
Europe’s centrality reflects no internal superiority accumulated in the Middle Ages, but is the outcome of its discovery, conquest, colonization, and integration of Amerindia [Latin America] — all of which gave it an advantage over the Arab world, India, and China. Modernity is the result, not the cause, of this occurrence. — Enrique Dussel, The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the ‘Other’ and the Myth of Modernity (New York: Continuum, 1995), 11. (Emphasis added).

Before I began to read the book under review, I had no expectations as to the quality of its content. I had heard Professor Ramadan speak in the United States in the past and had mixed feelings about what he had to say. Reading this book confirmed my initial reaction. Ramadan shares a lot of interesting ideas with his readers; however, he fails to develop a systematic critique and appreciation of modernity and how it has affected the modern Muslim world.

Muslim writing on the subject of modernity is pretty meagre. Apart from a few Muslim authors who have written on the subject in English, such as Fazlur Rahman, Akbar Ahmed, and Mohammed Arkoun, the field awaits a major Islamic reflection on the phenomenon of modernity, its philosophical assumptions and historical evolution in the past several centuries. Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity does not stand up to this task. The book takes modernity at face value by treating it in a neutral manner and suggests that the Muslim world must appropriate its essential philosophical and scientific underpinnings. This attitude prompts the author to raise the following question: “Can the Muslim world accede to modernity without denying some of the fundamentals of the Islamic religion”? (p. 1) If modernity is good, then the answer is clear: one must interpret Islam in a way that does not negate modernity.
Ramadan sets his discussion in the context of the dramatic transformations of European societies in the fifteenth century. He argues that this moment witnessed the first upheaval in modern Europe. He identifies this upheaval or “great moment of transformation in European societies” as ‘modernization’, “To put it plainly, modernization is a liberation, the breaking of the chains of all intangible dogmas [i.e., Christianity], stilted traditions and evolving societies. It represents accession to progress” (p. 3). Or, “We repeat, modernization was in its origin, a revolution. Being an expression of rejection, it actualized itself against an order, and every barrier stripped away was in itself a liberated stronghold, a gain of liberty” (p. 6). All of this sounds good but misses the mark. It is far from accurate, historically speaking, to argue that this moment was a negation of the old order in Europe. One must agree with the observation of the contemporary Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel that the European discovery of the New World, or, to be more accurate, the European stumbling upon the New World in 1492, was the seed that planted what would later bloom into European modernity. Furthermore, when Columbus discovered the New World, he did so in the name of the Christian king and queen of Spain, who generously financed his mission. Spain had just emerged from a long orgy of mass-scale slaughter of Muslims and Jews in the name of Christianity, a horrible historical event referred to as the Inquisition.

Modernity in that sense was not a revolt against an old system, but contributed to a significant expansion of that system outside Europe. The discovery of the New World and the decimation of millions of indigenous peoples in South and North America was all done in the name of Christianity. Therefore, modernity, at this point at least, does not represent any revolt against or liberation from “the chains of all intangible dogmas”, as Ramadan claims. On the contrary, it was by employing a certain dogma (Catholicism as understood in the early modern period in Europe) that this original European modernity proved to be the most fatal weapon against the ‘savage inhabitants’ of the Americas. In the same vein, Christian Portugal and Spain competed with each other in the possession of territories, not just in Latin America, but also in Africa, the Middle East, and South East Asia. All was done in the name of imparting the civilization of white European Christianity to the ‘backward indigenous people’ of the rest of the world. Portuguese and Spanish expansion between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries enhanced the old regime in those countries. Consider the modern history of the Philippines and how the Spanish conquerors of the seventeenth century completed their hegemony of the different races in that country with the help of the Catholic church and its clergy.
To say that Ramadan’s treatment of modernity is problematic is an understatement. It is cliche to state that no modern culture has escaped the problem of modernity. However, one is astonished that many an Arab and Muslim author has taken modernity for granted without inquiring into its violent and cruel beginnings. Most Western philosophers and thinkers treat modernity as a particularly European event or phenomenon, and believe it has nothing to do with the non-European ‘Other’. As such, modernity represents the most promising aspects of European thought and practice, and is the model of development and progress to which the rest of the world must aspire. Modernity represents the triumph of European Reason over the barbarism of non-Europe. This is definitely a Eurocentric notion that has as its basis the idea that European history is the pinnacle of world history, and thus its perfect conclusion. Under the guise of this treatment, the indigenous people in Latin America, Africa, and Asia disappeared, and when they do appear, they do so as a nuisance, as the enemy of the civilized West. It is a pity that a book with such a title fails to address the violent origins of modernity in the Third World.

