Egyptian Public Intellectuals and their 'Wests'

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In this contribution I discuss three recent publications 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 into the hands of the West. Amin was not alone in this assessment. Various nationalist and leftist newspapers and intellectuals criticized the report for the same reason. In one of Amin’s recent publications we can see how strongly he feels about the importance of the West, and how he identifies it as an imperialist entity. In “The Era of Arab- and Muslim-bashing: We and the World after September 11,” Amin argues that the Arab and Muslim world is suffering from a global smear campaign. For instance, the “events” of September 11 are thought by many to have been organized by Muslims, while in reality this was not the case. Amin does not elaborate as to who was behind the attacks if not Al-Qaeda, though he hints at the likelihood of an “inside-job.” His main aim however, lies in alerting Arabs and Muslims to the smear campaign against them and “reminding them of the justness of their case.” In The Era of Muslim-bashing, Amin rejects everything that does not fit the image of a noble, well-to-do Arab world. To him, the images of plun-

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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 smoothers 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/leftwing, nationalist, and liberal intellectual 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.

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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.
Muhammad Imara: incompatible civilizations

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to so-called “moderate Islamists” or “Islamic reformers,” sometimes also referred to as Islamic thinkers commonly categorized as “moderate Islamists” (in Arabic the word used is mujahid), meaning “balanced” rather than “moderate”). Through his various weekly column and appearances on television, he is an important contributor to Arab public opinion. In a recent publication he focuses on the relations between Islam and the West.1 Imara takes it as 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 toward 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.”2 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 West as a civilization that 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 be aggressive towards 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 “the middle way,” as distinguished from “fundamentalism.” 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, Muhammad Imara is one of those Islamic thinkers commonly categorized as “moderate Islamists” (in Arabic the word used is mujahid), meaning “balanced” rather than “moderate”). Through his various weekly columns and appearances on television, he is an important contributor to Arab public opinion. In a recent publication he focuses on the relations between Islam and the West.1 Imara takes it as a matter of fact that the relations between the two have always been at best problematic, and at worst, bloody. 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Rida Hilal: the West’s double speak

There are, however, also striking convergences in these occidentalisms. In all three accounts, the West is perceived to be of paramount importance for Egypt and the wider Arab world. While only Hilal seeks the solution to the region’s problems in an assertion of the “true West,” all three authors agree that the main source of the region’s problems lies in policies adopted by the “real West.” This distinction between the ideal and the actual may also help us to understand the discrepancy between Western self-identifications and the image of the West elsewhere in the world.

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