Egyptian Public Intellectuals and their 'Wests'

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In this contribution I discuss three recent publications of authors belonging to various ideological trends: “left-wing nationalist,” “Islamic,” and “liberal” respectively. The following exposé highlights a number of common strategies in Arab appreciations and representations of Europe and the West. I argue that the way in which the West is portrayed to Western (European and North-American) constructions of the West tend to identify human rights, democracy, and freedom as key Western values. Were we to take these premises to be the characteristics of the West, we would find that the West is highly appreciated throughout the Arab and wider Muslim world: recent opinion polls have shown that the majority of respondents from Morocco to Indonesia also value human rights, prefer democracy to dictatorship, and favour freedom over repression.1 It is clear that there is something spurious in the above postulation. The mistake lies not so much in the opinion polls, as much as it lies in the premise: while Western publics may generally identify the West with human rights and other lofty ideals, “non-Western” publics may hold different opinions. To further investigate this difference of opinion we could again turn to opinion polls, yet for a more thorough understanding of the ideological meaning of the West in the country of my particular interest—Egypt—I will zoom in on the public debate as shaped by popular intellectuals of various ideological trends. The intellectual landscape in the Arab world today resists a straightforward categorization. The long established lack of political and press freedoms smothers the display of intellectual debates which otherwise could be monitored freely. A conventional division employed both within and outside the Arab world is between “Islamist” and “secular” discourses. Others have opted for a more comprehensive categorization comprising Islamic, Marxist/left-wing, nationalist, and liberal intellectuals trends.2 In this contribution I discuss three recent publications of authors belonging to various trends. Galal Amin, Muhammad Imara, and Rida Hilal are all prolific authors of carefully published books, and have been regular contributors to the country’s major newspapers for at least a decade. While the economist Galal Amin and the jurist Muhammad Imara continue to be quite productive, the journalist Rida Hilal has not been heard of since he mysteriously disappeared in August 2003. The three publications fall loosely within certain broad trends: “left-wing nationalist,” “Islamic,” and “liberal” respectively. The following exposé highlights a number of common strategies in Arab appreciations and representations of Europe and the West. I argue that the way in which the West is portrayed is to a large extent determined by ideology, and that none of the three ideological trends hold the West to be unequivocally identifiable with the aforementioned lofty ideals.

Galal Amin: unabated Western imperialism

In 2002 the first Arab Human Development Report was published. This UNDP-sponsored report, drafted by a team of prominent Arab scholars and intellectuals, described with great candour the major problems in the contemporary Arab world. While the report was praised by many, some vehemently opposed the report for serving Western interests. Rather than elaborating on what was wrong with the Arab world, the authors had better focused on the oppressive role of external actors. One of the more prominent Arab intellectuals to attack the report was the Egyptian economist Galal Amin of the American University in Cairo. To Amin, the Report almost constituted treason, since it played in alerting Arabs and Muslims to the consequences of since he mysteriously disappeared in August 2003. The three publications fall loosely within certain broad trends: “left-wing nationalist,” “Islamic,” and “liberal” respectively. The following exposé highlights a number of common strategies in Arab appreciations and representations of Europe and the West. I argue that the way in which the West is portrayed is to a large extent determined by ideology, and that none of the three ideological trends hold the West to be unequivocally identifiable with the aforementioned lofty ideals.

Gradually, the term “occidentalism” is gaining ground. Since the end of the Cold War and the consequent loss of a West that could be defined in terms of (and against) its Communist nemesis in the East, the process of imaging the West is steadily acquiring students. This article reviews how popular writers in Egypt imagine the West, showing that while their views on the West are shaped differently by particular ideologies, they converge in condemning the policies emerging from the West.

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Muhammad Imara: incompatabile civilizations

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to so-called “moderate Islamists” or “Islamic reformers,” sometimes also referred to as Islamists of “the middle way,” as distinguished from “fundamentalists.” It has been suggested that this trend has emerged from within Islamic fundamentalism, and that contrary to their radical progenitor, the Islamists of the middle way are willing and able to compete in a liberal democratic setting. Although some have challenged the description, Amin argues, in a recent publication he focuses on the relations between Islam and the West. It makes a matter of fact that the relations between the two have always been at best problematic, and at worst, bloody. Much like some Western authors who present Islam as a civilization that, since its inception, has opposed the West (or Europe, Christianity, or the Judeo-Christian civilization), Imara portrays the West as a civilization that has never really changed in its position towards the Orient (or Islam, or the Arabs). The West, according to Imara, has always been imperialist: it oppressed “the Orient and the Oriental peoples for ten centuries, from Alexander the Great … to the seventh century [Byzantine emperor] Herakleos.” All this only ended, Imara explains, when Islam came on the scene and liberated the Orient from Western oppression. From that moment on, the West had been at odds with Islam. This historical narrative serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides the reader with an image of the Western mind, and the West is imperialist simply because imperialism is what Western civilization happens to produce. Secondly, and partly as a consequence of the first lesson, there is nothing Muslims can do to alter the bad image that the West has of Islam. The West has exercised its oppression over the Orient before Islam emerged, which is seen as proof that the West will continue to oppress the Orient regardless of Islam. This point is made elsewhere in the book, when Imara again stresses that the West campaigned against Islam long before 2001, and that clearly September 11 cannot be seen as the justification for Western attacks upon Islam. Imara’s portrayal of the West is different from that of Amin in that Imara focuses more on the idea of a religious conflict, in which the West stands opposed to Islam as a revolutionary religion and as an alternative to Western secular political systems. Though Imara does have economic grievances against the West, he stresses the cultural and civilizational differences between the Western and the Islamic worlds. In this sense his discourse echoes Huntington’s theory of a “clash of civilizations” as well as Bernard Lewis’s representation of East-West relations as characterized by perennial conflict.

Rida Hilaal: the West’s double speak

While “the West” has conventionally denoted Europe and North America, ever since the end of World War II it is the United States that has commonly been viewed as its primary component. The liberal intellectual Rida Hilaal goes further and tends not to speak of the West or Westernization, but of America and Americanization. In his recent book Americanization and Islamization, Hilaal calls for a marriage of Islam and democracy to take the place of the current situation in which rigid Salafi Islamization is coupled with American consumerism. Interestsingly, Hilaal contrasts the current process of Americanization with the pre-World War II process of Europeanization. He argues that whereas the Arab world today is taking but the foam of America, leaving aside its true riches, i.e. its values, the previous age of Europeanization was much more constructive: “Egyptians took from the Europeans the rule of law, constitutionalism, parliament, journalism, theatre, and cinema.” The result was that Egypt could live with the most progressive of the world’s nations, and Cairo could face up to Paris or London. This so-called renaissance-period, Hilaal argues, was eventually frustrated both by British imperialism and by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Egypt, when Cairo was known by many as “Paris along the Nile,” is common to many liberals in Egypt. A common understanding, not limited to liberals, is that Europe or the West in general contains certain highly commendable qualities with regard to governance and personal freedoms, but that Westerners betray these qualities in their foreign policy towards the Arab and Muslim world. Hilaal claims that for a solution to “the Middle Eastern crisis” to be reached it is merely necessary “that America should honour the American values, most prominently the value of democracy.” This is reminiscent of the way in which Arab nationalists from before WWII attacked European colonialism without rejecting the project of cultural and political Europeanization. As Hourani wrote of this phenomenon: “While the nationalists condemned British or French policy, the conclusion they drew was not that England or France were intrinsically bad but that they were being untrue to themselves.”

Notes
4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., 10.
8. Ibid., 65–66.
9. Ibid., 15.
10. Ibid., 33–34.
11. Ibid., 15.