

## **Islam, Democracy, and Cosmopolitanism**

*Ali Mirsepassi and Tadd Graham Fernée*  
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Ali Mirsepassi and Tadd Graham Fernée introduce their book as a “critical study of citizenship, state, and globalization in societies historically influenced by Islamic traditions and institutions” (p. 1). They place their approach in the framework of the relationships between individuals and the state, religion, and political community as part of investigating the democratic aspirations of Islamic societies. These relationships are then contextualized in a global setting wherein such aspirations presumably interconnect with some “cosmopolitan ideal.”

The book’s main thrust is quite clear from the outset in light of the authors’ two grounding assumptions: In order to attain agency and freedom humanity in general, but Muslims in particular, must (1) respect the “core Enlightenment values” of human equality and dignity regardless of ethnicity, religious affiliation, and belief or disbelief and (2) acquire a spatial vision of democracy that incorporates “the cognitive-imaginative resources of a multidimensional Islamic heritage” (p. 1). In short, an approach in which an overarching and universal Eurocentric value structure that respects Islam would help deconstruct any essentialist framework that posits the latter and Enlightenment as dichotomous opposites. This could be done through a “global ethic of reconciliation” – an alternative to the “death of epistemic universalism” (p. 30) along John Stuart Mill’s depiction of barbarian races in their failed relations to liberty – that sociologically interconnects three domains of a specific spatial-temporal context of Islamic practices, the democratic social virtue of nonviolence, and the cosmopolitanism of universal and shared human values (p. 4).

The authors’ analytical framework integrates three strands of twentieth-century critical thought concerning democratic nation-building. These pertain to John Dewey’s “conceptual pluralism,” Edmund Husserl’s “lifeworld” and “temporal Horizons,” and Amartya Sen’s conception of cultural variability and freedom as “capabilities” (p. 5). This is articulated within what Mirsepassi and Fernée designate as a “Pragmatic Revolution” that perceives an “unthought conjuncture between the Jasmine Revolution” – the so-called Arab Spring – and these critical strands’ gaining ground in western thought (p. 3). This is done through the tripartite problematic of “embeddedness,” “embodiment,” and the “unthought” (p. 7), all of which point to a new, even if inadequately, “theorized cosmopolitan horizon” (p. 7). The goal is to understand the “Jasmine Revolutions” as new popular forms of mobilization that respond to a specific pattern of the modern experience, while asking the question of

“how” in action (pp. 9-10) and linking up with the tacit dimension (Michael Polanyi’s “*We can know more than we can tell*”) of the unthought as the very basis of political “freedom of thought” (p. 15). Such freedom is made possible by a *scientific* worldview that always bears on a still “unrevealed reality” and on the unthought’s “passionate struggle for democratic freedom as a chosen commitment” (p. 25).

The following five chapters critically review the works or “texts” of prominent Arab scholars who have dealt with the various problematics of democracy, tradition, modernity, cosmopolitanism, and law from various perspectives: Abdel Aziz Al-Azmeh, Talal Asad, Muhammad Arkoun, Abdullahi Ahmad An-Naim, and Fatima Mernissi. Mirsepassi and Fernée are particularly influenced by Arkoun, who offers a simultaneous critique of western and Islamic reason as an opening toward democratic ends unconstrained by linear progressive horizons or ultimate closures, as well as an opening toward pluralism (i.e., ontology subverted in favor of epistemology) (p. 31). Here, in the tradition of Dewey, the ideal of public action becomes a matter of “modified institutions” based on the “possibilities” and “imagination” of “old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating” (p. 22).

In the context of this book, the final outcome of this is to further the democratic tradition of cosmopolitan justice (p. 84). The latter requires the historical subversion, based on Arkoun’s methodology of the thinkable/unthought interaction (chapter 4), of the “orthodoxy” that leads Muslims to think about “what is as yet unthinkable” (p. 32). This, according to the authors, would open the way for a “new cosmopolitanism” that would find its expression in everyday experience rather than in “distant dreams of ultimate reality linked to concentrated state power” (p. 33).

The rest of the scholars dealt with are critically analyzed in light of Arkoun’s influence on the authors. Thus, Al-Azmeh (chapter 2) is observed in terms of his contestation of Islamist essentialism and modernity’s militant cosmopolitanism (as an unthought). Asad (chapter 3) is examined from within his critique of cosmopolitan modernism in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. An-Naim’s (chapter 5) legal approach is analyzed in relation to his discussion of the conflicts between the Shari‘ah and constitutionalism. Finally, Mernissi’s (chapter 6) non-essentialist approach is highlighted as she contests the totalitarian legacy of Muslim state-building during the twentieth century. In this context, the authors challenge what they perceive to be Al-Azmeh’s ontological privileging of the state as the bearer of modernity, Asad’s dualism between Islamic authenticity and secular modernity, An-Naim’s rather “incoherent” combination of state and Islamic ontology on the one hand with secular institutional practice and con-

sensual probability on the other, and Mernissi's "failed" historicism and simplified model of Islam.

Mirsepasi and Fernée's textual analysis of these works seek to explore what they call "an emerging global ethic of reconciliation at the practical level," one that privileges real and actual humanity and links this to understanding the "mass movements" transforming Muslim societies – the "how" in action, or the reflecting on how these societies can make themselves at home in a modern world comprised of traditions and multiple others (p. 199). They perceive the so-called Jasmine revolutions as being strategically positioned to re-imagine and transcend the "intractable" problem of the state being the agent of truth (i.e., the religious or Islamic state). This strategic location is then linked to the Pragmatic Revolution by re-positioning the *democratic Enlightenment* as a "practical intellectual tradition rather than an ontological claim about reality" (p. 23).

Yet while they argue that the cosmopolitan ideal should reject any Eurocentric world historical temporality, their call for virtually adopting the Enlightenment's core values essentially makes this claim problematic. In fact, they explicitly state their position as one in which they "reject authenticity and uphold secular democracy" (p. 16). Given this, in essence this work is attempting to replace *western* ontology with *western* epistemology, in the frame of which the critical study of Islamic traditions and institutions is undertaken. This in itself is also methodologically problematic, especially when combined with a situation in which the Jasmine revolutions, for whatever reasons, have in many ways largely turned out to be grand failures.

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