

Conceptual Totemization from the Middle East to the West: Epistemological Rigidity and the Shared Architecture of Theological and Secular Extremism

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received 26 June 2026 Received in revised form 02 August 2026 Accepted 05 August 2026 Published online 25 October 2026 Keywords: Conceptual Totemization, Cybernetics, Political Theology, Biopolitics, Epistemological Rigidity.	This paper investigates the paradoxical coexistence of late modernity's high complexity and geopolitical instability with widespread epistemological rigidity rather than adaptive flexibility. It argues that religious fundamentalism and secular extremism are not opposing phenomena along a linear spectrum of modernization but manifestations of an identical cognitive-structural mechanism termed totemization—the extraction of historically contingent signifiers from dynamic contexts and their calcification into absolute, unquestionable totems. The central hypothesis is that theological and secular dogmatism share a common cybernetic pathology: the severance of epistemic feedback loops that enable adaptive learning and self-correction. Employing a transdisciplinary methodology integrating cybernetics, psychoanalysis, political theology, and systems theory, the paper applies a symmetrical topology across three domains: Middle Eastern political theology, Western secular dogmatism, and modern biopolitical governance. To prevent neo-colonial methodological asymmetry, it incorporates Mulla Sadra's Harakat al-Jawhariyyah (Substantial Motion) to demonstrate adaptive flexibility within Islamic thought. The analysis reveals that the terror of the Lacanian Real drives the mechanical closure of the Luhmannian system, requiring an ontological scapegoat—the infidel, the subprime borrower, or the terrorist—to absorb internal contradictions and justify systemic rigidity. The paper concludes that theological rigidity, secular financialization, and biopolitical securitization share an identical cybernetic failure, and that systematic desacralization and structural friction are necessary to restore genuine civic discourse and adaptive capacity.

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Introduction: The Dialectics of Rigidity in Late Modernity

In the epoch of late modernity, an era fundamentally characterized by unprecedented global interconnectivity, hyper-financialization, and algorithmic velocity, we observe a paradoxical entrenchment of epistemological rigidity. As Zygmunt Bauman theorized in his conceptualization of liquid modernity, the contemporary condition is one where social form and institutions no longer retain their shape for long; they melt faster than the time it takes to forge them (Bauman, 2000). Concurrently, Ulrich Beck's formulation of the « Risk Society » illustrates that modernization itself has become its own central threat, producing systemic risks (ecological, financial, and nuclear) that outpace the governance structures designed to mitigate them (Beck, 1992). One might assume that a highly fluid, risk-intensive global environment would naturally necessitate and produce highly adaptive, epistemologically flexible political and social systems. Yet, the empirical reality of the 21st century demonstrates precisely the opposite: a global retreat into absolute dogmas, rigid ideological silos, and violently enforced metanarratives. The current strategic and intellectual landscape is messy, historically contingent, and spatially complex (Tuathail, 2002). Social entropy, geopolitical instability, and manufactured ecological risks define the contemporary condition (Aslan, 2025), yet responses frequently default to cognitive and political closure (Danilyan et al., 2022).

Conventional sociological and political analyses frequently treat religious fundamentalism and secular dogmatism as polar opposites on a linear spectrum of modernization. In this prevailing teleological narrative, rooted deeply in Enlightenment assumptions of linear progress, religious fundamentalism is viewed as a pathological regression, a reactionary retreat to pre-modern irrationality and mythos. Conversely, secular, market-driven, or technocratic dogmatism is heralded as the apex of rationalized governance, suffering only from occasional bureaucratic excesses rather than fundamental structural flaws.

This paper fundamentally challenges that dichotomy through a transdisciplinary methodology that meticulously integrates systems theory, psychoanalysis, and political theology. To rigorously test this hypothesis, we select the Middle East as our primary comparative context alongside the West. The Middle East represents a unique, highly volatile geopolitical and philosophical space where rapid, often externally imposed modernization collides violently with deeply mobilized political theology. It serves as an ideal structural foil to Western secularism, where the death of God (Nietzsche, 1974) supposedly cleared the ground for pure rationality. By placing these ostensibly divergent spheres in direct structural dialogue, we aim to expose their underlying cybernetic isomorphisms, structural similarities in how they process information, manage internal complexity, and maintain political power.

We must emphasize that this analysis rigorously avoids the false equivalence of homology. We do not argue that the Iranian Revolution and the Chicago School of Economics share historical, cultural, or material origins. Rather, we argue that when systems, regardless of their foundational content, prioritize self-preservation over adaptation self-preservation over

adaptation, they resort to a shared structural mechanism to eliminate complexity. They share a cybernetic failure rooted in what we term conceptual totemization. The totem, originally an anthropological construct denoting a sacred object binding a clan, is here transposed into the epistemological realm: it is a concept shielded from critique, elevated above the flow of time and communication, and utilized to justify the violent suppression of systemic variety.

Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning

To articulate the precise mechanism of conceptual totemization, this paper must synthesize and expose the structural gaps across three traditionally distinct bodies of literature: political theology, cybernetic systems theory, and post-Marxist psychoanalysis. While each domain has extensively mapped the contours of modernity, governance, and ideology, contemporary scholarship lacks a transdisciplinary framework that unites the mathematical precision of cybernetics with the psychological depth of the Lacanian subject to explain epistemological rigidity across both Eastern theology and Western securitization.

Political Theology and the Secular Divide

The foundational literature on political theology is heavily anchored in Carl Schmitt's seminal assertion that modern statecraft is merely secularized theology (Schmitt, 1985, 36). Scholarship following Schmitt, particularly the biopolitical framework of Giorgio Agamben, has successfully utilized this premise to critique the modern state's claim to pure rationality, demonstrating how the « state of exception » functions as a secularized miracle (Agamben, 1998).

However, the literature is sharply divided on the nature of secularism. Anthropologist Talal Asad, in *Formations of the Secular* (Asad, 2003), challenges the Schmittian homology, arguing that the secular is not simply a masked version of the religious, but a completely unique epistemic category with its own historical formations of power, pain, and agency. While Asad successfully proves that secularism and religion lack identical historical origins (homology), his framework does not account for the structural isomorphism we observe in late modernity. The existing literature extensively debates the origins of these systems, but rarely analyzes the mechanical, cybernetic similarities in how both fundamentalist and secular systems process environmental information and fail identically under stress.

