

How “Liberalism” Creates Islam as its Enemy

Book Review: Islam in Liberalism by Joseph Massad

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The West today is thought of as the home of liberal values: tolerance, women’s and gay rights, compassion and empathy in democratic spheres. Islam has been positioned as liberalism’s other: intolerant, misogynistic, homophobic and cruel.

*[Joseph Massad’s](#) new book *Islam in Liberalism* argues that all of these qualities have been “projected onto Islam and that only through this projection could Europe emerge as democratic, tolerant, [philogynist](#) and [homophilic](#), in short Islam-free.”*

Massad is not interested in providing a genealogy of liberalism or Islam. Rather, the book considers the ways in which “Islam” has been fixed by liberalism as a single, knowable entity while also signifying different ideologies across time. In the early Cold War period, particularly the 1950s, he points out, the US supported “the issuance of religious fatwas against local and international communism.” In this period, Islam was a tool to be deployed in the interests of US imperialism: a “good” Islam, if you will.

In more recent decades, but especially after 9/11, Islam was turned into the demonic, evil other and became the more or less explicit target of the “War on Terror.” The West’s commitment to “democracy,” a primary liberal value, is as malleable as the Islam it creates to further its ends, he writes. *Islam in Liberalism* is at its heart a study of knowledge production, an analysis of how liberalism “constitutes Islam in constituting itself.”

In five chapters, Massad considers the histories of concepts and movements that define liberalism: democracy, women’s rights, gay rights, psychoanalysis and the notion of the “Semite.” It is a complicated task because Massad does not approach these terms as self-evident but shows how they are created through histories of power and domination.

One of the sustained threads in his work is the rise of the discourse of human rights and the parallel rise of a world-wide web of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). “Human rights” is far from being a universal category, but it is certainly a *universalizing* one. Quoting the historian Samuel Moyn, Massad points out that the notion of human rights in the 1940s “implied a politics of citizenship at home” but in the 1970s came to mean “a politics of suffering abroad.”

The American will to export “human rights” is evident in recent speeches by President [Barack Obama](#) to Kenyans where he excoriated them for their supposed lack of support for gay rights. Such proclamations are often accompanied by explicit threats: in 2011, [Hillary Clinton](#), then US secretary of state, [promised to the United Nations](#) that “gay rights are human rights and human rights are gay rights” and that the Obama administration would “consider a country’s record on LGBT rights when making decisions

about foreign aid.”

Erasing women’s labor

Domestically, Western liberalism has enabled the US and European countries to stem or control immigrant populations and to effectively render them unfit for benefits the rest of the population enjoys, all under the guise of furthering rights for the marginalized.

What Massad terms the “self-making” of the West is expressed in, for instance, its need to continually assert that its women are fundamentally freer and more liberated than Muslim women. One consequence is that the West will depict Muslim migrant women only within issues like veiling while erasing their labor — critical to many Western economies — as migrant workers.

An economic matter — the neoliberal flow of migrants moving to Europe and being exploited — is folded into a set of cultural problems, symptoms of “Islam” that must be cured by compelling immigrants to hew to the West’s perception of its better nature.

In contrast, [evidence of endemic domestic violence against women in the West](#) provokes no panic about “cultural” issues. Instead, the violence is translated into the language of individual pathologies and problems.

For Massad, the critical imperative is to engage society and culture in the “Islamic world” without the intention of recreating Muslim lives and people in the image of liberal Christians. Rather, he insists, scholars should “attend to the social and economic factors, to the geographic and historical factors and *actors*, to culture as a dynamic entity that produces and is produced by social, economic, historic and geographic factors and actors.”

This is a dense and densely argued book, in the best way, full of lively histories of the political, intellectual and cultural twists and turns that have enabled Western liberalism to so clearly dominate the discourse on Islam, and to claim it as the evil opposite while in fact feeding off that projection in order to strengthen itself.

Islam in Liberalism provides a sophisticated set of analyses and critiques for those wrestling with the liberalism that overlays international matters, especially on Israel and Palestine.

Liberal gays and lesbians everywhere are urged to support Israel and its politics of destruction because of its purported support for gay rights, in contrast to what is claimed to be Palestinian homophobia. But this ignores the realities of widespread Israeli homophobia, or the fact that Palestinian “gay refugees” are [still persecuted for being Palestinian](#).

If we pay attention to contexts and histories, as Massad’s work entreats us to do, we are more effectively able to counter [pinkwashing](#) as yet another tool in Israel’s machinations to shore up support for its policies under cover of a liberal agenda.

In the same vein, he is also critical of groups like the Palestinian queer NGO [alQaws](#) which, he points out, never references resisting Israeli military occupation in its basic statement of “[Who we are](#),” choosing instead to emphasize liberal notions of “diversity.” The point in all this is to examine how deeply embedded liberalism has become and how its language might dictate the politics of work on all sides.

“Muscularity”

Where Massad falters occasionally is in the sense of how the exportation of that liberalism might have played out in non-Western contexts and in the West itself. Using Helem, the Lebanese LGBT nongovernmental organization, as an example, he writes that 1970s-style feminism exported from the US, “shifted existing strategies and goals of local activism” in much of the Third World and that local organizations still embedded in it effectively operate in a time capsule, “oblivious to the critiques leveled by queer theory since the 1990s.”

While that may be true of some places, if liberalism survives outside the US and Europe, it is precisely because its muscularity, to borrow a [ghastly phrase](#) from UK Prime Minister [David Cameron](#), is such that it quickly accommodates to changes. The NGO structure in places like India, for instance, is run by people perfectly well versed in the most up-to-date analytic registers of contemporary queer theory and who produce some of the most cutting-edge analysis.

Some of that is deployed against the NGO-ification of queer activism, and some of that used to further it. Similarly, many queer scholars and activists in the US have no problem using liberal causes like gay marriage to further an ultimately neoliberal agenda of “human rights” and “equality.”

The gay movement’s win on marriage came at the cost of ending its struggle to expand the range of family structures outside the nuclear model and its fight, rooted in the 1980s AIDS crisis, to demand universal healthcare for all.

In its place today is a capitulation that “normal” and nuclear gay families deserve protection and that gays should be allowed to marry in order to access healthcare and other benefits. All of this [strengthens a system of privatization of resources where the family is the sole guarantor of benefits](#): the hallmark of neoliberalism.

Furthermore, a feminism inflected with contemporary critiques is not necessarily a feminism that separates itself from the interests of the state. Every year in the US alone, thousands of graduates from very queer and transnationalist gender studies programs join the insidious network of nonprofits like the Human Rights Campaign and The Feminist Majority Foundation devoted to “equality” for women, gays and lesbians and for assorted other minority interests at home and abroad.

They may as individuals be critical of the work they do, but the fact that such organizations exist and flourish even after decades of critique says a lot about the hold of classic liberalism on the nonprofit sector.

If we are to heed Massad’s call and be attentive to how liberalism works to continually other Islam, we are better off understanding that it is not a static entity but one capable of adapting quickly and effectively to assume power.

All that being said, this remains a profoundly important book, one that ought to be studied and its contents endlessly discussed in order to understand the true dangers of liberalism.

The soft calls for rights and reform disguise the fact that liberalism and its construction of Islam damn us all to perpetual war and terror.

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