Political Science Faculty Publications

Political Science

1997

Introduction to Part One

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The end of the Cold War brought with it a temporary euphoria about prospects for a worldwide "third wave" of democratization to sweep the globe. If civil society had triumphed in the former Soviet bloc, perhaps political liberalism would spread elsewhere. No sooner had the sweet taste of victory over communism subsided, however, than Western observers turned their attention to another, allegedly uniquely, antidemocratic current—Islam—whose civilizational values seem to clash with Western liberalism even more fundamentally than Marxism. Whereas people in other parts of the world crave civil society, so the argument goes, political openings in the Muslim world have only fanned the flames of religious extremism. This argument finds much support in Orientalist literature, scholarship, and journalism.

Orientalist is here used in the sense established by the Palestinian-American literary critic Edward W. Said's well-known book, *Orientalism*, to mean those who study, seek, and depict the Middle East. Said argued that Western literary treatment of the world of Islam and Arabs was based on an inversion of idealized images of European culture. He later expanded on this thesis to show how the American news media "covers" (a very deliberate pun) Islam and the question of Palestine.[1]

Orientalism can also be found in the social sciences. For instance, Max Weber, an important European sociologist, used an inversion to define his ideal-typical concept of (European) legal-rationality, contrasting it with what he called "kadi-justice," or the personalized application of Islamic law (*shari'a*). Weber tells his readers that Muslim justice is the antonym of modern Western practice.

In Orientalist depictions, Islam is often seen as the antithesis of tolerance, social justice, individualism, and legal-rationality. *Jihad* (often erroneously

understood solely as "holy war") appears more central to this great mono-theistic religion than prayer or charity. It is frequently repeated that "there is no separation of religion and politics in Islam," again substituting the inversion of a Western ideal for understanding the complex relationship of Islamic law to religious practice and political regimes.

The Orientalist mind-set attributes political struggles in the Middle East to culture, not social, economic, or individual factors. For instance, while lynchings, hate crimes, and family violence in America are but individual exceptions to a sound social ethic, "Islamic terrorism" is portrayed as if it were a religious expression. Most social scientists look to the humiliations of Versailles and the deprivations of the Great Depression to explain the "escape from freedom" into a violent, chauvinistic, exclusivist, right-wing European movement—fascism—in the 1930s. But how often do we look to military defeat and economic crisis to explain Middle Eastern extremism? Rarely, although these factors are clearly present. Instead (at least when comparing the West to the Orient), Westerners typically view Western experiences with slavery, fascism, and individual brutality as cultural anom-alies in a tolerant, humane, egalitarian Judeo-Christian civilization. Yet comparable phenomena in the Muslim world, widely "covered," appear to be indicators of a civilization that valorizes violence, book-burning, capital punishment, and chauvinism. Most of us do not believe right-wing Zionists or Christians who claim to speak for God, but we tend unquestioningly to accept that clenched-fisted Islamists waving green flags are the voice of the Muslim Allah.

This view holds that cultural impediments to pluralist politics, peaceful expression of dissent, and the rights of citizens are greater in the Islamic world than almost anywhere else. Civil society, the sphere of autonomous civic groups and activities that protect the private sphere from the state, is critical for modern democracy. Islam, the argument goes, has no such civil society.

The following essays help us to transcend the Orientalist myopia and then to look at Islamist[2] political movements, in particular, on their own terms. Yahya Sadowski's thickly-argued critical analysis of "neo-Orientalism" attempts to deconstruct scholarly arguments about the presumed nature of Islamic civilization. Two prominent Orientalist scholars derive central themes of traits they say characterize Arab culture today from their historical studies of one medieval Egyptian "slave" dynasty. Based on complex ex-trapolations from this rather exceptional historical example, they argue that the modern Muslim world cannot develop civil society.

The arguments Sadowski confronts are more subtle, nuanced, and so-phisticated than a simple inversion. While a consensus reigns among the neo-Orientalists that the Middle East can never achieve the ideal of de-mocracy, they differ about whether the obstacle is the state or society.

Sadowski notes that in the Middle East, as in Europe, major political move-ments are not likely to be explained by enduring cultural "essences." In the twentieth century North Africa and western Asia have seen nationalist, revolutionary, and Arab socialist movements, as well as sectarian violence; and important elements of the Muslim Brothers have opposed the use of violence. Some formerly Marxist or nationalist radicals are now radical Islamists. The politicization of a socially conservative, "fundamentalist" interpretation of the Qur'an into the most powerful current in the Middle East in the 1980s and 1990s must be explained in terms of its social, political, and economic context—not medieval history.

What of the potential for civil society and democracy in Middle Eastern countries other than Israel, often unproblematically regarded as the lone Western-style democracy? Is Islam antithetical to democracy? If so, would we go so far as to say, "Their culture is violent and antidemocratic, so that's okay for them"? Sami Zubaida, Suad Joseph, Gudrun Krämer, and Alexander Flores each present something rare in English—insight into ongoing de-bates among Muslim scholars, jurists, and political thinkers.

What strikes many Western readers of these articles is the extent to which Muslims do explicitly confront, and differ on, constitutional issues of law, governance, and citizenship. Even though Islamists claim to be "authentic" representatives of the "true" Islam, there are debates among scholars and differences between countries and contexts. "The debate," as Krämer points out, "is how the *shari'a* (Islamic law) is to be defined—as a comprehensive set of norms and values regulating human life down to the minutest detail, or as a set of general rules of good life and moral behavior."

This theme of defining the *shari'a* and its relationship to modern law and social policy, discussed on a theoretical level in this group of essays, carries over to the empirical case studies in the sections that follow. Zubaida and Flores guide readers through the transition from theory to on-the-ground issues. Zubaida shows that the contest in Egypt is not simply between re-actionary Islamists and enlightened liberal democrats, but one that involves secular human rights activists and Islamists in a struggle with a government trying to contain them both. In this struggle, as Flores explains, the Egyptian regime initially encouraged the religious conservatives in order to combat the left; later, progressives found themselves in strategic political alliances with the Islamists against the government. These politics are dynamic and fluid.

We do not have to accept right-wing zealots' claim to speak for all Muslims. Nor does understanding the Islamist current in its own terms and in a dynamic social, political, and economic context mean condoning either the totalizing aims or the violent methods of the religious right. All five of these essays are clear about this. Particularly moving is Joe Stork's interview

with Suad Joseph, an Arab woman who, like many Arab women, grapples with the multiple ways in which women's political space is constricted—by dehumanizing Orientalist stereotypes as well as by Middle Eastern patriarchal structures of class, community, and nation. Both imperialism and Arab politics limit her full citizenship and her exercise of basic rights.

NOTES

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Times Books, 1979); *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

2. Note the distinction between Islam*ic* and Muslim, which refer to the religion based on the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad; and Islam*ist,* referring to the twentieth-century political movements claiming the Qur'an is their constitution.