

Against culture: review of Al-Azmeh's "Islam and Modernities" (2009)

Written by Eric Walberg

Tuesday, 23 March 2010 06:53

Islam and Modernities by Aziz Al-Azmeh, 3rd edition, London: Verso, 2009

In this collection of essays by the Syrian historian Aziz Al-Azmeh, based at the Central European University in Budapest, the author provides a searing critique of both postmodernism and (multi)culturalism and of the radical Islamism that has arisen over the past 30 years in response to the Western onslaught on the Muslim world. In the preface to the third edition, Al-Azmeh attacks "culturalism and its correlative postmodernist and postcolonialist cant that betokens the ideological and conceptual hegemony of the Right over the Left, and the domestication of the latter by the former, most especially in Europe and North America since 1989." Not that he has any use for the "right-wing, fascist and hyper-nationalist ideology" of the Islamic reaction. On the contrary, he defends the Western Enlightenment – the chicken to the postmodern egg – against critics who trace today's intellectual and political quagmire to that same Enlightenment, insisting that any progress must derive from it.

This is no surprise, as Al-Azmeh is a secularist and Marxist, both trends solidly rooted in the Enlightenment. But this contradiction ultimately weakens the thrust of his nonetheless devastating critique of the dominant currents in our thinking about things Islamic and their relationship with the Western tradition. His pessimism about how to extract ourselves from the dead end of the Enlightenment saps the reader's will to fight the good fight. "The tropes and notions of political and social thought available today form a universal repertoire that is inescapable, a repertoire which, though of Western origin, has in the last century and a half become a universal patrimony beyond which political and social thought is inconceivable," having "filtered through modern state structures, forms of discourse and communication, educational and legal systems, terms of political life and much more, which have become globalised, native not only to their points of origin, but worldwide."

Communism once provided an alternative reality to the Western project but is no more. For Al-Azmeh, the quixotic Islamist project as epitomised by the bin Laden is doomed. It is hard to see any light at the end of his tunnel. But there is still much of value here. Al-Azmeh dismisses the hypostatisation or fetishism of Reason "construed as life, which is at once subject and object of knowledge we see in Western scholarship" and the equal if opposite process of fetishism among militant Islamists, who rightly identify the West's plans as inimical to Islam, but indulge in a "politics of nostalgia", pining for an "unsullied reality prior to the corruption of the present." The "civilising project" of the past two centuries is proof enough of the sterility or rather inhumanity of the former; and a sober look at the history of the Muslim world reveals the many periods of tyranny, intolerance and stagnation that have punctuated periods of peace, prosperity and intellectual ferment. Alas, there is no Golden Age that can be recaptured for all eternity. Cutting

off appendages in search of justice is just not on.

There is only the past, complex and contradictory, that can serve as a fund, a common heritage, subsequently to be mined and built upon. The underlying problem in both scholarship and politics is with the thoughtless use of the term "culture", intended to paper over the economic and social reality of society, ignoring the class dynamics that are its bedrock. With the mass migrations of the past century, which have now reversed from colonisation of empires to a mass migration from former colonies to the imperial centres, the mix of "cultures" (read: colonial and class refugees) has brought us to a new "multiculturalism", where the exotic differences of language, skin colour and habits – and, yes, religions – must be incorporated into a confusing and often tense social fabric in both centre and periphery in a nonlethal way. But this runs up against intractable problems: apart from ingrained racism, there are the problems of accumulated injustices which colonial peoples suffered. There is also the problem of the age-old animosity between Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the cause of so much prejudice, so many wars. With large immigrant populations in Europe and North America (we will focus here on Muslims), the old prejudices are poured into new wineskins.

Given the tragic history of the 20th century, which culminated in the last of the traditional invade-kill-pillage-evict colonial projects – Israel – the results have been disastrous for all except the Western elites, who need not worry about declining living standards, being killed in random violence, or being dispossessed, tortured, etc. Al-Azmeh, tongue in cheek, traces Orientalism, the ideological garb of the colonial project in the Muslim world, to the publication of *A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mohammedans*

by Joseph Pitts, a sailor who was captured by Algerian corsairs in 1678 and converted to Islam, finally escaping and returning to Exeter. A compendium of fantasy and bigotry obviously written to order, it set the stage for thousands of other self-serving Western analyses, endowing the object of study with "changeless, 'oriental' properties, some repellent and others charming, that go beyond history, that violate the changing nature of things." Despite Pitts's many years reciting the Quran, he denounced it in this first Orientalist treatise as "a Legend of Falsities, and abominable Follies and Absurdities." Orientalism posits unreason, despotism/servitude, and backwardness/anachronism as the fundamentals of the Orient, which included the Ottoman Caliphate and the Arab world, as well as India and China. But this slick tradition, informing both pro and anti Western scholars is no laughing matter. It is used today to justify invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and who-knows-what country next.

