

Author's response

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I thank Ugo Rossi and *Dialogues in Human Geography* for providing a forum to discuss my book *Islam in Liberalism*.

The book seeks to address the relationship of 'liberalism' to 'Islam' rather than provide an explanation of either term. It investigates how liberalism thinks itself through something it calls Islam both at the level of ideology and political practice since the 18th century while demonstrating that liberalism's presenting its version of Islam as Islam-in-itself and Islam-for-itself is a ruse. There is no attempt to define liberalism or Islam, as any such definition risks the very reification that the book seeks to undo.

I understand the difficulty that Richard Gale finds due to the lack of such definitions in the book, however, what the book does define is how Islam operates in liberal ideology and political practice (Gale is inattentive to the latter in his reading). *Islam in Liberalism* understands Europe as always already an amorphous identity with an incomplete geographic frame and is clear that Europe is not a stable signifier –and here there is no disagreement with Richard Philips who raises a similar point.

At the outset, what is presented in the book is not a specification of the moment of the birth of Europe as Gale seems to think, but rather that whatever moment those invested in specifying Europe's birthday choose – the era of Charlemagne, the Crusades, the Conquest of the Americas and the Reconquista, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and so on – they are sure to find Islam at the core of that moment of birth (p. 15). Surely some liberals criticized empire, but these critics were never hegemonic, just as today many liberal Americans may be critical of American imperialism (and the book provides a motley of such critics and exposes their insistent liberal imperial desires which contradict their declared antipathy to imperialism), which surely does not undo liberal regimes' imperialism. The point of the book is not, however, to say that liberalism is imperialist (Uday Mehta has already done a fine job demonstrating that), but

rather how Islam is internal to the constitution of liberalism, and that this liberal constitution explains the kinds of imperial relations liberal European and Euro-American regimes and intellectuals had and continue to have with Islam and Muslims. Richard Philips wants a larger discussion of Europe at present and senses that France and Britain are privileged in the book. But France, Britain and the Netherlands are only privileged in the era of high colonialism and not later, wherein the United States, Russia and Germany are also discussed in relation to Islam.

Islam in Liberalism proceeds to undo the West as some essential category and insists on explaining to those who mistake a critique of how the West was invented and continues to reinvent itself in a dynamic process (the West as the place of democracy and later of women's rights, and more recently of sexual rights, etc.), as anything but reification. Indeed, I explicitly state:

The 'West' has been normalized as the 'West' by a series of ontological and epistemological operations, including its hetero-homo binarization. It is these operations that produce it as the West and produce the West's others as opposites or approximations of it. (p. 261)

It is surprising that Sami Zemni mistakes this for essentialization. The book is also clear on the economic forces that subtend liberalism and its Islam:

the assumption of democratic identity by the 'West' and of despotic identity as the West's other, represented by the figure of 'Islam', is both an act of self-constitution and projection as well as an imperial strategy that uses cultural assimilation and othering as tactics of economic and political domination. (p. 19)

It is this universalist reach of Western liberalism which necessitated that Islam be a constitutive part of it at its moment of birth, as the liberal project was not only one that sought to construct a new political and social order in Europe, but of constructing it alongside an economic order that required that the newly invented Europe justify why it had to launch itself on a world scale. That Islam was a necessary *other* of European democracy and freedom was very much related to the necessity of the conquest of the

Muslim world (beginning with the Ottoman and Mughal Empires in the 18th century all the way to the Arabian and Persian Gulf in the 21st) as a guarantee for the economic order that formed the basis of liberalism, something it did in the 19th century for the benefit of Britain, France and other European imperial powers and does today to the United States and its subsidiary European allies. The problem all along, it seems, was never with Islam, but with the way European liberalism constituted itself and with the imperial order it sought and seeks to impose on the rest of the world.

Anna Mansson McGinty understands that ‘Mas-sad writes with urgency, asking his readers and the various actors in the intellectual, political, and diplomatic spheres to engage further in a critical and thorough examination of the epistemological framework and underpinnings of their work’. She suggests though that in doing so the book may be reifying liberalism, failing to notice fissures and resistances within it. In this regard, I want to draw attention to the many instances when the book discusses these varying liberal approaches that can contradict one another on a number of interpretative issues.

