker, focused on making God loved by humanity. But if humanity starts to know God correctly and love him, this will lead to a new and better civilization of love and tolerance, Gülen says. This is a political statement.

The Gülen movement is participating in social activities that are connected to political spheres and themes. Gülen's texts can be read as social movement text with a political message. Gülen also has a consistent and clear political theory that very well can be defined within the parameters of the classical Western political ideologies. Gülen is a democratic conservative political thinker.

Gülen and the movement has also been an important source of dignity for Muslims participating in modern societies, as moderns and Muslims. I will also argue that this is an important political impact, something that has always been at the heart of political struggles.

Fethullah Gülen has many times asserted that he has no political ambitions. He has never aspired to lead a movement or to gain political power of any sort, he says.¹ In that respect he is a non-political thinker, he is focused on making God loved by humanity. But he also thinks that if humanity starts to know God correctly and love him, this will lead to a new and better civilization of love and tolerance. This can definitely be seen as a political statement. The Gülen movement is participating in education, media, social solidarity and aid, and integration work in Turkey and abroad, activities that are connected to political spheres and themes. Gülen and the movement has also been an important source of dignity for Muslims participating in modern societies, as moderns and Muslims. I will argue that this is an important political impact, something that has always been at the heart of political struggles.

What is politics?

The words ‘politics’ and ‘political’ can have many meanings. They are tied to what can be described as an essentially contested concept, with no objective definition. Trying to define it is engaging in political debate.² According to Aristotle politics is a society’s communal efforts to find a good life and to solve the conflicts between the common good and special interests.³ “The personal is political” was one of the main slogans of second wave feminism.⁴ One of the outcomes of their political struggles was a different and broader understanding of what can be analyzed as political that has been adopted mainly by thinker in the Left. In Gülen’s statements about him having no political aspirations ‘political’ seems to mean party politics and representation in the parliamentary power structure. He has never aspired to this. But then he has himself said that such a narrow understanding of politics is mistaken:

Those who understand politics as political parties, propaganda, elections, and the struggle for power are mistaken. Politics is the art of management, based on a broad

¹ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4408 (Feb 27, 2009)

² W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol.56, 1956, and expanded on in W. E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, Lexington: Heath, 1974.

³ Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 21: Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944, § 1252a.

⁴ The phrase was coined in 1969 by Carol Hanisch in an essay circulated in the New York women’s movement and printed the year after, see Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political” in *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, ed. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, New York: The New York Radical Women, 1970.

perspective of today, tomorrow, and the day after, that seeks the people's satisfaction and God's approval.⁵

From this definition of politics I find it difficult to say that Gülen has no political aspirations. Maybe it is that we need to distinguish between aspirations and ideas. It is true that Gülen does not seem to be aspiring to manage a movement. But he certainly presents ideas about how a good management should be executed.⁶

So political can mean different things in different contexts, and defining the term is part of the political debate itself, as with other essentially contested concepts such as liberty or democracy.⁷

In this article I will try to show that Gülen does have a consistent and clear political theory that very well can be defined within the parameters of the classical Western political ideologies. Gülen has a conservative political message, I claim. His understanding that his own work should not be defined as political also reflects this conservative and more classically institutional understanding of what is political. But it should also be acknowledged that an important part of Gülen's writings is more apolitical. I mainly think of his impressive project translated as *Emerald hills of the heart: Key concepts in the practice of Sufism*. In this work there is a clear focus on theology and the individual. But even so, it could be argued that the focus on patience and content with the given circumstances are more in tune with conservative ideals defending the status quo, than with more reformist political ideologies.

The conclusion will be that Gülen can be read as more political than he claims, that the movement may very well be described as Turkey's third power, as done by *Jane's Islamic Affairs analyst*, and that Gülen can be read as a thinker who destabilizes the global Western political hegemony. Gülen's political ideas are firmly grounded on Islam. The commentators taking this fact as a proof of Gülen being a political Islamist, and therefore against democracy and a secular state, are jumping to conclusions that have no ground. But, the defenders restating the claim that Gülen and the movement do not have political ambitions and impacts are also drawing conclusions that are biased, or built on a too narrow understanding of the field of politics.