Cybernetics and Social Autopoiesis

To understand this mechanical failure, we turn to systems theory. The foundational literature in hard cybernetics, spearheaded by W. Ross Ashby and Norbert Wiener, established the mathematical necessity of requisite variety for systemic survival (Ashby, 1956; Wiener, 1948). When translated into human governance, Stafford Beer's *Brain of the Firm* (Beer, 1972) attempted to apply cybernetic principles to industrial and political management, yet this early application was highly technocratic and largely ignored the messy realities of ideology and human psychology.

The critical leap occurred with Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems. Luhmann revolutionized the field by defining society exclusively as an autopoietic network of communication, rather than a collection of physical individuals (Luhmann, 1995). While Luhmann brilliantly mapped how social systems use communication to reduce environmental complexity, the cybernetic literature remains critically deficient in explaining intentional self-sabotage. Luhmann describes how systems should function, but struggles to explain why a political system would intentionally and violently sever its own communicative feedback loops, knowingly driving itself toward collapse to protect a rigid dogma. To explain this irrationality, systems theory requires psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis and Ideological Rigidity

The psychological mechanics of ideology have been exhaustively mapped by post-Marxist and Lacanian scholarship. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) revolutionized political theory by introducing the concept of the empty signifier, a term devoid of specific meaning that functions purely to unite disparate political demands into a hegemonic bloc.

Slavoj Žižek expanded on this by explicitly linking ideology to Lacan's point de capiton (master-signifier) and the terrifying intrusion of the Real (Žižek, 1989). The psychoanalytic literature successfully explains that subjects cling to rigid ideologies not out of ignorance (false consciousness), but as a psychotic defense mechanism against the chaotic trauma of the Real.

Methodological Symmetry: Islamic Ontology and Substantial Motion

Crucially, our transdisciplinary approach must not rely exclusively on Western epistemologies to dissect Eastern political theology. To prevent methodological asymmetry, we incorporate indigenous ontological frameworks that inherently resist totemization. Specifically, Mulla Sadra's 17th-century Islamic philosophical concept of *Harakat al-Jawhariyyah* (Substantial Motion) posits that existence is not static, but in a state of continuous, dynamic becoming and existential evolution. This provides a robust, indigenous Islamic framework for what cybernetics terms adaptive flexibility. By utilizing Mulla Sadra alongside Ashby, we demonstrate that the Middle East possesses profound internal philosophical resources to resist epistemological rigidity, proving that conceptual totemization is a systemic aberration rather than an inherent regional or theological defect.

The Research Gap

Despite the profound insights of these three distinct fields, they remain fundamentally siloed within contemporary scholarship, and crucially, they frequently fail to interact with the deep philosophical resources of the non-Western world. Political theology maps the shift in sovereignty, cybernetics maps the mathematical flow of information, and psychoanalysis maps the terror of the Subject. The critical gap in contemporary scholarship is the absence of a unified framework that operationalizes psychoanalysis within a cybernetic model, while symmetrically balancing Western sociology with Eastern ontology.

This paper fills that gap by proposing the mechanism of conceptual totemization. We argue that the Lacanian master-signifier (the totem) is the exact node where the cybernetic feedback loop is severed. By integrating these frameworks, we move beyond the debate over historical origins (Asad vs. Schmitt) and provide a mathematically and psychologically rigorous explanation for why both Middle Eastern political theology and Western secular dogmatism exhibit identical, totalitarian responses to the unprecedented complexity of late modernity.

Table 1. *Synthesis of the Transdisciplinary Theoretical Framework*

Theoretical Domain	Key Theorists	Primary Focus	Identified Research Gap	Contribution to Synthesis
Political Theology	Schmitt, Agamben, Asad	Sovereignty, the State of Exception, secular formations	Focuses heavily on historical origins, ignoring mechanical system failures	Explains how secular governance utilizes theological structures of power
Cybernetics / Systems Theory	Ashby, Wiener, Luhmann	Autopoiesis, Requisite Variety, communicative closure	Lacks an explanation for <i>intentional</i> or <i>psychological</i> self-sabotage	Provides the mathematical architecture for why low-variety systems fail
Psychoanalysis (Lacanian)	Lacan, Žižek, Mouffe	The Real, the Master-Signifier, psychotic defense mechanisms	Operates largely at the subjective/individual level, ignoring macro-systemic flows	Explains the human, psychological <i>terror</i> that drives the severing of cybernetic feedback
Islamic Ontology	Mulla Sadra	<i>Harakat al-Jawhariyyah</i> (Substantial Motion), continuous becoming	Often excluded from Western systemic analyses of modernity	Provides an indigenous model of "adaptive flexibility" against rigidity

Theoretical Foundations: Totemism, Cybernetic Closure, and the Secularization of Theological Concepts

The Anthropological and Psychoanalytic Roots of Totemization

To fully grasp the mechanism of conceptual totemization, we must first trace the anthropological and psychoanalytic lineage of the « totem » and translate it into a mechanism of contemporary political epistemology. The concept of the totem has long served as a locus of intersection between sociology and psychology.

From Durkheim to Freud: The Sacred as Social Cohesion

In Émile Durkheim's foundational work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), the totem is not merely an object of primitive worship; it is the physical emblem of the clan itself. For Durkheim, when society worships the totem, it is unknowingly worshipping its own collective power. The totem is the mechanism through which the chaotic multiplicity of individuals is bound into a singular, unified social organism. It is the absolute demarcation between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim, 1915).

Sigmund Freud, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), psychoanalyzed this structure, positing that the totem emerges from a primal trauma, the collective murder of the primal father by the sons, who then elevate a totem animal in his place out of profound guilt and the terrifying realization of the chaos that follows the destruction of absolute authority (Freud, 1950). The totem, therefore, is inherently linked to prohibition (taboo); it exists to prevent the system from collapsing back into violent, undifferentiated chaos.

Epistemological Translation: The Lacanian Master-Signifier

In translating these anthropological origins to modern epistemology, we must avoid a reductive concept jump. The modern political totem is not a physical object, but a discursive anchor. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's critique of logocentrism, we recognize that Western and theological metaphysics alike rely on a transcendental signified, an ultimate, unquestionable center (such as God, Reason, the State, or the Market) that anchors all meaning but remains safely positioned outside the chaotic play of language and critique (Derrida, 1976).

