

Europe and the Arab World

Samir Amin and Ali El Kenz

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Concise, succinct, and informative, this book skillfully elucidates and assesses the patterns, prospects, and complexities of Arab-European relations contextualized in a globalizing (read “Americanizing”) world. It also identifies the ambiguities and limitations of social movements and struggles within the Arab world, as well as their implications for mutual relationships (p. vi). The authors’ main thesis is that both global capitalism and the American determination to construct a “new” Middle East in its own image have undermined the possibilities of domestic reforms and external realignments in most Arab countries. American hegemonic influence, together with the growing sway of politicized Islam on public life, have added more limitations and constraints to other failures to transform the underlying economic and political structures defining the relations between members on both sides of the Mediterranean.

The book comprises four chapters: three written by Amin (chapters 1, 2, and 4), and one (chapter 3) by El Kenz. The first chapter is a critical survey of conditions in the Arab world in general and that of the Arab “state” in particular. Amin designates the latter structure as a manifestation of “mameluke power,” reflecting a complex traditional system that has merged the personalized power of warlords, businessmen, and men of religion (p. 3). The Arab state, he argues, has never really embraced or understood modernity. Egypt, Syria, and the Ottoman Empire underwent a first phase of ineffective modernization during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second phase was associated with the populist nationalism of Nasserism, Baathism, and the Algerian revolution between the 1950s and 1970s. With the end of this phase, a multiparty system gave way to a paradoxical regression into the mameluke type of autocracy (pp. 10-12). Whereas Europe broke with its past, which allowed for its modern progress, the Arabs have not. Amin identifies modernity with such a historical break as well as with secularism, the differentiation of religion and politics, the emancipation of women, and the rest of the term’s conventional elements (pp. 2-3).

He criticizes currents “claiming to be Islamic” (p. 6), particularly those of the Wahhabi type, viewing Islamic militant groups as manifestations of a revolt against “destructive” capitalism and “deceptive” modernity (p. 6), more interested in sociopolitical issues than in matters of theology. Amin dismisses Iran as being no different, although he provides no details (p. 8), and

views non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as smokescreens reflecting postmodern capitalist interests (pp. 31-38). He writes that postmodernity offers a “scholarly” version of an ideology of capitulation to such interests, while “good governance” offers its popular counterpart (p. 38). Also discussed are the socioeconomic conditions of individual case studies of key Arab countries and the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation

Chapter 2 focuses on international policy issues and the European states’ geopolitical interests, by examining the extent of these interests’ autonomy in light of American hegemony and whether they are compatible with socioeconomic development in the Arab world. Amin concludes by stressing that final global strategic decisions are made by the United States, while Europe simply plays the role of an auxiliary (p. 73). Both, however, represent an “imperialist” condition in their own way (p. 71).

Chapter 3, by El Kenz, presents an extensive analysis of the Euro-Mediterranean Barcelona project, the role of globalization and regionalization in developing asymmetric relationships, and the ensuing disillusionment. The project is seen as nothing more than a “defense” agreement aimed at protecting Europe against possible social, political, and cultural “overflowing” from the countries south of the Mediterranean (p. 82). El Kenz perceives Europe as seeking the same objectives as the United States, but in a more “civilized,” less “brutal” way (p. 82). He concludes that the Barcelona process is one of large-scale corruption of political leaders, for it ties them down as domestic and regional representatives of neoliberalism’s global goals and policy objectives. (p. 124).

Chapter 4 concludes the book by asserting that Europe is an integral part of the interrelated agenda of liberal globalization and American hegemonism in the service of the interests of dominant capital (p. 136). The agenda’s association with democratic slogans and political rights, while ignoring their socioeconomic counterparts, serves more to undermine the credibility of democracy, which is cynically seen as a tool of manipulation and “double standards” raised against an opponent regime to weaken it while swept under the rug when an ally is involved (p. 137).

This study offers much in terms of critical analysis of the dynamics of global capitalism. However, imbued with a clearly visible dose of Marxist analysis, its approach sometimes carries with it the inertia and baggage of dogma. This detracts a bit from what otherwise is an insightful piece of work. For example, it does not deal adequately with the pressing issue of how leftists or Marxists could perceive a transformed relationship with disparate Islamic currents or how both social forces could coalesce to engender change

that would meet the material, spiritual, and cultural needs of Arab and Muslim societies. The authors' perhaps justified hostility toward "Islamic" movements, which had linked up in an unholy alliance with the United States during the cold war era, render them incapable or unwilling to see the difference that Iran makes (p. 8). In their Marxist view, an Islamic system can only reflect a new "comprador" power (p. 8).

Yet the problematic should perhaps be approached more in sociological, rather than in metaphysical, terms camouflaged and couched in socio-economic discourse. Otherwise, one may fall into dogmatic fallacies – being so obsessed with *social* contradictions that forms of *cultural* struggles are considered superfluous and "imaginary," thus ignoring their complementary and dialectical connection (p. 9). It does not occur to the authors that Iran's Islamic revolution may actually reflect a shift to the left of conventional Sunni sociopolitical thought. Perhaps it may be a harbinger of a new and different relationship between Islamic revolutionary movements and social and liberationist groups, one that is crucial and necessary if neoliberalism is not to end up being the sole global player, with its opponents divided and conquered. Change in the Arab world requires a united front of all social forces. Intellectuals, therefore, should not be the source or instruments of divisions, whether driven by inertia or dogma; rather, they should be the source of visionary leaders.

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