⁵ Fethullah M. Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*. Fairfax: The Fountain, 2000, p. 149.

⁶ Most succinctly in the chapter that the quote above is taken from. *Ibid.*, pp. 147.

⁷ Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*.

So, I will try to give a presentation of the classical political theory to be found in Gülen's English publications. On the practice of the movement I do not have that much to say, other than what would be in line with the political ideas I ascribe to Gülen.

Gülen under attack and scrutiny: Is he undemocratic?

This winter Gülen and his movement have been under critique from forums such as *Middle East Quarterly* and *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst*. It is not surprising that the huge successful growth and impact of the movement has led to a wider and more critical attention. A man voted to be the world's leading intellectual should be scrutinized thoroughly. Gülen and the movement have come to a whole new position of power. It should therefore be acknowledged that things said from the margin may take on different meanings when stated from a more powerful position. You might have political influence whether you aspire for it or not.

Michael Rubin, editor of *Middle East Quarterly* in April 2008 compared Gülen with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, implying that if Gülen returned to Turkey it could be the start of a similar Islamic revolution as the Iranian one in 1979. He says the "cult leader" and his movement seeks to Islamize Turkey.⁸ But his analysis rests on an assumption that Islamization has a fixed and univocal meaning. The Swedish imam and politician Adly Abu Hajar sometimes says that "Sweden is the best Islamic state now". He says the Swedish system upholds Islamic ideals such as democracy, tolerance, gender equality and social welfare.⁹ So who is the most fitting Islamic inspiration, Abu Hajar's party colleague, the Swedish Prime Minister Reinfeldt, or Ruhollah Khomeini? The point is that this is not an analytical question, but an ideological one. And Rubin does not really give us any argument for why his comparison is the most valid one.

In the 2009 winter edition of the *Middle East Quarterly* Rachel Sharon-Krespin wrote about "Fethullah Gülen's grand ambitions". To briefly capture her way of arguing and her stance on Gülen a telling quote can suffice:

⁸ Michael Rubin, "Turkey's Turning Point: Could there be an Islamic Revolution in Turkey?", *National Review Online*, April 14, 2008, <http://www.meforum.org/1882/turkeys-turning-point> (Feb 27, 2009)

⁹ "Kunskapen är extremismens motkraft" [Knowledge is the counter force to extremism], *Sydsvenska dagbladet*, Feb. 12, 2009. <http://sydsvenskan.se/sverige/article141994/Kunskap-ar-extremismens-motkraft.html> (Feb. 27, 2009). The quote, connected to an interview in relation to the cartoon debate, has also, through Reuters, been spotted by Militant Islam monitor, talking about "his Scandinavian Khalifate wet dream". <http://www.militantislammonitor.org/article/id/1774> (Feb. 27, 2009).

He presents himself and his movement as the modern-day version of tolerant, liberal Anatolian Sufism and has used the literature of great Sufi thinkers such as Jalal al-Din Rumi and Yunus Emre, pretending to share their moderate teachings.¹⁰

To build an analysis on the assumption that a writer only pretends to mean what he writes is an awkward method. And very hard to argue with. But as Greg Barton reflected in *Today's Zaman* in response to Sharon-Krespin the kind of pretending that Sharon-Krespin insinuates throughout her piece would require a conspiracy involving millions of followers.¹¹ It is frankly academically sounder to choose the simpler explanation that people aren't pretending, and that Gülen actually means what he has been saying for many years.