We synthesize this Derridean critique with Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian framework, specifically the concept of the *point de capiton* (the quilting point or master-signifier) (Žižek, 1989). In Lacanian theory, the symbolic order (language, law, culture) is a chaotic, sliding chain of signifiers that threatens to induce psychosis if it is not anchored. The *point de capiton* is the signifier that stops the slide, quilting the symbolic order into a coherent structure.

The subject, whether an individual citizen or a collective political entity, operates as an information-processing node whose very reality is anchored by these master-signifiers. Crucially, as Žižek points out, the master-signifier is fundamentally empty; it has no intrinsic positive content but functions purely structurally to hold the system together (e.g., the concept of Freedom in American political discourse, which can justify both emancipation and imperial intervention).

Conceptual totemization occurs when a political or social system treats its master-signifier not as a contingent, historically constructed *point de capiton*, but as an absolute, transcendental, and naturalized reality. By totemizing these concepts, ideological systems protect their foundational axioms from rational deconstruction. They transform a structural necessity (the need for a signifier to anchor meaning) into an ontological absolute (the belief that the signifier is reality). This cognitive rigidity effectively shields political decisions from the vulnerability of critique, replacing the terrifying ambiguity of the Real with the comforting, rigid certainty of the Totem.

The Psychoanalytic Architecture of the Totem: The Real, The Symbolic, and The Imaginary

To truly comprehend why political and religious systems cling so desperately to their totems, we must plunge deeper into the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. The mere structural necessity of a master-signifier (*point de capiton*) does not fully explain the *violence* with which these systems defend their totems against cybernetic feedback. For this, we must examine

Lacan's tripartite topological model of human subjectivity: the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary (Lacan, 1991).

The Symbolic order is the realm of language, law, and social structure. It is the cybernetic network of communication defined by Luhmann. The Imaginary is the realm of the ego, of illusion, and of dualistic relationships, the space where the subject misrecognizes itself as a unified whole. However, the most critical register for our analysis of epistemological rigidity is the Real.

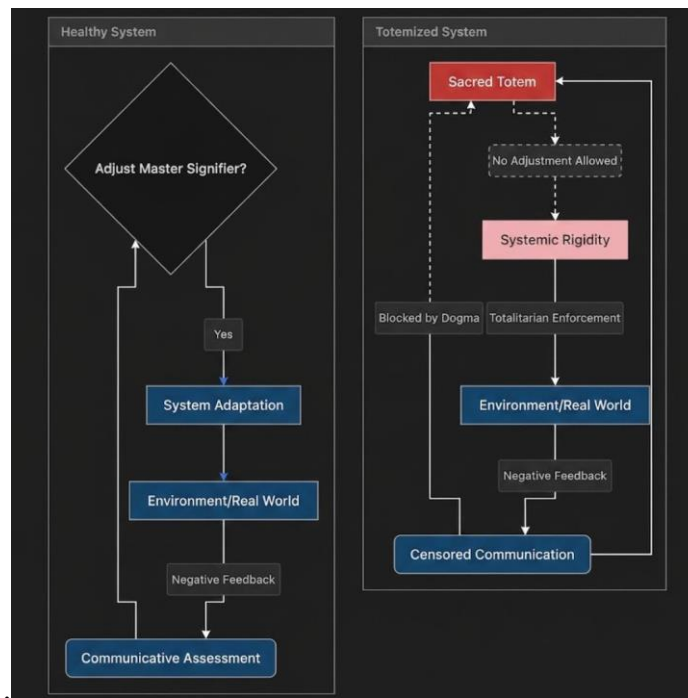
In Lacanian theory, the Real is not reality (which is always structured by the Symbolic order). The Real is that which fundamentally resists symbolization. It is the traumatic void, the terrifying abyss of meaninglessness, the impossible chaos of the environment that cannot be captured by language. The Real is the ultimate source of environmental complexity that Ashby's cybernetic system must attempt to regulate.

When a society is confronted by a massive intrusion of the Real, such as an unprecedented economic collapse, a devastating pandemic, or the sudden, violent disintegration of traditional social norms due to hyper-globalization, the Symbolic order fractures. The language and laws that previously provided meaning suddenly fail to explain the environment. This failure produces catastrophic, systemic anxiety.

The mechanism of *conceptual totemization* is, at its core, a psychotic defense mechanism against the intrusion of the Real. The totem is elevated to an absolute, not merely to anchor meaning, but to plug the terrifying hole in the Symbolic order. The ideological system promises its subjects that if they perfectly obey the totem (the absolute Market, or the absolute Divine Law), the terrifying chaos of the Real will be kept at bay.

To reconcile Luhmann's purely communicative systems with Lacan's subjective terror, we must precisely identify the translational node: the human bureaucratic actor and the citizen-subject. While Luhmann's macro-system itself cannot « feel » anxiety, it relies entirely on biological and psychological human nodes to process and transmit its communications. When environmental complexity overwhelms the systemic language (the intrusion of the Real), it is the human nodes that experience the resulting psychotic terror. In their desperate psychological need to restore the Symbolic order and shield themselves from this trauma, these human actors defensively sever the communicative feedback loops. Thus, subjective Lacanian anxiety directly drives the mechanical Luhmannian systemic closure.

This explains the phenomenon of ideological *jouissance* (a painful, excessive enjoyment) found in totalitarian enforcement. When a fundamentalist regime punishes a transgressor, or when a secular technocracy ruthlessly enforces austerity measures despite horrific human costs, the system is extracting *jouissance*. The violence inflicted on the environment (or the citizen) serves as a desperate, ritualistic proof that the totem is still potent, that the Symbolic order still holds, and that the Real has not consumed them.



The Objet Petit a and Political Desire

Furthermore, this psychoanalytic architecture reveals the function of what Lacan terms the objet petit a, the object-cause of desire. The objet petit a is the unattainable object that supposedly contains the lost fullness of being. Ideologies function by convincing the subject that the system can provide this lost fullness if only certain conditions are met.

In Middle Eastern political theology, the objet petit a is often framed as the retrieval of the mythical, uncorrupted early Islamic community (the Salaf). In Western secular dogmatism, particularly market fundamentalism, the objet petit a is the utopia of perfectly efficient, frictionless capitalism, where all human desires are optimally satisfied by the invisible hand.

