Review of Mozaffari, M. (2017) Islamism: a new totalitarianism

Dodds, T.

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Islamism: a new totalitarianism, by Mehdi Mozaffari

Tomás Dodds

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Section four examines questions of race, race "denialism", "who constitutes being African", and offers a praxis for building a non-racial politics enshrined in the constitution, through the lens of "culture, custom, and identity". Suttner contends, in only 15 pages, that colonialism constructed identities to divide, but that this can be overcome through respect and solidarity. In order to create equality one must "see cultures, customs, and identities as in flux" (119) and by recognizing "differentiated experiences" that structure society (123).

At stake in the remainder of the book is what constitutes South African democracy and revolution for Suttner; whether it is something limited to multiparty elections and legally enforced equalities. Suttner answers this question by first assessing "who leads and how they lead" (136) through figures such as Chief Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Walter and Albertina Sisulu, and Bram Fischer in section five, to identify the lessons learned. The sixth section then provides a historical overview of the ANC before conceptualizing radical politics in South Africa in the final, seventh section. Important here is Suttner's articulation of the existence of a radical potential within democracy and those participatory activisms that have informed "radical programmes" and ethics within South Africa. It is this dimension of democracy that may remedy the problems outlined in the previous sections, to not only ensure that the constitution is upheld but to work towards innovative ways of building democracy and "reinvigorating people as political subjects" (219).

In sum, Suttner's book should be read alongside political and sociological literatures on post-apartheid South Africa that explore tensions within the practice of constitutional democracy, structural discrimination, government corruption, and the relationship between electoral democracy and social movements more broadly. Students, experts, practitioners, activists and non-specialists alike will find value in Suttner's critical assessment of "declining democracy" and the proposed rejuvenation of a radical democratic imagination to safeguard freedom. Those seeking a refined discussion on political-economic history, race, gender, and civic-activist organizations within South Africa, however, will be left with more questions than answers – which, ultimately, is the book's core aim.

Paul Emiljanowicz
McMaster University
emiljapa@mcmaster.ca

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Islamism: a new totalitarianism, by Mehdi Mozaffari, Boulder, CO, and London, UK, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2017, 345 pp., $85 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-62637-654-0, $32.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-62637-655-7

Since the 9/11 attacks in New York, the word "Islamism" has been extensively used in journalism, political speeches, and academic publications. It rapidly became a new word in headlines worldwide. It was on that Tuesday morning that Western countries experienced al-Qaeda's message of terror and learned the real capabilities

of an Islamic terrorist group. And yet, the reasons behind these attacks still remain unclear for so many.

Islamism: A New Totalitarianism constructs a narrative that aims to explain how and why some branches of Islam have mutated into Islamism, "an expression of regression and an imaginary remedy of stagnation" (59) that has considered the Western enlightenment process as its enemy throughout the centuries. This new form of Islam started long ago, but only became relevant with the Islamist Revolution of 1979 in Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Khomeini preached and urged for the establishment of the first Islamist government in the twentieth century to combat both modernity and secularization, which he saw as a cultural invasion (*hujum-e farhangi*) and an immediate danger to the Islamic world.

As media continues to erode the distinction between religion and extremism, *Islamism: A New Totalitarianism* is a provocative, necessary, and divisive work that aims to show, without hesitation, that "Islamism is, first and foremost, an ideology, and as such, it should be treated and studied as we do other political doctrines and ideologies such as Marxism, fascism, and liberalism" (15). Readers must be wondering whether there should be a question mark at the end of this book's title, as most academic scholars would have preferred. However, Dr Mehdi Mozaffari, Professor Emeritus at the Department of Political Science at Aarhus University and an escapee from the Iranian revolution himself, soon presents his rationale, arguing that Islamism is no more than a "religiously inspired ideology based on a totalitarian interpretation of Islam, whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means" (268). This approximation to the topic leaves very little room for questions.

