4 Islamisms and the Seeds of Disciplinary Power

In the previous chapter, the struggle for ideological hegemony was analysed primarily via looking at the Egyptian regime through the office of the three presidents. In this chapter, a further important part of the historical jigsaw composing the backdrops to women’s activism is discussed. The raison d’être and the consequent hegemonic ambitions of some of the Islamist regimes are analysed. The predominance of women’s activism during the early times is not comparable to the contemporary landscape. Though undoubtedly women would have played important roles, documentation of this is scarce, with the exception of Zaynab al-Ghazali’s own autobiography. Hence, this chapter is concerned mainly with the early period, the narratives of which are dominated by men.

In fitting this jigsaw together, seminal works of some of the ideologues of contemporary Islamist regimes are examined. I begin with an analysis of the prominent book of Sayyid Qutb, whose influence is felt by men and women activists alike. Other works examined are those of Shukri Mustafa and Abd al-Salam Faraj. In many ways, Qutb’s work pinpointed the direction to be taken, Mustafa’s ideology and activities clarified the practical implications and difficulties involved, and Faraj’s texts expounded on the necessary means of action.

SAYYID QUTB

On Social Relations

Qutb’s work is, with few exceptions, based on a clear-cut dichotomy between Islamic (good) and non-Islamic (bad). This binarism is not only pertinent to Qutb’s thought, but to much of the conceptualizations formulated within Islamist regimes. Concerned with the setting up of alternative state and society structures, the continuous comparison with existing socio-political entities (i.e. the Egyptian state, ‘the West’), is inevitable in almost all the writings and proposals. Furthermore, the following has to be read whilst keeping in mind that what is
being prepared and presented as Islamic teachings are part and parcel of the creation of a body of knowledge. The latter is then the focus of Islamist disciplinary power, which is meant simultaneously to elicit obedience and instil a feeling of empowerment in its adherents.

**Signposts on the Road**

As mentioned previously, this book by Sayyid Qutb was perceived by Islamists as an outstanding work of ideology which set out the main signposts along the road to an Islamic state. Islamist regimes either used it as their guide and based their own strategies on it (like the Society of Muslims and Jihad); or shunned it completely and attempted to distance themselves from it (like some, though by no means all, within the Muslim Brotherhood).

*Signposts* was an excellent indicator of Qutb's overall attitude towards, and perceptions of, authority and the state. As Kepel (1985: 46) lucidly put it: 'the book aspires to be both an instrument for the analysis of contemporary society and a guide for a vanguard whose task is to inaugurate the resurrection of the *ummã*. In short, it is a manifesto.'

**On Society and State**

In a chapter entitled 'Islam is the Real Civilisation', Sayyid Qutb expounds his views on societies that call themselves Muslim but are in fact *jahiliyya* (ignorance). Qutb's *jahiliyya* was a society ruled by an evil prince who had made himself an object of worship in God's place and who governed according to his own caprice instead of ruling on the basis of principles by the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (sayings of the prophet). *Jahiliyya*, then, is 'a combination of infidelity, decadence, and oblivious ignorance, similar to that prevailing in pre-Islamic Arabia' (Ibrahim 1980: 431). According to Qutb, there are only two distinct kinds of society within Islam: a Muslim one and a *jahiliyya*. Needless to say, the Muslim one is governed by Islam (which, to him, is faith, legislation, worship, social organization, theory of creation and behaviour). *Jahiliyya*, on the other hand, 'lacks Islam', in other words, lacks civilization:

Thus, a society whose legislation does not rest on divine law (shari‘a) is not Muslim, however ardently its individuals may