However, because the objet petit a is fundamentally unattainable, the system inevitably fails to deliver it. A healthy, flexible cybernetic system would process this failure as negative feedback and adjust its goals. A totemized system, however, cannot admit that the objet petit a is structurally impossible. Instead, it must invent a scapegoat, a figure who is supposedly stealing the society's enjoyment.

This scapegoating is the very mechanism that severs the cybernetic feedback loop. Instead of reading environmental complexity as data requiring systemic adaptation, the system reads all complexity as the malicious interference of the scapegoat (the infidel, the immigrant, the market regulator, the terrorist). The environment is no longer a source of information; it is exclusively a source of contamination. Consequently, the system's communicative variety collapses entirely into a paranoid, defensive posture, dedicating all of its processing power not

to adaptation, but to the endless, impossible task of purging the scapegoat to protect the purity of the totem.

Cybernetic Pathology: Systems Theory, Autopoiesis, and Feedback

The mechanism of totemization, while psychoanalytically rooted in the subject's terror of the Real, is best understood structurally through the lens of cybernetics. Cybernetics, the science of communication and control in the animal and the machine (Wiener, 1948), provides the precise architectural vocabulary to diagnose why epistemologically rigid systems ultimately fail in complex environments.

Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety

The foundational axiom for our analysis is W. Ross Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety. Ashby mathematically demonstrated that « only variety can absorb variety » (Ashby, 1956, 207). In practical terms, this means that for a regulating system (e.g., a government, a religious institution, a macroeconomic framework) to successfully maintain stability, its internal complexity (its repertoire of responses) must match or exceed the complexity of the environment it seeks to govern.

If the environment poses 100 distinct challenges, the regulatory system must possess at least 100 distinct, adaptive responses. If a system possesses only 10 rigid responses, it will be overwhelmed by environmental variety and collapse. Healthy systems survive by maintaining rich, sensitive feedback loops that constantly update the system's internal state in response to environmental perturbations.

Luhmann and the Autopoiesis of Communication

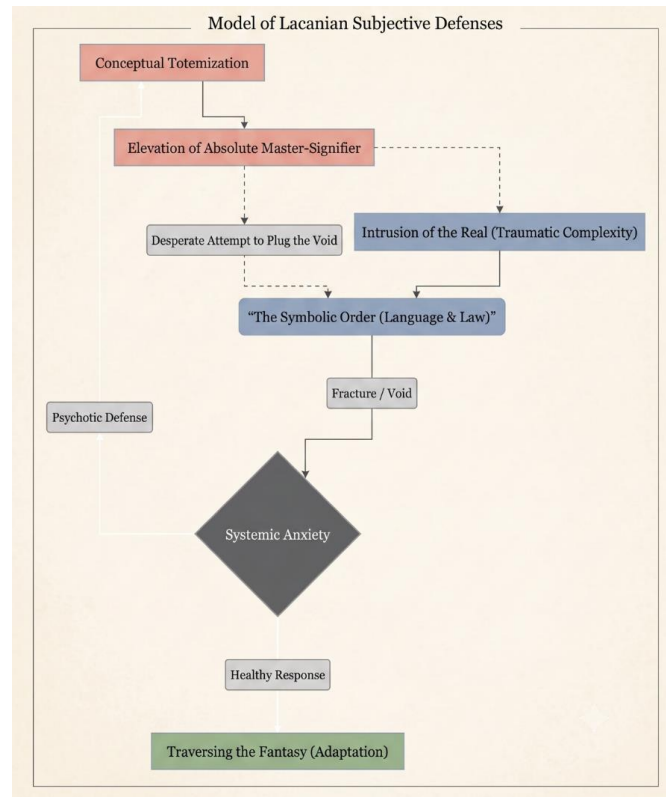
To bridge the gap between hard cybernetics (designed for thermostats and anti-aircraft guns) and human sociolinguistics, we turn to the monumental work of Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann revolutionized sociological systems theory by positing that human society is not made of physical individuals, but solely of communication ([Luhmann, 1995](#)).

For Luhmann, social systems are autopoietic, they continuously self-reproduce their own elements through the recursive network of communication. The environment is always infinitely more complex than the system. Therefore, the system's primary task is the reduction of complexity. It does this through structural coupling with the environment, using communication as the medium to filter external noise into internal meaning. Language is the vital autopoietic mechanism through which environmental complexity is processed, errors are detected, and the system dynamically rewrites its own code to survive.

The Severance of Feedback

Totemization acts as a lethal cybernetic pathology because it deliberately and violently restricts linguistic and communicative variety. When a historically contingent concept (e.g., a specific interpretation of Sharia law, or the infallibility of the Free Market) becomes a sacred totem, it is removed from the communicative feedback loop. This severance of epistemic feedback loops, which normally enable adaptive learning and self-correction (Beardslee, 2023),

creates a closed, autopoietic system where internal variety is insufficient to match external complexity, ultimately leading to fragile stability (Choudhury, 2013). Consequently, it cannot be modified by negative feedback; empirical evidence demonstrating the totem's failure is discarded as irrelevant. To question the totem is no longer an act of systemic self-correction; it is defined as heresy, treason, or irrationality.



Consequently, the system's internal communicative variety is artificially and severely restricted. The system becomes deaf to its environment. Unable to adapt to environmental complexity through learning, the system is driven toward totalitarian enforcement. Totalitarianism, in cybernetic terms, is not merely a moral failing; it is a mechanical necessity for a low-variety system attempting to maintain control over a high-variety world. If the system cannot generate internal variety to absorb the environment, it must violently suppress the variety of the environment to match its own rigid internal state.

Comparative Topologies in Late Modernity

The structural isomorphism of this cybernetic failure reveals itself across three seemingly disparate domains. By analyzing these domains sequentially, we expose the underlying mechanics of conceptual totemization independent of their specific ideological content.