Today's multiculturalism is really anti-culturalism, an obliteration of the pre-capitalist societies, which were/are dismissed as un-cultures, an understanding that conveniently allowed British

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colonial administrators to dispossess local rulers of their gold, introduce monetary and market mechanisms and Western-style "land



reforms"; and when it all went terribly wrong, as in the case of the Bengal famine of 1943, to wash their hands of it and not lose any sleep. It led to the horrors of partition in India and Palestine. In today's world, it helps the administrators' heirs rationalise ghettoisation in the imperial centre without any feeling of guilt for past injustices that just may be the cause of the current flood of immigrants from their failed post-colonial states. Not to mention "structural adjustment" policies through the IMF to the neocolonial administrations which further impoverish the already poor masses. The upside of multiculturalism is xenophilia, though Al-Azmeh turns his nose up at this outgrowth of the Enlightenment. "Race became ethnicity, then culture; normative hierarchy and inequality gave way to representation in terms of difference; and xenophobia was in many circles replaced by xenophilia." Here as elsewhere the author's sympathy for Enlightenment gets in the way.

Multiculturalism finds support in social theory in the form of postmodernism, "the most recent form of the ideological production which had previously been termed 'the end of ideology'." The individual is "projected on to a metaphysical screen describing universal conditions." The supposed "celebration of difference" (read: xenophilia) of multiculturalism really "bespeaks conditions of post-Keynesian social fragmentation", as best exemplified in identity politics such as feminism and gay liberation, movements that isolated and alienated more than they gave succor, and which were easily incorporated into the now solidly pro-capitalist establishment, replacing the real threat that socialism once posed. In the latest dizzying development, "cultures become natures, and the history of human masses becomes a natural history," with the extremist writings of the likes of socio-biologist Richard Dawkins, famous for his fetishising of evolution and militant atheism. We are doomed by our savage, selfish genes.

The whole "civilising project" aims to convince the new immigrants to forget the past, and in the case of Muslims, the central importance of their religion to their lives, as embodied in the Western disestablishment of the church and its relegation to the privacy of ecumenical chapels and honorary secularised festivals a few times a year. These immigrants must blend into this shallow, multicultural "culture" (a culture in name only), which, say, in the case of Britain, means supporting Chelsea or United while tossing back pints of ale, absorbing imperial history and acknowledging the civilising mission of the British empire, and, if the immigrants still want to play at being Pakistani or Indian, becoming emissaries in the neo-imperial project of reincorporating the old colonies into a now global world order.

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Of course, this project is a fantasy, unrealisable. The old imperial order was cruel and racist; it produced distorted, dysfunctional neo-colonies, and racism in the imperial centre is far from dead, as the unsurprising resurgence of the fascists under the label British National Party makes perfectly clear. Sad, if also not surprising, is the fact that this current stage in the flux of centre-periphery relations in Britain has been glibly presided over by New Labour, which uses liberal slogans to implement a right-wing agenda, complete with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and immigration controls to stem the flow of economic and political refugees from Britain's current and past sordid adventures. Al-Azmeh calls this the "vicious circle of complicity" of the three protagonists – xenophobes, xenophiles and Islamists, embodied in the BNP, New Labour, and Islamist ideologues. In the case of France "Jean-Marie Le Pen is an ally of Islamic fundamentalism."

With these three protagonists, he proceeds to dissect both the theoretical attempts by Orientalists and post-Orientalists to square this vicious circle, and the concrete realities that Muslims face today. Curiously, the multicultural facade produces both xenophobes and xenophiles, the latter perhaps bored by white Britishness and revelling in the cooking, music, possibly more natural, less alienated ways of their dark-skinned neighbours. The Orientalist intellectual tradition has nurtured this fascination with the "unreformed Other", who is perhaps more sensuous but also more lazy, crafty, primitive, etc. You pick and choose the characteristics according to your own prejudices. The Islamists too latch on to a "recherché cluster of modes of visible behaviour" that they argue "represents the 'true prior reality'" that they long for. This "psychodrama, self-parody and caricature" is not just an amusement, but the basis on which Western policy makers make decisions about education, security, whatever, with a view "to detaching British Muslims, especially Asians and most particularly Pakistanis, from the mainstream of modern life, and their resocialisation within a new culture of exclusivism and xenophobia."