It is clear that Europe came to birth as a result of confrontation with the European ‘Other’, especially in Amerindia. Europe defined itself as discoverer, bearer of religion and civilization, conquistador, and colonizer. According to Hegel, almost two hundred years before Francis Fukuyama and his grandiose claims in *The End of History and the Last Man*, Europe is absolutely the end of universal history. Nineteenth century European philosophers often mentioned Asia in their discourse, but missed Africa and Latin America. The Germanic spirit was considered to be that of the New World, whose end is the realization of absolute truth. The destiny of the Germanic people is to be the bearer of Christian civilization. (Compare this to what Bush had to say in 1991 about Iraq).

Ramadan is on the mark when he bemoans the negative coverage of the Muslim world in Western academia and the media. Unfavourable and blatantly biased portrayals of Islam and the Muslim world have increased exponentially since the events of September 11, 2001. Ramadan makes two assumptions: first, a social science approach to the problems of the Muslim world which is a faulty way of going about things; and second, in order to prove the compatibility of Islam and “the acceptance of the principles of modernity as they are actualized in the West”, we must carry out an in-depth

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study of the fundamentals of Islam. I leave the critique of these two assumptions for the moment. The author goes on to argue that of the fundamentals of Islam, “we [I suppose the Muslims] often know nothing, but which we speak about without having anything of substance to say” (p. 12). What are we supposed to make out of this sweeping generalization? It sounds like the Muslim world lacks the ‘ulamā’, theologians and religious thinkers capable of explaining the fundamentals of their own faith. What about the thousands of madrasahs, Sharī‘ah colleges and universities in the Muslim world that annually graduate thousands of men and women in the Sharī‘ah sciences? Fortunately, the author presents a totally different thesis halfway through the book: “To refer to the sources requires an in-depth knowledge of the Islamic sciences relative to the domain in question. The Muslim world abounds with trained personalities who have authority” (p. 119).

Knowledge has never been a neutral process. In his masterpiece, *Orientalism*, Edward Said has shown that Orientalism, as a form of European discourse of knowledge on the Muslim world, was totally intertwined with power and colonialism. What we are missing in our contemporary discussion about ‘Muslim knowledge’ is its production in contemporary Muslim societies, and how the political elite often interfere in the production of knowledge in order to ensure that no intelligentsia with critical consciousness arises in the Muslim world. This kind of approach is missing in the author’s treatment of the fundamentals of Islamic thought and practice. It is true that he discusses at length (pp. 11–74) what he calls “At the Shores of Transcendence” and “The Horizons of Islam”, where he treats such ideas as ījtihād, Imām Shāṭibi’s theory of ‘objectives of the Sharī‘ah’ (maqāsid al-Sharī‘ah), social justice, individual and family rights and obligations in Islam. However, the crucial question is not just to interpret these ideas in a certain manner but to explain why the contemporary Muslim world has shied away from many of these ideas. The Qur’ānic and legal principles about life, man, and society have been clearly enunciated. The question is how to make sure that real actual Muslims follow them, develop a true Islamic ethic and live by the commandments of the Qur’ān. Yes, all of these notions are foundational in classical and modern Islamic thought. However, the question is how to actualize them in a modern reality, a reality that was shaped primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by European colonial modernity, the rise of the nation-state, regional and not ummatic identities, and the weakness and division of the Muslim world.

The debate about the implementation of the *Sharī‘ah* in contemporary Muslim societies is very interesting for it highlights the different religious and social forces at play and the manipulation of the political elite in the whole
discussion. In the modern Arab world, for example, the founders of Islamism, most notably the Ikhwān movement founded the Shaykh Ḥasan al-Bannā, grandfather of the author, were clear about the issue: a full implementation of the *Shari‘ah*, as a comprehensive legal system, takes place only when an Islamic political system is established. In other words, an Islamic state is needed to implement the *Shari‘ah*, from above, so to speak. The author is not as direct as the early leaders of the Ikhwān. He says that, “The application of the *Shari‘ah* is nowadays the priority given to the actualization of a social project founded on the principles of justice and collective participation” (p. 50). To be sure, as the author shows, the *Shari‘ah* is applied in many individual spheres in the Muslim world; however, it lacks a power base in society. Is it possible to achieve social justice without power?

