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**‘The Facts, The Whole Facts and Nothing But The Facts’:
An Epistemological Analysis of The So-Called Islam Question.**

Coline Senac

Abstract : Starting from the O. Roy’s argument that “we have facts and data” could certify the validity of any arguments, this article attempts to analyze epistemologically the process of constructing the meanings related to Islam, and more particularly Islamism. It highlights the inadequacy of positivist and empirical methods that constructs “matter-of-facts” and “valued data” from the observation of social interactions without recognizing the mechanisms of normalization embedded in social theories from the study of social and political processes within a particular social entity. Oriented by expectations and assumptions, scholars specialized in Islam study the Islam question by constructing from a set of theoretical tools all the meanings related to Islam so that when the concept is theorized, it becomes significant in a commodified reality. However, this reality is governed by a power-knowledge matrix from which power relations established the effective rationality that lead the nature of the knowledge, whether it is prescriptive or logical.

Keywords: Epistemology; Sociology; Critical Thinking; Islamism; Positivism; Empirism; Social Sciences; O. Roy; F. Volpi; G. Kepel.

As soon as O. Roy claimed in *Global Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* that proofs such as “facts and data” (2004, pp.6-7) could be sufficient to certify the validity of the arguments, F. Volpi wrote an article called “we have facts and data” (2010, pp.1-20) to criticize him, arguing that having facts and data does not more answer the so-called Islam question as it defines the field of questioning itself, with the assumption there is an Islam question to deal with. As a crucial point, F. Volpi poses M. Arkoun’s question: “can one speak of a scientific understanding of Islam or one must rather talk about a western way of imagining Islam?” (2010, p.5). For F. Volpi, the best way to apprehend this question is to study how Westerners imagine Islam. It is the only conceivable option, especially in the context when social sciences and fundamentalist discourses remain too difficult to be analyzed. Yet: why do we separate two epistemological issues that are highly correlated? Obviously, theorists (E. Said, H. Foster) that prioritize the focus on the representations of Islam, Orientalism or the Otherness, are always trapped by the endless division between representation and an unapproachable reality apparently misrepresented. Rather, my argument in this article is to demonstrate that the language determines the way the reality is represented by constituting it. Thus, this is the western scientific understanding of Islam that develops western ways of imagining it. So, instead of studying Islam from the positioning of the ‘we’ in “we have facts and data” that is nowadays the most common way to acknowledge the question of subjectivity, I rather study the relative values and matters established by positivist and empirical “facts and data” that constitute the meaning of the concept ‘Islamism’, more and more often used to directly refer to Islam.

Because of the same root 'Islam', Islamism and Islam appears to be equivalent although Islam is the religious faith of muslim communities whereas Islamism becomes more and more related to a 'political Islam'. So how can be a religious faith political? Of course, the definitions still differ depending on the way the subject is studied and what are the main theorist's assumptions associated to the subject. For instance, O. Roy defines Islamism as a "political reading of the Qu'ran", an "inclusive order" and an "ideology" (1994, p.39-41). As such, the terms that define 'Islamism' contains value judgments in order to build up a normative way of conceiving a certain 'political' dimension of Islam. But the more the meaning of a concept is legitimated by the spheres of power, the more the spread of a meaning by the strength of power fluxes determines its condition of regeneration and retransmission within a discourse by any individuals from different spheres of society. So, in general the reiteration of the meaning reproduces the norm itself so far. Therefore, the spheres of power indirectly operate a slippery slope of a concept's meaning which consequently change the nature of the knowledge by becoming more or less prescriptive.

With the premise that science constitutes the concept 'Islamism', I first argue that positivism and empiricism paradoxically entail normative facts and valued data, which produce/reproduce the world meanings and build the imaginary narratives related to it. Alternatively, positivist and empiricist methods develop normative ways of studying social sciences that transforms all patterns of social interactions in commodified administrated system. From this statement, I point out that the instrumentalisation of the commodified reality by the power spheres define the condition of the rationality so that it consequently determines the logics and the contingency of individuals' life., Also the struggle against power can be reached by the implementation of logical theories within this power-knowledge matrix that always regenerate the commodified reality in the aim of struggling against the prescriptive dimension of the knowledge.

Language as constituent of Islamism

Starting from the article "We have facts and data", I will distinguish the different meanings attributed to Islamism by focusing on the 'what' and 'is' of the question: "What is Islamism?".