Attempts by xenophiles to bridge the chasm through "trans-cultural communication" are doomed, since they demand "an act of sympathy, which alone, according to this conception, allows access to a meaning that is, ultimately and in principle, inaccessible, it being the sense apprehended by an irreducible subject... the mystification of otherness." This sympathy is a mistake for Al-Azmeh, as "cross-cultural knowledge does not have conditions distinct from the conditions of knowledge in general." Is it even possible to have "cross-cultural conversations"? He fears not, since "the finality of the interlocutors ... tends to cause reason to degenerate to the tritest statements on common maxims of etiquette." The pretend conversations of Bush/ Blair "reaching out" to Muslims merely reinforce the "bellicose dehumanisation of the Other and genocidal demonisation" of Muslims under attack who are desperately defending themselves and their lands. That goes doubly for the likes of Israeli President Simon Peres in his pious words about the "peace process" belying his shockingly cruel deeds over his long anti-peace political career.

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Yet this is where the author flounders, as such cross-cultural knowledge indeed requires sympathy, or rather empathy to overcome the accumulated animosity that he so well documents later in his analysis of relations between East and West. The 14 centuries of discord and misunderstanding, the misconstruing of Islam as the enemy of Judaism and Christianity requires a Herculean effort of empathetic deconstruction before the storm clouds can be dispersed. The object of study is humans, as is the subject, and we must feel their pain and joys as our own before we can truly appreciate them and benefit from their Otherness. Al-Azmeh's aloof criticisms require some emotional footnotes at the very least. While his anger at the atrocities committed against colonial victims by imperialists is genuine, it ultimately leads nowhere, as he continually falls back on the ennui of the "universal discourse" to which we are willy-nilly captive. "This political Islamism is entirely accessible in the medium of Danish", he argues airily, alluding to the language of the infamous cartoons which so offended Muslims when published in 2006. But it isn't. To my mind, lack of empathy for the religious sensibilities of Muslims is precisely the problem.

As a historian, Al-Azmeh rejects the essentialism of religious discourse in favour of historical structural analysis of society. Fair enough, but all the same his insistence that Islam is no different from any other religion does not ring true. Muslim immigrants may come from different classes and different societies, their Islam may be Shia or Sunni, mystic or Wahhabi, but more than any other religious group, their common battles with their European/American secular masters force them to bond if they are serious about their faith. They see that their Christian and Jewish compatriots there are mostly indifferent to religion. They can follow suit, as their political overlords devoutly hope, or they can resist. The fact that Islam is much more than a one-day-a-week affair, really a way of life, is something that Al-Azmeh doesn't address adequately, as he argues "against its use as an explanatory or causal concept," rather reinstating "history against culturalist claims". Though they do not constitute a manifesto, he is clearly falling back on his secular, socialist beliefs as the way out of the current impasse.

To risk using the dreaded term "post", Al-Azmeh is a post-Marxist: "Marxist" in that he recognises economic and social relations – historical context – as trumping abstract categories such as religion. "Post" in the sense that he recognises that these beliefs, including nationalism and racism, are nonetheless vital in any analysis. He laments the nationalist period in Arab politics, as the regimes were marked by glaring flaws, including political despotism and "their break with enlightened thought and the liberal heritage" which led to the situation where these states "turned in on themselves and changed into Mafias monopolising power and wealth." At the same time, he laments the collapse of the socialist opposition to imperialism, arguing that the Soviet Union did not so much collapse as succumbed after 70 years of Western subversion and attack, just as did the Arab socialist attempts.

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In the case of the latter, the attack was joined by Islamists effectively operating in league with their supposed imperialist enemies. This unwitting cooperation of political Islam with the imperialists was encouraged in the Truman Doctrine to counter the Soviet Union during the Cold War, culminating in the intrigue hatched by the current US Defence Secretary Robert Gates to massively fund bin Laden and the Afghan mujahedin in the late 1970s – the crowning victory of the imperialists in their demonisation of all things socialist. But this is actually old hat, as the British encouraged the Wahhabis in the 18-19th centuries as part of their intrigues against the Ottoman Caliphate, with results which we still witness today, as the staunchly Islamist Saudi



Arabia buys all the latest lethal hardware from its ally the US in the latter's ongoing project of subjugating the Muslim world.