The author spends Part II of the book trying to prove that the central notions of ‘modernity’ such as democracy, pluralism, human rights, and the protection of minorities are compatible with the true Islamic perspective. This is not a new argument. It is as old as the encounter between the modern Muslim world and the colonial West. In the 1960s, some regimes went as far as to advocate the notion that socialism and Islam were compatible. Yes, one can easily find enough textual support in Islam for democracy. Some Islamists, however, such as Shaykh ‘Abd al-Salām Yāsīn of Morocco, do not consider Islam to be compatible with democracy. However, the crucial question is what happens to the Muslim world in the age of globalization and privatization? Why do the ruling elite in the Muslim world defy any logic of progress, pluralism and democracy? Why hasn’t the ‘modernized West’, and in particular the United States, lent any serious support to democratic forces in the Muslim world? Furthermore, what happens to religious and ethnic minorities under the New World order? Yes, the author goes on to discuss some of the troubling issues in the context of North/South divide (pp. 121–125). He points out that dictatorship, oppression, cronyism and corruption are rampant in the Muslim world. Hasn’t modernity given these repressive regimes new technological power to be even more repressive?

In Part III of the book, the author discusses Islamic economic principles and the possibility of implementing them in the Muslim world. He is certainly right to be critical of many Gulf countries because of their purely capitalist orientation (p. 136). I think this is the best section of the book, although it lacks a coherent historical context. In this regard, it is important to consider the post-World War Two social and economic engineering of some Muslim countries, which were deemed important to both the strategic and economic interests of the United States. One must make mention here of the leading
American economic doctrine after World War Two, referred to as Fordism, and its successor, post-Fordism.

One must understand the rise of American power to world dominance after 1945 in the context of the expansion of Fordism, an economic system taking shape in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century and coming to maturity after World War Two, when European industrial power was damaged by the war. The American model of socio-economic development was fully realized after the war: “Leading thinkers heralded a ‘postindustrial’ order that eliminated industrial capitalism’s fundamental socio-political divisions”.¹ In the 1950s and 60s, United States’ capitalism was able to achieve a high level of ‘class compromise’, where the poorer sections of the population bought into the American dream theory. Both David Harvey and Noam Chomsky note the rise of the United States to economic and political prominence in the world order as a result of the tremendous economic possibilities of the United States, the rise of Fordism or the industrial management of American society, and the destruction of key industrial nations in the aftermath of World War Two. In Chomsky’s words:

In 1945 the structure of world power was unusually clear by historical standards. A half-century before that, the United States had become by far the world’s greatest economic power, but it was a relatively small player on the world scene. By 1945 that had radically changed, for obvious reasons: the other industrial societies had been seriously damaged or destroyed, while the US economy had flourished through the war; the US had literally half the world’s wealth, incomparable military power and security, and it was in a position to organize much of the world, and did so with the assistance of its ‘junior partner’, as the British Foreign Office ruefully described the new reality of the time.²

David Harvey, after an enlightening discussion of the history of modernism and postmodernism in the West and their appropriation by Americanism in

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² Noam Chomsky, “Power in the Global Arena” in New Left Review, Number 230 (July-August 1998), 4. David Harvey elaborates on the history of modernism and postmodernism in the West and how these phenomena were appropriated by Americanism directly after World War Two. He says that around 1945: “What was distinctively American had to be celebrated as the essence of Western culture. And so it was with abstract expressionism, along with liberalism, Coca-Cola and Chevrolets, and suburban houses full of consumer durables. Avant-garde artists...now political ‘neutral’ individualists, articulated in their works values that were subsequently assimilated, utilized and co-opted by politicians, with the result that artistic rebellion was transformed into aggressive liberal ideology”. David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 37.
the 1940s, turns his attention to the economic system created by Fordism in the early part of the twentieth century, which grew to maturity in the interwar period and was launched on the world scene after the destruction wrought on Europe by World War Two. Harvey argues that:

The problem of the proper configuration and deployment of state powers was resolved only after 1945. This brought Fordism to maturity as a fully-fledged and distinctive regime of accumulation. As such, it then formed the basis for a long postwar boom that stayed broadly intact until 1973. During that period, capitalism in the advanced capitalist countries achieved strong but relatively stable rates of economic growth. Living standards rose, crisis tendencies were contained, mass democracy was preserved and the threat of inter-capitalist wars kept remote....Postwar Fordism was also very much an international affair. The long postwar boom was crucially dependent upon a massive expansion of world trade and international investment flows.... This opening up of foreign investment (chiefly in Europe) and trade permitted surplus productive capacity in the United States to be absorbed elsewhere, while the progress of Fordism internationally meant the formation of global mass markets and the absorption of the mass of the world's population, outside the communist world, into the global dynamics of a new kind of capitalism.... All of this was secured under the hegemonic umbrella of the United States' financial and economic power backed by military domination.  