First, the definition given by F. Volpi clarifies the conceptual haze about Islamism which is admitted in relational terms as "a political Islam" related to "the recognition of the Islamic tradition in social processes" (2010, p.18). The emphasis on relational terms refers to the idea that there is no essence to Islamism because there is no physical objet that is Islamism. Indeed, the language itself not only describes, but also constitutes the objects of a physical reality by referring it. So how does it work? For instance, we see a dark-skinned person with a djellaba and a beard walking on the street. We identity him as a person, but as soon as his typifications could define him as one of the common representations of a Muslim, we could think he is a Muslim although he really is or not. The fact that he is perceived as a 'Muslim' and recognized as such results from the relationship between the different signifiers that constitute his conceptual 'Muslim' significance. As a master signifier, the word 'Muslim' accumulates meanings and is progressively correlated with other terms that are consolidated by the recurrence and the frequency of their meanings depending on their use and interpretation. This universe of meanings develops the speakers' imagination about what/how/why/where is a Muslim, and consequently transcends the physical reality. Yet we have established from the observation of his typifications the fact that he is a Muslim although whether what we have observed corresponds to

the reality of his being a Muslim or not (unless you directly ask him). Also, the typifications related to the attribute 'Muslim' can change over the time and the place we observe this situation. Furthermore, words commonly designate an object that refer to the reality in which its meaning coherently floats depending on the context and the use. From now on, I want to demonstrate the constituting processes involved in the construction of the meaning 'Islamism' in terms of different geographical and temporal contexts. First, Western and Oriental societies have different conceptions about the meaning of Islamism. As F. Volpi underlines: "in Western social sciences description, political Islam is brought under the general framework of political determination, with religion being a residual category of explanation" (2010, p.19). On the contrary, from the perspective of the Islamic tradition, there is an attempt to contextualize these processes within a religious worldview, with politics being a residual category. Second, O. Roy propose two different definitions of Islamism in *the failure of political Islam* (1994) and *Global Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (2004) in the space of ten years. In 1994, O. Roy considers Islamism as the "political ideology of Islam" (1994, Preface, xi) that appears to be a "societal phenomenon" (1994, Preface, x) whereas in 2004, he considers that Islamism has become a "post-islamism" (2004, p.4) with the reaffirmation of the autonomy of the political, of the struggle for power, of the logic for national or ethnic interests, and of the precedence of politics over religion. In conclusion, the meaning of a word can drastically differ whether it is defined according to a geographical dimension (between West and Orient) or/and a historical one (even over a period as short as ten years).

Besides, how can Islamism still exist despite this wide range of meanings? Although we can think that meanings are, in a sense, perfectly connected by the notion, they are rather correlated by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one feature is common to all, but still is what the philosopher Wittgenstein calls a 'family-resemblance':

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all — but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language'. (Ludwig Wittgenstein; 1956, p.65)

On different levels, the language develops networks of meanings correlated into words, lexical fields, and sentences as an auto-referential system of significations. If it remains coherent, meanings can be correlated to another, but also attributed to one or several significations. Historically, Islamism has been created in the 1990's in France by mainly G. Kepel and O. Roy as it has 'coherently' corresponded to the emergence of contemporary forms of political Islam in relation to power politics. Simply, the term comes from the addition of the word *intégrisme* (term previously related to Christian extremists and closed from the meaning 'fundamentalism') and the notion of Islam. Particularly in *Islamic suburbs. Emergence of a religion in France*, G. Kepel (1991, p.15) argues that: 'the existence of mindsets from a strong community construction about the Islam reference within which are expressed centrifugal tendencies of French society's values, as well as its centripetal movements. But they are frequently determined by the adversity'. If the term 'Islam' is replaced by 'Christian', the sentence becomes: 'the existence of mindsets from a strong community construction about the Christian references within which are expressed centrifugal tendencies of French society's values, as well as its centripetal movements. But they are frequently determined by the adversity'. As you can judge,

the sentence is still coherent if we can understand it, but appears to be false. Perhaps, because it is not normal to understand how a Christian from a Judeo-Christian traditional country that shared yet common moral values are led by the adversity. In other terms, if we are talking about a Christian, we interpret the sentence as false or as a truism, but if we talk about a Muslim, we determine the sentence as true. Hence, this is not a question of semantic anymore, but rather a question of ontology. So, the language refers to objects in an utterance, which is firstly interpreted according to the context and the conditions the sentence is read in, and then is understood regarding the tacitly agreed upon consensus on social and moral values. Accordingly, language is first based on the premise of the recognition of the term and the understanding of it; and second, language is interpreted through the share of consensual values transmitted by the meaning that depends on the context and the condition it is read in. So that in everyday life as in science, words transmit by their meanings a set of values from a certain time, a certain space and depending on a certain context.