Rubin might have a better point, showing that Khomeini expressed support for democracy before his return to Iran, and that Western journalist portrayed him as a positive alternative to the Shah. He thinks this has similarities with the image of Gülen. This might be correct, but a big difference is that Khomeini had been writing about his political visions since the 1940s, and at least with the book *Islamic Government (Hokumat-e Islami)* of 1970 had articulated his theocratic ideal, that the state should be ruled by a *faqih* who “surpasses all others in knowledge” of Islamic law and justice.¹² Khomeini builds his political ideals on the example of the Prophet Muhammad's rule and on Ali's, but the model is also very much inspired by the Platonist idea of a Philosopher-King. So it is easy to see that Khomeini was not sincere in his talk about democracy, and that the journalists portraying him as a potential democratic force were misinformed. Gülen's support for democracy is coherent and even after a thorough study of his writings (in English) one has to use Sharon-Krespin's insinuating method to question his sincerity. If she wants to be convincing she has to find other statements in Gülen's preaching or Turkish writings to support her claims. Until that is presented the pretence argument should be ignored, I think.

In reply to the *Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst's* report “Gülen movement. Turkey's third power” Ihsan Yilmaz claim that “Gülen has repeatedly stated that the ideologization of Islam and its use as an instrument in politics harm Islam first; furthermore, he condemns the

¹⁰ Rachel Sharon-Krespin, “Fethullah Gülen's grand ambitions: Turkey's Islamist danger”, *Middle East Quarterly*, winter 2009, <http://www.meforum.org/2045/fethullah-gulens-grand-ambition> (Feb 27, 2009)

¹¹ Greg Barton, “A response to Rachel Sharon-Krespin's “Fethullah Gülen's grand ambitions: Turkey's Islamist danger”, *Today's Zaman*, Feb. 11, 2009.

¹² Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government*, London: Manor Books, 1979, p. 59.

politicization of religion. The movement has reportedly stayed away from politics [...].”¹³ But, then he later says that “Gülen and his movement have been supporting democracy, a liberal market economy, a secular state, freedoms, human rights and so on since the emergence of the movement.”¹⁴ To me that is not staying away from politics. It is a clear political stance, but it has not been advocated through the classical political institutions of the representative parliamentary democratic system. I also think that Yilmaz is closing the debate a bit prematurely. Gülen says the use of Islam as an instrument in politics harms Islam. But does that really contradict the analysis that Gülen and the movement wants to Islamize society? I still think it is clear that Gülen wants to Islamize society. But that does not really mean anything specific. If Islam is the container of all desired values of democracy it will be synonymous to Islamize and to democratize society. When describing his ideal society Gülen says that:

The Qur’an addresses the whole community and assigns it almost all the duties entrusted to modern democratic systems. [---] Islam recommends a government based on a social contract. People elect the administrators and establish a council to debate common issues. Also, the society as a whole participates in auditing the administration. Especially during the rule of the first four caliphs (632-661), the fundamental principles of government mentioned above – including free elections – were fully observed.¹⁵

So, we can see that for Gülen there is no contradiction between Islam and democracy, but he also stresses that Islam can not be compared to democracy. Democracy is merely a political system, Islam is a religion, and as such contains so much more and is concerned with a whole range of fields that are not connected to democracy. But the social and worldly ideals of Islam can be compared with, and found to support, democracy, even though Gülen also stresses that “Islam does not propose a certain unchangeable form of government or attempt to shape it. Instead, Islam establishes fundamental principles that orient a government’s general character, leaving it to the people to choose the type and form of government according to time and circumstances.”¹⁶

¹³ Ihsan Yilmaz, ”Jane’s Gülen movement Analysis: An Orientalist misreading (2)”, *Today’s Zaman*, Feb. 9, 2009.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fethullah M. Gülen, *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*. New Jersey: the Light, 2004, p. 17.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

So Rubin's and Sharon-Krespin's concerns that Gülen is set on re-establishing the sultanate does not have any empirical support in his writings. On the contrary he is explicitly critical of the theocratic state of Iran and of the historic sultanate as a break from the egalitarian system of the first four caliphs.¹⁷ Two things might be said though. Gülen does not explicitly state how often free elections should be held, so the critic's fear of a possible free election of an Islamic despot in Turkey can not be totally countered. One can question whether such a solution is in line with Gülen's ideas, though, and quote passages like the conclusion to his analysis of the increasing global connections in today's society: "making it inevitable that democratic governments which respect personal rights will replace oppressive regimes."¹⁸

The historical accuracy of the description of the rule of the first caliphs as fundamentally democratic can be questioned.¹⁹ But in this context it might be more relevant to look at the ideological use Gülen makes of the example.