Al-Azmeh laments the rise of political Islam, condemning the current politics inspired by Islam as counter to historical tradition – oppressive, anti-Enlightenment, utopian, “the offspring of modernity rather than of tradition”. He scoffs at the idea of finding a concrete programme for today's society in the Quran, and argues that, for instance Nasser's use of Al-Azhar and more broadly Islam was a cynical ploy to square the circle of his fundamentally secular programme. But others interpret this heroic period in Egypt's history – anti-imperialist, socialist, adapting the promise of the Enlightenment to a newly liberated post-colonial African country – very differently.

The 1960s was a period when dreams of African socialism were inspiring millions and were led by clear-minded anti-imperialists. Now that these dreams have been shattered, a reconsideration of the truths of Islam can find much of value to help right the wrongs of today's society: zakat promises that no one should live in poverty; the proscription on exploiting others rejects sweatshop labour; the outlawing of usury suggests financial capital should be under the control of society; exhortations to treat nature with respect should inspire one's every economic step. These are not just platitudes if felt and acted on. Islam is more than just "opium", but to ensure that the five pillars are the inspiration for society requires an Islamic state to enforce them; so argue the Islamists, and not without reason (despite Al-Azmeh's and the Orientalists' charge that this "return" to a nonexistent utopian Islam is irrational unreason).

Al-Azmeh condemns attempts to find inspiration in Islam to counter the "universal project" – though now only Islamists are left holding the bag – as "primitivist withdrawal to concentrate on the specific as opposed to the universal, or to cling to the idea that we might be a nation

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different from other nations, our essence defined wholly or partially by religion". He argues this leaves no alternative but to submit, albeit grumbling, to the now very universal diktat of Western discourse, bankrupt though he admits it is. Just as bad are "former militants of the Arab left, nationalists who are disenchanted, sincere or naive, or who think they are being wily" for "giving credence to the Islamist discourse."

But stepping back for a moment, we must marvel at the resilience of Islam, that in the face of the obvious decline of Western "civilisation", it is alive and well, inspiring, comforting, unlike the tattered threadbare socialist secular ideology or the literally bankrupt capitalist one, not to mention the impotent remains of Christianity and the lethal racialist doctrine that Judaism in its Zionist phase has morphed into. Surely to anyone concerned with scholarship based on historical analysis, this "eternal" recurring spiritual force must be granted grudging approval, even admiration. After the last bank closes, after the last rainforest is chopped down, after the last Israeli drone crashes and the Jews flee their "eternal" city for the safety of their true spiritual home (secular Europe), people will be spreading their prayer mats in response to the plangent call of the muezzin and worshipping five times a day, together celebrating the oneness of the Almighty.

The very fact that capitalism, having destroyed the socialist alternative, is now demonising Islam in Western discourse should alert Al-Azmeh to its vital role as the last great protagonist of capitalism, which he realises is at the heart of our current crisis of reason, faith, economics, politics, what-have-you. But he has put all his eggs in his secular basket as the only way out. "The alternative choice would be a theocratic state... a temporary marriage of the pre-Galilean and the postmodern." He can't conceive of a developmental alternative that is not rooted in the West and seen through the prism of the Enlightenment, unable to rout for the last "cultural" symbol standing in the way of capitalism.

It is true that political Islam is the product of the last 30 years, "the offspring of modernity". But that is not to condemn it. Rather, it is to recognise, as Al-Azmeh demands we do, the importance of history, of fixing our eyes on its sweep and the social and economic forces shaping it. Islam has assumed the anti-imperialist burden which the Soviet Union once carried and collapsed under. There is a future other than Al-Azmeh's (unrealistic) one of pushing aside Islam and once again working towards a secular world socialism. It is not one where Muslims come hat in hand to their socialist secular brothers, but one where Western anti-imperialists come to the support of their Muslim brothers and sisters, as we are in fact witnessing today with the outpouring of sympathy for the Palestinians, unfortunately less so for the Afghans and Iraqis, as they valiantly resist the colonial steamroller.