As the Duhem-Quine thesis about “theory-ladenness of observation” (Zammito; 2014, p.17) explains, there is no neutral observational vocabulary as words are not completely free from theory. So what counts as the interpretation or the meaning of an observation is at least a partly-theory dependent. Dependent from a logical set of theories, the fact is unable to face down the theories; or else, the isolated fact is instantly refuted or refitted in the aim of protecting the theory itself. When Daniel Varisco intends to replace Islamism by “fundamentalism” (2010, p.33) as a way to still keep the ‘extremist’ dimension of the term without negatively connoted Islam, or when H. Fradkin scrap off the meanings subtended by ‘Islamism’ because of its encouragement of ‘negative stereotyping’ (2010, p.79), their arguments can be considered as ‘false’. Why? As previously claimed, the logic has to be still remains intact. An interesting theoretician such as S. Jackson uses the idea of “slippery language” (2006, p.3) to argue that a notion is not a given but can turns out to be slippery and unstable. For instance, M. Ayoob (2007, p.2) claims the meaning of Islamism is slipping into ‘religious’ and ‘theological’ dimension, which misleads the primary consideration of Islam as political ideology rather than a religion or a theology. Nevertheless, it leads to the conception that people have assumptions of what words should be, and therefore have an intention in saying what it rather be. What does the intention imply? As the philosopher D. Davidson (1976, p.689) claims: ‘to know an intention with which the action was done is to know a primary reason why someone acted as he did’. In analyzing O. Roy’s work, I have found that the reason why I has written *The failure of political Islam* is to counter-argue the ‘apology of Islam’ (“everything is in the Quran and the Sunna, and Islam is the best religion”) (1994, p.11) whereas, for *Globalization*, he explains that his aim is to “open up some new lines of intellectual inquiry” (2004, p.5). However, to know the intention is not necessarily to know the primary reason in full details. Hence the analysis of the ‘master signifier constitution’ that emphasizes on rather the arbitrary although oriented way of meaning things to highlight the normative assumptions and moral values affiliated to it. Moreover, this approach helps us to understand how reiterated meanings generalized the significance of a word that becomes relatively truthful as validated by the positivism and empirical methods and instrumentalized by the power.

The underdetermination of social sciences

First, it is important to study the logical processes underpinned by the positivism and the empiricism in the aim of pointing out the inherent paradoxes that they are composed of. Even though their paradoxical principles lead the social sciences to be underdetermined, the power still legitimize and claim it as providing a truthful knowledge.

Led by A. Comte in the 18th century (initially called social physics; 'sociology' term appears in 1839), social sciences are issued from the positivist approach that reorganize society by scientific principles, as if they were natural sciences. According to J. H. Turner, A. Comte claims that "all phenomena is subject to invariable natural laws, and therefore sociologists must use their observations to uncover the laws that govern the social world" (2012, p.40). Therefore, (1) sociological theory is not to be concerned with causes but, rather, with the laws that describe the basic and fundamental relations of properties in the social world; (2) sociological theory must reject arguments by final causes because it is issued from results of a phenomenon for the social whole; (3) the goal of sociological activity is to reduce the number of theoretical principles in the aim of developing the fundamental properties from the social world. So, what Auguste Comte produces is the demarcation of science from all non-science and then, the development of unity vectors among empirical observations to be fit in general social principles. Furthermore, observations of empirical events even lead to generate, confirm, and modify sociology's laws whilst being used as tools or instruments to modify the social world. Yet J. H. Zammito asks: "does the logical positivist and empiricist model of logical entailment characteristic of formal-mathematical systems combined with protocol sentences for evidential warrant can serve as an adequate analogue for theories of social interactions" (2014, p.10)? In my opinion, the modelling of social interactions upon the natural sciences' framework simply drop out social processes that partly constitute the mechanisms of the interaction itself. We can think at least about the social structures that shape the social activities or the agents' perspectives that define the social actions. Accordingly, the social world is partially studied whilst remaining totally ruled by general incomplete laws. So much so that I consider that the positivist and empiricist model is principally inappropriate for social sciences.