However, both Chomsky and Harvey are quick to point out that in the process of the internationalization of Fordism, or the American capitalist system, American policy makers identified the indigenous nationalist movements as a threat and worked hand in glove with a tiny indigenous elite, which chose “to collaborate actively with international capital”.  

The capitalist West decided to export its version of Fordism to the less developed world, while seeking to suppress any political movement standing in the way of realizing its capitalist agenda. Ramadan discusses all of this in Part III of the book. In the case of the Arab world, Nasserism was identified as a threat to the expansion and consolidation of the capitalist system in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf countries. Nasserism was defamed as being pro-Communist and anti-Islam.

Fordism had a decisive influence upon the social structure and relations of capitalist societies. The same is true of the Arab world, especially in the Gulf, since 1945. Most Arab ruling elites have bought the Fordist ideas. The United States exported these ideas to the Arab world and agreed to transfer Fordist

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1 Ibid., 129, 136, 137.
2 Ibid., 139.
forms of production while “maintaining crucial command and research functions in the metropolises”. The question is the impact of such a project on the social composition of modern Arab societies, the rise of new classes, and the enlargement of the margins of the poor in post-1945 Arab societies. The Gulf States worked hard to implement a new social and economic contract with their own people. With the advancements in technology and the application of the Fordist project, it became possible to put a new social contract into place, one based on ‘material prosperity’ and excessive material consumption. Furthermore, the Fordist project in the Arab world was carried out in collaboration with official Islamic forces that justified not austerity, but material consumption in the name of Islam. This is most poignantly seen in the Gulf States, which further depended on a huge pool of cheap foreign labour to actualize the economic objectives of Fordism. No serious force has arisen in any of the Gulf States to challenge the fundamental premises of Fordism, which reached its apogee in the 1970s and 80s. On the contrary, many in the Gulf mourn the passing of these decades. It is clear that post-Fordism, which entered a crisis in the industrial world in the 1970s, caught up with the Arab world two decades later.

One major net result of the whole process has been the consolidation of the Third World elites’ influence in restructuring their societies and making them more appealing to the demands of global capitalism. This fact has exacerbated class differences in the Arab world in the past three decades. In the case of the West as well. “Under post-Fordism, class lines have grown sharper, more severe, and more easily visible; the alleged postwar trend toward a ‘middle class society’ is undergoing a reversal”. The recent manifestation of globalization, in the view of many Third World intellectuals, is triumphant Americanization that has advocated a new kind of cultural and economic model. “Besides being an economic system, globalization is an ideology that serves this system. Americanization and globalization are highly intertwined”.

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As seen previously, there is a real need to tackle the new social and economic order in the Muslim world, understand its historical foundations, current directions and the forces that support it. The social and economic engineering of the Muslim world has been formidable throughout the past six decades, and was done in the name of modernization. So far, no substantial movements of change have appeared in the Gulf States, for example, to change the prevailing order. Ramadan thinks that an Islamic oppositional movement is in the making to confront injustice. “Inspired by Islamic points of reference, this is the real front of rejection of the world order and its injustices, that is in gestation” (p. 179). Is this “front of rejection” armed with the logic of modernity or Islam or both?

At the end of the book the author claims that “Nothing in Islam is opposed to modernity and we can firmly state that the Muslim thinkers and ‘ulamāʾ (savants) who are opposed to this notion and to the idea of change and evolution that it covers often confuse it with the model which is current in the West. Clearly, they confuse modernity with Westernization” (p. 308). Isn’t Westernization the child of modernity, in the same way that colonialism, capitalism, and secularism have been its products? What is surprising about the author’s discussion at the end is his conclusion: “The awakening of Islam may bring a contribution, hitherto unsuspected, to a real renaissance of the spirituality of the women and men of our world” (p. 311). Modernity has not been kind to spirituality in its origins and current manifestations. I think it is important to remember Wallerstein’s insightful phrase: “We do not live in a modernizing world but in a capitalist world. What makes this world tick is not the need for achievement but the need for profit. The problem for oppressed strata is not how to communicate within this world but how to overthrow it”.

Yes, spirituality is needed by the poor strata in Muslim societies in order to bear the enormous burdens that have been associated with ‘deformed modernity’.

Finally, the book suffers from a multitude of grammatical and stylistic problems, which make fluid reading difficult. On the whole, the author’s style of writing is neither succinct nor direct. His arguments could have been made in a book half the size of this one.

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