The text is firmly structured around the classical ideology of Islamism. Dr Mozaffari pays particular attention to ideas engendering Islamist organizations and movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaida, al-Shabab, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). And here we find the real strength of the book; Dr Mozaffari's description of an antimodern and antidemocratic doctrine (32) by using key actors from the history of Islam as foundational references. Mozaffari identifies some of these ideas in the preaching of, for example, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, a Muslim theologian and jurist who lived and taught between the eighth and ninth centuries, and who laid down a foundation to negatively brand Greek philosophy as a *bid'a* (innovation) and paved the way for the re-emergence of a regressive and anti-intellectual school of thought (35) that understood classical philosophy as an enemy of the Islamic empire. Or the work of Abu Hamed al-Ghazali, another Islamic philosopher and theologian, who at the beginning of the first millennium introduced the dogmatic postulates that supported the restoration of an orthodox Sunni imperial power and argued that social sciences, such as metaphysics, politics, and ethics, should not defy Islam, but serve it. Or again in the work of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), a strong defender of Sunni Islam based on strict adherence to the Qur'an, and who imposed a doctrine that defends the Islamic war and condemns other nonviolent forms of religious deeds undertaken for spiritual perfection, claiming that a martyr's death in jihad (war) is not only easier but also "superior to any other form of religious rigour" (46).

From the roots of Islamism, this book also scrutinizes the Shia radicalization process after War World II and the continuous struggle for the revival of the golden age of the Islamic civilization. Why, indeed, if Muslims were once well-versed in Plato and Aristotle, have we witnessed an emergence of powerful Islamic dogmatism? Mozaffari offers several explanations – philosophical, geostrategic, technological-scientific, and the

"Unification of the World Theory". This is probably the book's strongest point: a historical analysis of how Islamism came to be.

However, Mozaffari's efforts to argue that Islamism, Marxism, communism and Nazism should all be studied and treated the same way, because all of them are totalitarianisms, feels like an oversimplification. It is a dubious historical claim that fails to consider contextual variables in the equation. Another weakness of the arguments is expressed again in Mozafarri's statement that a totalitarian version of Catholicism could not happened, like it did for Islam, in part because Catholics have a central institution -the Vatican- that Muslims lack. The history of the Catholic Church and its ramifications during the twentieth century in Western Europe, South America and North Africa can easily be used to prove quite the opposite.

It is not until the final chapters of the book that the author offers some analysis about the differences between Islamism and other Western totalitarianisms. Indeed, towards the end of the volume, Mozaffari argues that Islamism should be separately categorized within these heinous groups, since "Islamism is a religiously inspired ideology, whereas Western totalitarianism is secular in character, despite the fact that among Western thinkers and scholars, there has been a tendency to attribute a kind of religious aura to nonreligious ideologies" (267).

In *Islamism*, the reader will find a good introduction to a topic that begs to be discussed at length, but it needs to be aware of the comparative limitations and the elasticity with which Mozaffari constructs his theoretical framework. The author seeks to educate us about the history of the radicalization of Islam, and it does. But it fails to present the connections between the claims and evidence for placing Marxism, communism and Islamism all in one sack. Future editions of this volume would benefit from including a more critical look at those political movements that Mozaffari so freely lumps together.

Yet, in a teaching environment, Mozaffari's work can be used as a strong basis to motivate student discussions. Indeed, every sentence of this book can and should be used to spark off an intense debate on comparative studies regarding politics and religion.

Tomás Dodds
Leiden University
t.dodds.rojas@fsw.leidenuniv.nl http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4724-5307

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Islam and democracy after the Arab spring, by John Esposito, John Obert Esposito, and Tamara Sonn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 320 pp., £20 (hb), ISBN: 9780195147988

Islam and Democracy After the Arab Spring, written by three titans in the field of democracy and Islam, asserts that to understand the lack of democratic progress in Muslim majority countries one must recognize that these societies have different political and historical circumstances, which is why their path to democratization will be varied and different from the West's experiences. In this argument, the authors build