Beyond this inadequacy between social and natural methods, the positivist and empiricist methods are inherently paradoxical as they based their facts on a certain 'sense' of the observation. Despite of this conception of 'matter-of-facts' that completely contravene the core ambition to build up a set of rational social laws, the observations can still claim to validity. Indeed, J. Dewey considers that the elaborate systems of science are born not of reason but of impulses to handle, move about, to hunt, to uncover, to mix things separated and divide things combined, to talk and to listen (1930, p.196). How? For instance, R. Rorty demonstrates that science is based on sense contents because the source of the fact is the externalization of the norm (2008, p.249). And he explains it with this example: "we suppose that, as a contingent reality, a community (that you are part of) despise people who do A". The members of the community often say that they rather die than do A. If you identify yourself with them, you will thus say: 'Us are not doing A'. If you are wilt from your community and identified as an anthropologist or a historian, you will report the fact that: "They rather die than doing A". In some extend, the source of the norm is your internationalization of the fact. Conversely, the source of the fact is the externalization of the norm. So, the norm corresponds to the presupposition that transcend the significance of the observation. Therefore, how can we reply to G. Maxwell that claims that the referents of most of the statements used in everyday life and in science are not sense contents but, rather, physical objects and other publicly observable entities (1962, p.13)? Indeed, the referents of the statement are

not sense contents, simply because they are built from it. When we translate an observation through the linguistic system of thought that we possess, we give an interpretation of what we consider as valuable as we qualify it by what it is supposed to be. As D. Davidson claims: when we explain an action by giving the reason, we describe the action by placing the action in a pattern that leads to its explanation (1976, p.685). In other terms, the process of rationalization operates by giving valuable reasons to observable actions. Therefore, the rationalized actions are processed to be validated as “matter-of-facts” (Zammito; 2014, p.26) because they inherently contain a facticity and a normality. In brief, facts are normative depending on the perspective and the context from where the actions are issued.

Yet, the empiricism and the positivism defend the supremacy of the truth. Therefore, how can the social sciences determine the truthiness and the falseness of their knowledge if their rationalization processes are based on normativity? With the recognition of ‘matter-of-facts’ and ‘valued data’, the truth rather equals to rational acceptability. It is established from the validation of what J. Dewey (1941, p.170) have called the “warranted assertability”, “justifiability” and “verifiability” of what we believe justified or rather, what we are justified in believing or asserting. As R. Rorty (1982, p.142) claims, justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but rather of conversation, of discourse, of social practice. Through the language, these interactions are implicitly led by ‘matter-of-facts’ and ‘valued data’ that have been controversially legitimated as rational. Consequently, the explanations of our actions are defined by the language and therefore by the norms and moral values. While through our rationalization process, we could either incorporate, reject or modulation the results of the action’s interpretation depending on our own moral constitution. However, B. Flyvbjerg considers that rationality purely becomes the principal strategy in the exercise of power as it attempts to conduct the field of our rationalization through the normative “matters-of-facts” and “valued data” knowledge (1998, p.228). Led by the power, the rationality is more powerful to influence our actions, feelings and thoughts. Conversely, it shows the power of rationality in the case if we incorporate the norms embedded in the rationality. Highlighting the intertwined relationship between power and rationality, theory is therefore always for someone and for some purpose. So finally, power and rationality attempts to build up forms of institutional structures that transcend individual agency, which consequently provokes a recognition and acceptance of prescriptive knowledge by the individuals, such as the theories proposed by Olivier Roy about Islamism that are rationally unacceptable.

The powered knowledge

From now on, I will analyze the intertwined relationship of the power and the knowledge in the processes of the production of truth to show how prescriptive the knowledge can be if “the greater is the power, the less is the rationality” (B. Flyvbjerg; 1998, p.228). The aim is to criticize the arguments that O. Roy has used by a rhetorical analysis. Then, I will analyze the processes of normalization that influence the conduct of the individuals by using M. Foucault’s framework.

Is a true statement a claim to power or power that claims a true statement? The possession of power restrains the free use of reason as the effects of the power bounds the contingency of the truth. According to B. Flyvbjerg, “the

privilege of power and its rationality is the freedom to define reality” (1998, p.229). In other terms, the more power obtains, the less need it gets to understand how reality is really constructed or to prove the trueness of its statements. Thus, the knowledge can be prescriptive without being validated with evident proofs. The debate about the Muslim question reaches the point that I esteem that certain specialists such as O. Roy or G. Kepel are supported so well by the power that their label as ‘specialists on Islam’ can be sufficient to declare statements that are highly valued discriminative and rationally intangible. As M. Crotty has claimed: “articulating scientific knowledge is one thing; claiming that scientific knowledge is utterly objective and that only scientific knowledge is valid, certain and accurate is another” (2003, p.29). Obviously, O. Roy applies rigorously the scientific methods to define his terminology, his approach, his objectives although use rhetoric speeches that prescribes “matter-of-fact” and “valued data”. In *the failure of political Islam*, O. Roy claims for instance that:

the Islamist movement is in keeping with two tendencies. One, of course, is the call to fundamentalism, centered on the Sharia: this call is as old as Islam itself and yet still new because it has never been fulfilled. [...] The other tendency, more recent and therefore more difficult to see, is that of anti-colonialism, of anti-imperialism, which today has simply become anti-Westernism - from Cairo to Tehran, the crowds that in the 1950s demonstrated under the red or national flag now march beneath the green banner. (1994; p.4)