Yilmaz is definitely right in questioning the use of the word Islamist for anyone who argues that Islam has ideals that would improve society, but he makes it too easy for himself when he leaves the question after showing that Islam should not be a tool for politics.²⁰

The Gülen movement as a social and political movement

I think it is accurate to claim that the Gülen movement is a social movement, and that Gülen is a social movement intellectual. I will therefore implement a brief social movement analysis on his writings, as one method for reading political texts.

Fethullah Gülen inspires people who then act as a movement with political implications, but not by classical political means. Creating parties is not the only way of being political. More and more social engagement is channelled through less strictly delineated social movements and networks. The debate about new social movements started in the 1980s. "Social movement" became a label for a wide variety of collective action. This debate was closely connected to the debate about the new post-society. New social movements became a label for those movements that had been born after WWII, where political arguments are expressed in

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 17. and Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*, p. 151.

¹⁸ Fethullah M.Gülen. *Toward a global civilization of love and tolerance*. New Jersey: the Light, 2004, p. 230.

¹⁹ Marshall G. S.Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and history in a World civilization, vol 1*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

²⁰ Yilmaz, "Jane's Gülen movement Analysis".

association with popular culture and identities connected to music and fashion. The Gülen movement is not connected to popular culture in this way, Gülen himself have been critical of the tendencies to produce religious uniforms and other markers of separate identities.²¹

A social movement at least includes some kind of collective identity, an understanding of a collective agent, and a shared understanding that the actions of the movement have a vaguely defined goal for a different and better social life. This is a form of political mobilisation.²²

A social movement entails a collective identity. The identity-forming processes that creates this collective identity can be reconstructed from a set of different practices. To form a social movement and a collective identity around it one has, according to sociologist Håkan Thörn, to define

- a) the problematic conditions in society
- b) the causes for these problems
- c) the opponents of the movement
- d) who belong to the 'we' of the movement
- e) some strategies for action to solve the problem
- f) an utopia, a goal for the movement

This has almost always been done in text, and these texts can be called movement texts.²³ Gülen is a movement intellectual, a writer of movement texts. Some of his texts can be interpreted through the scheme presented above. But even in the texts that can best be read in relation to this model Gülen's work is less sociopolitically directed than most others texts normally seen as movement texts of for example the labour movement, the women's movement, the environmental movement, or the political texts of radical Islamic intellectuals such as Sayyid Qutb or Maulana Maududi.

²¹ Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*, pp. 140. where he also says that the head scarf is not a condition of Islam, and that "it's against the spirit of Islam to regard uncovered women as outside of religion."

²² Alain Touraine, *The voice and the eye: An analysis of social movements*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, and Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

²³ Håkan Thörn, *Modernitet, sociologi och sociala rörelser*, Göteborg: Kompendiet, 1997.

A very brief analysis of the book *Towards a global civilization of love and tolerance* using this framework can give this: The problematic conditions in society (a) according to Gülen are less political than moral. Despite technological gains that have led to material ease, society today is foremost a society of division that has made a brake with traditional values. It is an egoistic and intolerant society, Gülen says. The causes for these problems (b) are the turn from religion and love and the break between science and spirituality. The opponents (c) are the materialistic and antireligious modernists, and also those Muslims who deem all scientific interest as Western and therefore evil. Gülen describes a 'we' (d) of loving, tolerant and educated Muslims in tune both with tradition and scientific knowledge and technology. But this description is rather broad and vague. The clearest portrait is given of the golden generation, which is more of a future we, since Gülen does not count himself as belonging to this group. The strategy (e) is to educate the future generation, to make them into ideal humans. This is no direct political strategy, but it does have a political goal, the creation of a different and better society. There is also an utopia (f) in Gülen's thinking: the future ideal society, the coming civilization of love and tolerance.