Middle Eastern Political Theology and Instrumental Reason

In Middle Eastern political theology, the locus of the sacred is explicit and undisguised: divine sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*). When theology is mobilized as an inflexible political ideology, such as in the radical formations of Qutbism (derived from the writings of Sayyid Qutb) or the institutionalized structure of *velayat-e faqih* (the guardianship of the Islamic jurist), the contingent, historically situated interpretations of sacred texts are totemized into absolute, ahistorical legislative mandates. Such movements paradoxically replicate the dogmatic certainties they claim to oppose, creating what has been termed an Islamic political anti-theology that is structurally indistinguishable from the sovereign decisionism it contests (Andrus, 2025).

Sayyid Qutb's formulation of *Jahiliyyah* (the state of pre-Islamic ignorance) effectively binaries the world into the realm of God and the realm of ignorance (Qutb, 2006). This binary operates as a massive cybernetic filter. The complex, multifaceted realities of modern statecraft, economics, and international relations are stripped of their nuance and forced through this singular algorithmic binary.

To analyze this deeply, we must engage with the Frankfurt School, particularly Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's critique of instrumental reason. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they argued that the Enlightenment, in its quest to dominate nature through pure rationality, reverted to myth and barbarism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). We observe a mirrored phenomenon here: political theology, despite its claims to the divine, is stripped of genuine, unknowable transcendence. It is weaponized purely as an instrument of social control and bureaucratic administration. Here, political theology is effectively modernity masquerading as antiquity.

The system deliberately restricts its requisite variety by outlawing hermeneutic flexibility (*ijtihad*). Feedback loops that might introduce adaptive societal changes (e.g., shifts in gender dynamics, economic globalization, or technological disruption) are aggressively severed, because adjusting the legal superstructure in response to environmental feedback is framed as an intolerable affront to the divine totem. Instrumental reason uses divine edicts as algorithmic tools for totalitarian optimization, streamlining complex, chaotic social dynamics into rigid, enforceable obedience. The failure of the state is never attributed to the failure of the model; rather, environmental noise (dissent) is blamed and subsequently purged.

Western Secular Dogmatism: Market Fundamentalism and the Totem of Reason

Secularism often operates under the powerful dialectical illusion that it has structurally transcended dogmatism. Having displaced the Church, it assumes it has displaced the Totem entirely. However, as the legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt famously argued, « All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts » (Schmitt, 1985, 36). The metaphysical structure of absolute authority does not vanish; the locus of the sacred merely shifts. In Western secular dogmatism, it shifts from God to the Nation, the State, or, most pervasively in late modernity, the Free Market. By moving beyond simple

binaries, we can demonstrate that dogmatic rigidity in secular contexts operates through the same structural logic as its theological counterpart (Latzer, 2022).

This displacement requires an examination of the foundations of modernity. The Cartesian subject (*res cogitans*), conceptualized as an isolated, radically rational processing unit severed entirely from the messy, physical world (*res extensa*), laid the groundwork for a new absolute. As the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty argued in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the Enlightenment did not abolish the need for an unquestionable authority; it merely replaced the unquestionable authority of God with the unquestionable authority of Reason and Objective Truth (Rorty, 1979). Reason itself became a totemized structure, immune to critique regarding whose reason was being institutionalized.

This structural pathology aligns perfectly with Jean-François Lyotard's critique of metanarratives. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard defines the postmodern as an « incredulity toward metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). Yet, secular dogmatism refuses this incredulity. The prime example of this cybernetic closure in the West is Neoliberal Market Fundamentalism. The Market is elevated to an omniscient, self-correcting deity. It is treated not as a historically contingent mechanism for distributing resources, but as an infallible metanarrative.

When the cybernetic environment produces massive negative feedback, such as the 2008 global financial crisis, staggering systemic inequality, or imminent ecological collapse, this information is treated by the system as statistical noise or an « externality. » The feedback is ignored to protect the ideological purity of the secular totem. Just as the theologian blames the sinner for the failure of the state, the market fundamentalist blames market inefficiencies or government interference for systemic collapse. Both refuse to rewrite the source code of their master-signifier.

Biopolitical Securitization: Enframing the Standing Reserve

In modern biopolitical governance, we observe a terrifying synthesis of these rigidities, utilizing cutting-edge technology to achieve total cybernetic closure. Giorgio Agamben's archaeology of Western political theology (Murray, 2010) demonstrates how the state of exception has become the normal paradigm of modern governance. Following Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, defined as the state's administration, management, and optimization of biological life (Foucault, 1978), and Martin Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* (enframing), the modern state treats human life not merely as civic subjects, but as *Bestand* (standing reserve) (Heidegger, 1977). Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2020) extends this analysis to show how sovereignty manifests as the power to determine who may live and who must die.

In this context, *Security* frequently emerges as the supreme sacred value, the ultimate totem. While not a universal absolute in every instance of governance, it represents a dominant, overriding tendency in highly securitized states, heavily accelerated in the post-9/11 era and the

subsequent War on Terror. To protect the totem of Security, the state justifies the creation of Giorgio Agamben's state of exception, a topological zone where normal constitutional and legal frameworks are suspended in the name of preserving the state (Agamben, 1998). We see this empirically in legislation such as the USA PATRIOT Act, mass NSA surveillance programs, and algorithmic predictive policing.

The state becomes cybernetically rigid, prioritizing the technological enframing of risk over civic adaptability. Through algorithmic surveillance, the citizen is reduced to a matrix of biological and behavioral risk data to be continuously monitored and managed by the cybernetic state. Dissent is no longer categorized as a political disagreement; it is categorized as a biological, viral, or existential threat to the cybernetic organism of the state itself. The feedback loop is closed entirely: the algorithm dictates who is a threat based on historical data, and the state acts upon the algorithm's output without permitting the human subject to contest the underlying logic. The systemic output is an autopoietic loop of securitization that manufactures the very alienation it claims to fight, subjecting minoritized populations to necropolitical regulation (Mbembe, 2020) and epistemic death.

The Ontology of the Enemy: Schmitt and the Absolute Scapegoat

To fully grasp the rigidity of both theological and biopolitical systems, we must deeply analyze the mechanism by which these systems process environmental threats. The cybernetic failure is not a passive inability to process data; it is an active, aggressive categorization of all complex data as an existential threat. This brings us directly to Carl Schmitt's foundational definition of the political: the absolute distinction between friend and enemy (Schmitt, 1996).