First, the idea that the Sharia is as old as Islam itself is tautological: the Sharia (not the Sharia law) comes from one of the Qu’uran’s verses, which means that it have been revealed by Allah to Muhammed in 610 so at the same time as Islam have been consequently created. By using this rhetoric figure, he misleads the readers by implying that the common modern conception of the Sharia law is deeply rooted in the History. Second, when he claims that people from the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialism movement are the same from the anti-Westernism one, he creates from deductive reasoning a parallelism between three elements from three different contexts that have no common features except that they are part of the same geographical region (the Middle East). By the repetition of ‘anti’, he implicitly brings a negative connotation to those who are supposedly ‘anti’-colonialists/imperialists/westerners. Moreover, in *Globalization*, O. Roy (2004, p.40) established that: “the failure of political Islam means that politics prevail over religion, as is obvious in Iran” (without giving concrete examples of what is happening in Iran). By the use ‘obvious’, he claims a prejudice based on the belief that Iran is a failure of political Islam. This is a judgement held without any proof, so therefore it can’t be considered as a salient fact. So, without any examples and references, O. Roy develops statements that are not validated but somehow already legitimated. According to B. Flyvbjerg, the absence of rational arguments and factual documentations in support of certain statements may be more important indicators of power than recognizers of rationality (1998, p.229). Therefore, I argue that it is rather the power that legitimate a “considered-as-true” statement than a true statement that claims to power.

But how does the individual face this powered knowledge? According to M. Foucault, the individuals are subjects to the truth (1980, p.94) from which they become targets of power (Foucault; 1977, 136). As the power produces the discourse, it controls, selects and organizes the normative statements that individuals interiorize, which consequently extends upon the effects of power. The power is constantly exercised by means of surveillance and coercion rather than by means of order obligations distributed over time. And as a powered knowledge, it transforms all patterns of social interactions in commodified administrated system ruled by those who hold the power and consequently what they called the ‘truth’. By these two biases, the powered knowledge transcends the social order

and build up policies held by the administrative spheres to structure the entire social space from which the truth is established through the production of discourses. And, the individual - as a receptacle but also a transmitter of this prescriptive knowledge - becomes part of these mechanisms of power by perpetuating and renewing the discourses. Therefore, the individual, as an active subject of the regime of power, accepts the normative truth of the powered knowledge without even questioning its validity.

However, M. Foucault claims: “we are subject to the production of truth through power, therefore, we can’t exercise power except through the production of truth” (1980, p.93). As a dynamic flux, the power transits at some degree to all the subjects (although they have integrated the principles of coercion and discipline), which give them the opportunity to exercise an influence from the power-knowledge matrix. Eventually, the aim is to decrease the degree of power by increasing conversely the degree of rationality. And the result is truly logical: the less great becomes the power, better (more + more) is the rationality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the entire essay attempted to prove that there is facts, the whole facts, and finally nothing but the facts. It finally means that facts have no relation with the physical reality as it develops by the language a commodified one but also facts are just interpretations by the way theorists develop results depending on what they were looking for by finding a logic that could prove any assumptions. In fact, any facts are more valuable than another: they are just more or less acceptable depending on their degree of correlation with pre-existing theories that are currently legitimated by the power but also their potential degree of truthfulness according to the rationality truly accepted in this current situation. If there is a ‘objective’ way of seeing and defining Islamism, and by bias of consequence, Islam in general, it is mainly because it is legitimated as such.

As an auto-referential and auto-sufficient system, positivism and empiricism proposes paradoxically an interpretation and an arrangement of a world although still referring to the physical reality as a mean to continuously clarify the causes, contexts and consequences of the social interactions, by using principles rationally defined by natural sciences. Although these principles arise from the commodified reality of word-objects, their implementation within an administrative system world transcend the beings from the physical world by transforming them into objects. This process provokes a transformation that could be called a ‘sociogenesis’ by the way specific beings that are considered as epistemologically negative or inferior are manifested as ontologically negative or inferior by the force of the logic and the logos that is spread through the fluxes of power.

Whether it is more or less prescriptive, the knowledge produced through the constitution of a commodified reality is determined true by the effects of power that recognize it as coherent according to the subsequent rationality built up from all the theories that are necessary to understand our world. So, the trueness is not a sign of the truth anymore, but rather a recognizer of rationality and an indicator of power.

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