The Gülen movement can according to this perspective be seen as a social movement, and as such it has a kind of political organisation. And Gülen's texts around which it is formed also have political significance as movements text.

Classical conservatism: an extremely brief introduction

Conservatism is an ideology characterized by its respect for the established traditions and its wish to uphold the traditional institutions of society.²⁴ Often conservatism includes a critique of rationalistically motivated changes in society, it holds that social reform must respect the collected wisdom in the established order, and think that lasting social institutions can only be built on religious bonds. The state is often seen as a natural organisation with an individual identity. It is a defence for the old order, often articulated in times of revolutionary political changes in society. It first arose as a response to the French revolution, with a classical articulation in Britain in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the revolution in France* from 1790, in France itself Joseph de Maistre saw the revolution as going against the divinely sanctioned order represented by the kingdom. In Germany Johan Gottfried von Herder elaborated the idea of a natural *volks gemeinschaft* with its own particular language, law, literature and

²⁴ My presentation of conservatism is as brief and traditionalistic as possible, for further details see Robert Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream or reality*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, and Ted Honderich, *Conservatism*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1990.

religious tradition. The nation is created in a long historical evolution that has given it peculiar form and content. Our true belonging is to our people, and a patriotic spirit is essential in human life.

Conservatism today is democratic, even though it has never been a driving force in democratization.

Mapping the Western political ideology in Gülen's writings

The political conservatism of Fethullah Gülen is clear and consistent. It is also clearly democratic. He explicitly dismisses all the traditional Western political ideologies except for conservatism.

We do not believe that anything new will emerge from the tatters of capitalism, or the fantasy of communism, or the debris of socialism, or the hybrids of social democracy, or old-fashioned liberalism. The truth of the matter is if there is a world open to a new world order, it is our world.²⁵

This quote not only shows that the classical ideologies except for conservatism are openly rejected. It also articulates Gülen's project of bringing about a new world in a clearly political context. It is not only that the coming alternative will be different from the politically shaped ones, it is specific political ideologies that have proven unable to create a good world. And I think it is significant that conservatism is not mentioned in this context.

Gülen has repeatedly stated that Islam is no ideology, it is a religion and it can not be made into a political tool. I take this as an argument that Gülen can have an attachment to a Western political ideology, since Islam cannot function as such. As I will try to show the ideological connotations of Gülen's social vision is classically conservative. In an interview with Nevval Sivindi Gülen said that "Islam can seem attractive to both rightist politicians for its conservative ideas and to leftist politicians with its ideas on sharing."²⁶ But in Gülen's writings these leftist possibilities are not explored, in contrast to the conservative ones. On the contrary he repeatedly criticizes socialism.

²⁵ Fethullah M. Gülen, *The Statue of our souls: Revival in Islamic thought and activism*, New Jersey: The Light, 2005, p. 24.

²⁶ Nevval Sevindi, *Contemporary Islamic Conversations: M. Fethullah Gülen on Turkey, Islam, and the West*, New York: SUNY Press, 2008, p. 64.

In contrast to non-conservative Western political thinkers that often views society as built on antagonism and any commonality as built on interests, Gülen views society as an organic harmonious whole. “When one tries to redirect toward a spiritual life there will always be consensus, agreement, and solidarity, whereas, if one is to rely merely on change, then one is likely to witness disputes, divisions, and even fights.”²⁷

Gülen sees national belonging as an innate identity and describes family and nation as man’s natural communities. Women and men are viewed as complementary and therefore the family becomes the smallest unit where we can become complete.²⁸ His view of societal cooperation is thus classically conservative. Different groups in society might also seem complementary in Gülen’s understanding.