For a totemized system, the enemy is not merely a geopolitical competitor or a domestic political rival. The enemy is elevated to an ontological category. In Middle Eastern political theology, the enemy is the *Takfiri* or the apostate, a figure who threatens not just the state, but the cosmic order of divine sovereignty. Symmetrically, in Western biopolitical securitization, the enemy is the terrorist or the radical, a figure who embodies pure, unpredictable chaos threatening the standing reserve of the state.

In both instances, the enemy functions exactly like the Lacanian scapegoat discussed in Section 2. The system requires the enemy to explain its own internal failures. When the cybernetic state cannot provide economic stability or social cohesion (because its rigid models fail to match environmental complexity), it cannot blame the master-signifier. Instead, it projects the cause of this failure outward onto the ontological enemy.

The presence of the absolute enemy justifies the permanent suspension of cybernetic feedback. A system at war (whether a Holy War or a Global War on Terror) does not have the luxury of democratic deliberation or adaptive policy-making; it requires absolute, unified command. By permanently institutionalizing the threat of the enemy, the state permanently justifies its own rigidity. The state of exception becomes the permanent rule. Therefore, the totemization of the enemy is the necessary precondition for the totemization of the state. The

system actively generates and requires its own enemies to survive the terror of its internal inadequacies.

Table 2. The Structural Isomorphism of Conceptual Totemization

Dimension	Middle Eastern Political Theology	Western Secular Dogmatism (Market Fundamentalism)	Modern Biopolitical Governance (Securitization)
Master-Signifier (The Totem)	Divine Sovereignty (<i>Hakimiyyah</i>)	The Free Market / Pure Rationality	Absolute Security / The State of Exception
The <i>Objet Petit a</i>	Retrieval of the mythical <i>Salaf</i> (uncorrupted origins)	Frictionless capitalism / Optimal efficiency	Total predictability / Zero-risk society
The Ontological Scapegoat	The Infidel / The Apostate / Western Imperialism	The Subprime Borrower / Market Friction	The Terrorist / The Internal Traitor
Cybernetic Failure Mode	Suppressing socio-economic variety in favor of theological purity	Ignoring material/human feedback to protect algorithmic purity	Suspending civil liberties to prevent hypothetical threats
Linguistic Pathology	Sacralized discourse foreclosing critique	<i>Langue de bois</i> (abstraction, TINA - "There Is No Alternative")	Discourse of permanent existential crisis
Systemic Output	State violence enforcing religious orthodoxy	State bailouts socializing losses to protect capital	Autopoietic securitization enforcing permanent emergency
Internal Counter-Framework	<i>Harakat al-Jawhariyyah</i> (Substantial Motion)	Agonistic Pluralism / Deliberative Democracy	Constitutional friction / Sunset clauses

As this matrix demonstrates, the architecture of the totem is conceptually consistent across disparate ideologies; the following historical case studies will illustrate precisely how these architectures are forged during moments of systemic crisis.

Historical Case Studies in the Metamorphosis of the Totem

To move beyond pure structural abstraction, we must ground this cybernetic and psychoanalytic framework in concrete historical analysis. The process by which a concept is violently extracted from its contingent reality and calcified into a totem is rarely a peaceful intellectual evolution; it is usually forged in the crucible of profound historical trauma and systemic crisis. By examining specific historical ruptures in both the West and the Middle East, we can observe the precise moment the cybernetic feedback loop is intentionally severed to protect the newly established master-signifier.

Table 3. *Comparative Isomorphism of Historical Case Studies*

Case Study	Systemic Crisis (Environmental Overload)	The New Master-Signifier (Totem)	Cybernetic Closure Mechanism	Ontological Scapegoat	Systemic Output
The French Revolution (1789–1793)	Foreign invasion, economic collapse, ideological void	Pure Reason (The Cult of the Supreme Being)	Material dissent (starvation/poverty) categorized as inherent "irrationality"	The Aristocrat / The Counter-Revolutionary	The Reign of Terror (Guillotine as complexity reduction algorithm)
The Iranian Revolution (1979)	Institutional collapse, ideological fragmentation, Iraqi invasion	Velayat-e Faqih (Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist)	Civic or economic dissent categorized as an affront to divine will	The Marxist / The Secular Liberal / The Apostate	Totalitarian state violence enforcing religious orthodoxy
The Cold War (Mid-20th Century)	Existential nuclear threat, dual-superpower competition	Capitalism & Freedom (US) / Dialectical Materialism (USSR)	Economic/labor feedback framed as existential infiltration or sabotage	Communist Sympathizer (US) / Capitalist Saboteur (USSR)	McCarthyism (US) / The Gulag Archipelago (USSR)
2008 Global Financial Crisis	Collapse of subprime mortgage market, intrusion of the Real	Algorithmic Financialization (The Free Market)	Market operates as a closed mathematical loop, blind to physical reality	The Subprime Borrower / The Individual Broker	Massive state bailouts (socializing losses to protect the totem)

As this matrix demonstrates, the architecture of the totem is conceptually consistent across disparate ideologies; the following historical case studies will illustrate precisely how these architectures are forged during moments of systemic crisis.

The French Revolution and the Cult of Reason: The Secularization of the Totem

The transition from theological absolutism to secular dogmatism in the West was not a smooth process of Enlightenment rationality peacefully replacing superstition. It was a violently contested rupture that perfectly illustrates the displacement of the totem. The French Revolution of 1789 dismantled the divine right of kings, the ultimate theological master-signifier of the Ancien Régime. However, the revolutionary system, faced with staggering environmental complexity (foreign invasion, economic collapse, internal counter-revolution), could not survive the psychological and structural void left by the destruction of the divine totem.

Consequently, the Jacobin apparatus did not abandon the structure of absolute authority; they merely replaced the content of the totem. Under the orchestration of figures like Jacques Hébert and later Maximilien Robespierre (with the Cult of the Supreme Being), the abstract concept of Reason was literally deified. The Cult of Reason (1793) involved the desecration of churches and their rapid conversion into Temples of Reason.

This was not a metaphorical shift; it was a cybernetic necessity for a low-variety system attempting to violently control a high-variety environment. Reason, which in the hands of Descartes or Kant was a critical methodology for processing information, was instantly calcified into an unquestionable, transcendent Totem. Once Reason was totemized, it ceased to function as a feedback mechanism. If a citizen's material reality (starvation, poverty) contradicted the dictates of the revolutionary state, the citizen was not providing negative feedback; they were, by definition, acting irrationally and against Reason itself. The horrific violence of the Reign of Terror was the direct consequence of this cybernetic pathology. The guillotine became the ultimate mechanism of complexity reduction: a binary algorithm (loyal/traitor) that severed environmental noise with mechanical precision. The secular state proved that it required a master-signifier just as desperately as the theological state it replaced.