All relationships of authority-subject, employer-employee, landlord-tenant, landowner-peasant, artist-admirer, attorney-client, teacher-student will become different aspects of the unity of the whole.²⁹

Gülen is an idealist, to create a better civilization the task is primarily about moral change, not institutional change. When society becomes saturated with moral individuals, then it will become a society of love and tolerance. There is a harmonic, organic sense of community among humans. “The strongest relationship among individuals in the family, society and nation is that of love”, he says.³⁰ This conservatism puts Gülen more in line with thinkers like Hegel, than with more pessimistic conservatives such as Hobbes. But in contrast to the classical conservatives Gülen is a modern democrat that makes clear that no one must be sacrificed for the good of the broader collective. Probably the most used qu’ranic quote in Gülen’s English publications is “To kill one man is to kill all mankind”.³¹

Since true reform in Gülen’s understanding comes from the bottom up there is no big need to discuss the practical institutionalization of justice, love and respect.

²⁷ Gülen, *Toward a global civilization of love and tolerance*, p. 101.

²⁸ Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*, pp. 133.

²⁹ Gülen, *Statue of our souls*, p. 102.

³⁰ Gülen, *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*, pp. 123.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Gülen has always been a strong defender of the state as the legitimate form of the nation; Hakan Yavuz even calls him a statist.³² In his constant critique of terrorism one important argument is that according to Islamic law only states have the authority to declare war.³³ He has also been supportive of the military's defence of the Turkish state against alleged anarchic tendencies.³⁴ He often emphasises the importance of patriotism and pride in the Turkish nation, something that is most obvious in the interviews with Nevval Sivindi published in English as *Contemporary Islamic conversations*. The Turkish tradition honoured by Gülen is not only Islamic; it is also pre-Islamic strands "which regards water and trees as sacred and which prohibits their destruction." He also celebrates "the equal place of women in the Turkish tradition" and states that "Turks are a modern society."³⁵

I can't see that he says that the members of the golden generation should refrain from seeking political power. But the true transformation of society can never come about if the people do not become moral. This is a classical conservative scepticism towards the possibilities of radical imposed change. Reforms must come gradually and slowly without altering the traditional structures of society. Gülen's positive view of the Ottoman state can also be seen as classically conservative. The structures of the laicist Turkish republic do not have the organic ties to the Turkish people that the Ottoman institutions had. The kemalist project is a radical attempt to impose new and unnatural institutions on the nation. And any lasting institution must be built on religious fundamentals as Edmund Burke stated in the *Reflections on the revolution in France*. Gülen says: "As with all other nations, our essential characteristics are religion and language, history and motherland."³⁶

His ideal society is the Muslim society of the first four caliphs, and in Gülen's presentation of this historical period they are leaders chosen in free elections. After their time the leadership of the Muslim state became tied to dynasties and thus left the original democratic spirit of Islam. Islam has no despotic aspect according to Gülen.³⁷ Neither is there any open discrimination on who can be elected leader, he states the example of Aisha leading an army,

³² Hakan Yavuz quoted in Sevindi, *Contemporary Islamic conversations*, pp. 128.

³³ Gülen, *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*, p. 129.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 135.

³⁵ Sevindi, *Contemporary Islamic conversations*, pp. 72.

³⁶ Gülen, *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*, p. 85.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 119.

which is opening also for the possibility of women as leaders, even if gender issues can't be said to be one of Gülen's major interests. Also in this area he is classically conservative.³⁸

Some conclusions, and remarks on intercultural dialogues

Gülen is apolitical in that his mission is about creating good, God loving individuals, a new golden generation. But he is political in that the members of this golden generation shall become examples for others and thus transform the world. He also has a coherent and openly stated conservative ideology. Even if it represents a small part of his overall intellectual work.

Those who try to argue that Gülen is not a defender of democracy can not find any support in his writings. He defends the right of the individual and says that open elections is the only legitimate way to political power.

Gülen is a conservative democrat. I think this opens for an interesting discussion about Aayan Hirsi Ali's critique of leftist liberal Europeans support for Islamic movements in the Netherlands and Europe. Often a leftist support for Muslim organisation seems to come from solidarity with the oppressed in society, a kind of identification with the enemy of the enemy. Hirsi Ali criticizes the liberals and the Left for applying double standards, saying that they are being more forgiving towards Muslims than toward other groups in society. She does not like that support, since she sees Islam as a contradiction to modernization.³⁹

Gülen does not support the kind of repressive Islam that Hirsi Ali criticises (and wrongfully attribute to anyone calling themselves Muslim). Gülen and his followers seem to be ideologically more in tune with the Christian democrats than the multiculturalists and leftists love to hackle. If the leftist multicultural support for an Islamic presence in Europe is seen as a voltairian support for the right to express views that they might even hate, then it is nothing awkward about it. But Hirsi Ali has a point in that the conservatism of Gülen might be more troubling to those circles, if it was more clearly understood.

Taking politics in another direction: the decolonial option

³⁸ Ibid., p. 121. See also Patrik Hällzon, "The Gülen movement: Gender and practice", paper presented at "Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement" November 14-15, 2008 at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

³⁹ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, London: Free Press, 2008.

I will now open a rather different aspect of the meaning of politics that is actually more important and interesting than trying to pin Gülen to an established Western political position. Even if that was possible to do.

Going back to a statement I have already quoted a part of I will take the argument in a different direction.

Turks are a modern society, even according to Western references. Moreover, there is no need for Western terms and theories to be the only point of reference. There is no such thing as modernizing only in the Western way.⁴⁰

This is another kind of political statement. And an important one. To tie politics only to the established ideologies of the Western tradition is to keep on as if there was no alternative to Western modernity. Walter Mignolo says that modernity is only the rhetorical side of the Western tradition, the practical side he calls coloniality. Today we witness efforts to get away from the modern/colonial distribution of power and wealth in many parts of the world. These are in many ways material struggles, looking for more decent living standards. But ultimately it is also a question of dignity. Up till very recently it has been impossible to articulate a political struggle from outside the realm of modernity/coloniality. Today more and more thinkers from hitherto oppressed, indigenous traditions are claiming their right to think from their own perspectives. According to Mignolo the practice of emancipation and de-colonization starts with the recognition that also knowledge has been colonized under modernity. The political alternative needs to be articulated at an epistemic level, as a delinking from Western hegemonic epistemology. A key point in such a political struggle is free education.⁴¹

Throughout his work Gülen shows that there are other ways of being modern than the Western one, he even says that “my main objective has always been to create global

⁴⁰ Sevindi, *Contemporary Islamic conversations*, p. 73.

⁴¹ Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking”, in *Cultural Studies*, 21:2, 2007. I have analysed Gülen from a mignolian perspective, and presented the concepts more in depths, earlier, in Klas Grinell, “Beyond East and West: Fethullah Gülen and border thinking”, in Ihsan Yilmaz (ed.), *Peaceful coexistence: Fethullah Gülen's initiatives in the contemporary world*, Leeds Metropolitan University Press, London, 2007. Other important influences for this analysis is Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000 and Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Asians think?: Understanding the divide between East and West*, Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2001.

education, which will become an alternative to the Western model of cultural imperialism.”⁴² These are words that are very hard to reconcile with a Western conservative stance, even if there can be conservative critique of capitalism and modern society as a whole. But Gülen’s works are also concerned with a different scale of politics. Maybe we can say that the fact that he is being conservative from an Islamic position makes Gülen’s political message radical in relation to capitalism and the global Western hegemony. Maybe this is also something that the European Left sees and can acknowledge in its support for Islamic movements such as the Gülen movement.

Political struggle can only succeed when the sought alternative have a firm grounding in an ontology and epistemology of its own. Deconlonial emancipation is reached in an intercultural dialogue with modernity based on a sense of dignity coming from the own tradition.

I would argue, as I have done before, that Gülen is a thinker developing such an epistemic alternative, and that the movement is a source for such a dignity. To me, that is a significant political act, connected with the most interesting and pressing global political debates being articulated today in countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Bolivia and Ecuador.

⁴² Sevindi, *Contemporary Islamic conversations*, p. 74.