The Iranian Revolution and the Institutionalization of Velayat-e Faqih

Conversely, we observe an isomorphic process of totemization in the Middle East during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The revolution originally encompassed a massive, highly complex variety of political ideologies: Marxist-Leninists, secular democrats, constitutionalists, and various factions of Islamic modernists and traditionalists. This coalition successfully overthrew the heavily securitized, Western-backed regime of the Shah.

However, post-revolutionary Iran faced an environment of overwhelming, nearly unsurvivable complexity: the destruction of state institutions, fierce ideological fragmentation, and soon, a devastating, decade-long invasion by Ba'athist Iraq. In cybernetic terms, the new system was rapidly drowning in environmental variety.

To prevent systemic collapse, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini deployed a theological innovation that functioned as a massive cybernetic filter: Velayat-e Faqih (the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) (Ayatollah Khomeini, 1981). Historically, within Shi'a jurisprudence, the concept of the guardianship of the jurist was largely restricted to non-litigious matters (such as the care of orphans or the administration of endowments) in the absence of the Hidden Imam. It was a historically contingent, highly specific, and dynamically debated legal mechanism.

It is crucial to acknowledge the profound internal theological logic of this shift. For Ayatollah Khomeini, Velayat-e Faqih was not a cynical power grab, but a deeply spiritual and jurisprudential (Fiqhi) necessity rooted in mystical ('Irfani) obligations to realize divine justice and protect the oppressed-on earth. The subjective intention was the materialization of a perfect moral order. However, from a cybernetic and systems-theory perspective, the systemic output of this theological elevation bypassed its spiritual intent. Under the immense pressure of state-building and survival, Khomeini radically expanded and totemized this concept. Velayat-e Faqih was extracted from the dynamic flow of scholarly debate (ijtihad) and elevated to the status of an absolute, unquestionable, constitutional master-signifier. It granted the Supreme Leader absolute political, legal, and divine authority over the state.

This transformation perfectly exemplifies conceptual totemization. A contingent legal concept was frozen, sanctified, and placed above the realm of cybernetic feedback. Any political, economic, or social feedback that challenged the directives of the Supreme Leader was no longer processed as civic information; it was immediately categorized as an affront to the divine will itself.

The institutionalization of Velayat-e Faqih solved the immediate cybernetic crisis of 1979 by violently reducing internal variety (purging the Marxists, liberals, and opposing clerics). However, it locked the Iranian state into a permanent trajectory of epistemological rigidity. By closing the feedback loops necessary for long-term adaptation, particularly concerning economic globalization and the rapidly shifting social dynamics of a massive, highly educated youth population, the totemized state guarantees eventual structural failure. The system's only remaining regulatory mechanism is the continuous, escalating deployment of state violence against its own environment (its citizens) to force reality to match the rigid parameters of the totem.

The Cybernetics of the Cold War: Mutually Assured Totemization

To further understand the global scale of this pathology, we must briefly look at the Cold War, which functioned as a macro-systemic engine of dual totemization. The geopolitical conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was not merely a military standoff; it was a totalizing ideological war that demanded the absolute calcification of master-signifiers on both sides.

In the Soviet bloc, the contingent historical analysis of Karl Marx was totemized into the rigid pseudo-science of Dialectical Materialism. The Party became the infallible interpreter of this historical algorithm. Economic feedback, such as agricultural failures or industrial inefficiencies, could not be processed as flaws in the model, because the model was sacred. The feedback was instead attributed to saboteurs, resulting in the Gulag archipelago, a vast system of complexity reduction.

Symmetrically, in the West, particularly under McCarthyism, Capitalism and Freedom were merged into a singular, untouchable totem. Dissent regarding labor rights, civil rights, or economic equality was frequently processed not as necessary civic feedback, but as communist infiltration, an existential threat to the totem. The Cold War demonstrates that when systems are locked in existential competition, they mutually force each other to abandon adaptive complexity in favor of rigid, totemized absolutes to maintain internal cohesion.

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis: Algorithmic Closure

The mechanism of conceptual totemization is not bound by era or geography; it transitions seamlessly from the physical state-building of the 20th century to the digital architectures of the 21st. While we have discussed Market Fundamentalism theoretically, we must examine its most extreme, contemporary manifestation to understand how secular dogmatism achieves total

cybernetic closure: algorithmic financialization. In the 21st century, the totem of the Free Market has been operationalized through high-frequency trading algorithms, derivatives, and quantitative easing.

This financial architecture represents the absolute severing of the economic system from the physical environment. In a healthy cybernetic economy, financial instruments exist to map and allocate resources within the physical world (funding agriculture, manufacturing, infrastructure). The physical world provides feedback (e.g., a crop failure or a labor shortage), and the market adjusts.

In algorithmic financialization, the system achieves autopoietic closure in the most pathological way imaginable: it only communicates with itself. Financial derivatives (such as collateralized debt obligations) are based on other derivatives, completely untethered from the underlying material reality (the actual houses, or the actual labor). The algorithms trade at sub-millisecond speeds, reacting only to the data outputs of other algorithms.

This is the ultimate triumph of the Cartesian subject (*res cogitans*) severing itself from the physical world (*res extensa*). The market becomes a pure, closed loop of mathematical logic, utterly blind to environmental feedback. The devastating consequence of this cybernetic closure was violently demonstrated in the 2008 global financial crisis. The physical environment (millions of citizens unable to pay mortgages) generated massive negative feedback, but the algorithmic system was incapable of processing this human data until the entire global architecture collapsed.

Furthermore, to maintain the purity of the market totem in the face of this catastrophic intrusion of the Real, the system immediately required an ontological scapegoat. The algorithmic failure was not blamed on the foundational architecture of the Free Market; rather, it was violently projected onto the "irresponsible subprime borrower," the "predatory individual broker," or anomalous "market friction." By purging these individual moral scapegoats, the systemic architecture remained theoretically flawless.

Crucially, demonstrating the absolute resilience of the secular totem, the aftermath of the 2008 crisis did not result in a systemic rewriting of the master-signifier. The fundamentalist belief in the market was not abandoned. Instead, the system resorted to the economic equivalent of the state of exception: massive state bailouts socializing the losses, thereby protecting the financial totem from the consequences of its own cybernetic failure. The environment (the taxpayer) was forced to absorb the shock to ensure that the rigid, totemized structure of financial capital remained completely intact. This empirical historical event proves that secular rationalism, when confronted with existential failure, operates with the exact same dogmatic rigidity and reliance on state violence/coercion as the most fundamentalist theological regimes.

Linguistic Structures: *Langue de bois* and the Collapse of Variety

Whether analyzing abstract political topologies (Section 3) or concrete historical ruptures (Section 4), each of these systems enforces totemization through a shared, deeply pathological

linguistic structure: *langue de bois* (wooden language). This discourse relies heavily on abstraction, endless tautologies, and rigid clichés to mask the Real (in the Žižekian sense) of political contradictions. It is the language of a system that has stopped listening.

Langue de bois operates almost exclusively through Manichaean binaries: good vs. evil, believer vs. infidel, patriot vs. traitor, efficient vs. inefficient. By flattening language in this way, the system explicitly manufactures the "Ontological Scapegoats" mapped in Table 1; a word like "Terrorist" functions purely as a thought-terminating cliché designed to instantly block environmental feedback and justify systemic violence. Žižek posits that ideology functions not merely as false consciousness (people being tricked), but as an ideological fantasy that fundamentally structures our social reality; we know very well what we are doing, but we do it anyway to sustain the fantasy (Žižek, 1989).

By flattening complex, multidimensional realities into absolute binaries, *langue de bois* acts as the primary mechanism that preemptively rejects environmental noise. It structurally prevents the articulation of nuance. If the only available words are « patriot » or « traitor, » one cannot articulate the concept of « loyal opposition. » This effectively shuts down the communicative feedback loops defined by Luhmann as absolutely necessary for systemic self-correction.

Implications: The Cybernetic Pathology of Totemization and the Architecture of Rigidity

The symmetrical topology presented in this analysis carries profound implications for both theoretical understandings of dogmatism and practical interventions aimed at fostering adaptive governance in an era of escalating complexity. Theoretically, our findings challenge the foundational assumptions of modernization theory, which has long positioned secularism and religious fundamentalism as opposing endpoints on a linear developmental spectrum. Instead, we demonstrate that dogmatic closure is not a relic of pre-modern consciousness awaiting supersession by enlightenment but a recurrent structural possibility inherent in any system that must manage the anxiety of radical contingency.

The theoretical contribution of this analysis lies in its demonstration that all three domains of dogmatism, theological, secular, and biopolitical, manifest an identical cybernetic pathology rooted in the reduction of requisite variety (Ashby, 1956). From a cybernetic perspective rooted in Bateson's ecology of mind (Bateson, 2000), totemization severs negative feedback loops through what we might term second-order epistemic closure: the system not only fails to register disconfirming evidence but eliminates the very conditions under which such evidence could be recognized as legitimate.

For counterterrorism practitioners, the current paradigm of securitized governance operates through precisely the totemic logic we have identified as pathological. Effective counterterrorism policy must break this cycle by restoring democratic feedback loops. For educators and civic institutions, resilience depends on cultivating epistemic humility. For

institutional design, democratic resilience requires maintaining "agonistic pluralism" (Mouffe, 2000). For neoliberal economics, breaking the totemic hold requires systematic desacralization. Future research should explore quantitative indicators of totemic closure, longitudinal case studies of systems undergoing desacralization, neuropsychological mechanisms underlying cognitive closure under uncertainty, comparative secularisms across different regions, and action research evaluating deliberative mini-publics to restore requisite variety.

Traversing the Fantasy from the Middle East to the West

Moving from these practical implications back to the theoretical core, it becomes evident that the overarching challenge of late modernity is not a clash of civilizations, but a shared cognitive crisis. The topological and historical evidence synthesized in this study demonstrates that when the foundational metanarratives of any system, whether divine sovereignty in the Middle East, or the Free Market and Absolute Security in the West, are subjected to severe environmental stress, they undergo an identical process of conceptual totemization. They abandon cybernetic flexibility, enforce epistemological rigidity, and deploy state violence to protect their respective master-signifiers.

Because totemization inherently severs the communicative channels required for systemic self-correction, any ideological apparatus that relies on a sacred totem is mathematically and sociologically on a trajectory toward eventual collapse. The environment will always outpace a system that refuses to learn.

However, if we accept the psychoanalytic premise that a subject fundamentally requires a master-signifier to structure reality and prevent psychosis, a naive, absolute call for «desacralization» is socially impossible and politically catastrophic. To destroy all totems is to invite psychotic systemic collapse, leaving society vulnerable to the darkest forms of nihilism and fascism.

The cybernetic and philosophical solution is not the destruction of the totem, but what Lacanian psychoanalysis terms «traversing the fantasy» Traversing the fantasy does not mean achieving a state of pure, objective enlightenment outside of ideology (which is impossible). Rather, it means publicly and institutionally acknowledging the fundamental emptiness and historical contingency of our master-signifiers.

In practice, this means we continue to operate with concepts like «The Law», «The Market» or «The Nation» but we do so ironically. We refuse to treat our political and economic signifiers as absolute, transcendental mandates. For a state apparatus holding a monopoly on violence, institutionalizing this irony does not mean abandoning legal enforcement or descending into anarchic collapse. Rather, it means embedding constitutional self-doubt directly into the architecture of power. This is achieved through deliberate systemic friction: mandated sunset clauses on emergency powers, the fierce protection of agonistic opposition, and the institutionalization of continuous, structured review. By embracing the contingency of our own ideological structures and forcing the state to constantly justify its master-signifiers rather than

commanding divine or mathematical obedience, systems can restore the linguistic and epistemic feedback loops essential for adaptive capacity, genuine civic discourse, and long-term viability. Only a system that can tolerate the anxiety of its own contingency can survive the staggering complexity of late modernity.

--- In strict systems-theory terms, this psychological tolerance for ideological anxiety is precisely what provides the requisite internal variety necessary to match the overwhelming complexity of our environment.

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