What the book finds pervasive, however, is the missionary and interventionist rescue mission that even these critical approaches pursue. I do indeed show how so many illiberal thinkers and feminists resist this – Marnia Lazreg, Heba Raouf, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Joan Scott, et al. That many Muslims would adopt the liberal discourse of democracy to resist liberal imperialism was noted in Chapter One as an indication of the global hegemony of liberalism, including and especially among its victims. Here there is no ‘dichotomy’, as McGinty supposes, between liberalism and Islam, as the whole purpose of the book is to demonstrate that *Islam in Liberalism* is nothing if not a liberal projection rather than some external opposite, and that the dichotomy that exists is internal to liberalism rather than one that resides outside it. The book, as Katharyne Mitchell shows, includes a number of discussions about the neo-liberal economic policies and material colonial effects. Still, it is intended as an intellectual and political history of Islam in liberalism rather than a

sociological or economic study of Europe or of Muslim-majority countries.

On the sexual, I want to draw Phillips’ attention that I address the role of the Dutch and the Germans, not only the Americans, the French and the Brits. While I discuss debates on whether Romania should be included in this Europe, recent events transpiring after the publication of the book show us how easily Greece was about to be expelled from Europe, let alone the 1980s debates on whether Italy should be included in the Maastricht Treaty at all.

I remain unsure why my discussion of MSM struck Philips as ‘sweeping’. Dennis Altman, Sonya Katyal and Hakan Seckinelgin endorse and offer a very similar critique and there has been no persuasive response negating our contentions. Though I should point out that I am clear that ‘while MSM started with the insight in HIV prevention efforts that practice rather than identity is the ground for HIV transmission, its ossification into identity was not necessarily obvious or inevitable except under the epistemological pressures I identified’. I am taken aback, however, by Philips urging us to consider whether ‘attitudes towards and restrictions upon Muslims [in Europe] are shaped more by well-meaning liberalism in some settings, and more by racism in others’! Liberal imperialists always declared and justified colonialism as a process that would bring benefits to and improve the lives of natives. Is Philips suggesting that these declared ‘good intentions’ are separable from racism?

In this context, I should clarify one recurring question with regard to cultural imperialism. There seems to be a misunderstanding that criticism of those among the colonized (intellectuals and professional activists) who adopt culturally imperialist norms for political and social activism is based on viewing them as ‘victims’ of cultural imperialism. I have never made such a questionable argument. I am rather clear about these intellectuals’ and activists’ complicity (and sometimes outright collaboration) with imperial organizations and policies. I insist on the active agency of the complicitous and reject viewing them as victims or as suffering from false consciousness.

Katharyne Mitchell agrees that, despite the impact of Said's *Orientalism* on academe, so many of its declared admirers continue with a business-as-usual approach in their scholarship: 'Massad demonstrates again and again, the lessons learned, (or not), never seem to stick very well, given the epistemological power of liberal thought, and the colonial European powers of ontologization that have been hard at work for several centuries'. I fear, however, that her objection that I was not 'generous' or was too critical of these scholars might reinscribe an institutionalized liberal Protestant politesse that wants to relegate scholarly disagreement to a place behind the scenes where it is covered up by a veneer of agreement and harmony. My book abides by the very critique it offers in performing resistance to such a liberal approach and to such a form of politesse, in addition to exposing its not so 'peaceful' pretensions.

My intention in mentioning the background of scholars and activists who speak on behalf of, or study, Muslim women (or those who speak on behalf of all Muslims or against them) is not to accuse them of 'treachery' nor is it to express any 'disappointment' whatsoever as Mitchell projects, but rather to convey how identity politics in a European and a Euro-American setting lends legitimacy to forms of scholarship and activism (let alone art and politics) based not on the quality of the scholarship or the nature of the activism in question but predominantly on one's patronym (especially of those Lila Abu-Lughod has poignantly termed 'halfies' and who, in our case, would have an Arab or Muslim father) or andronym (in the case of those non-Arab and non-Muslim European and Euro-American women who marry Arab and/or Muslim men and adopt their last names), which substitutes for both. Indeed Abu-Lughod is clear that in addition to feminists:

halfies [like Abu-Lughod herself], by the way their anthropological practice unsettles the boundary between self and other, enable us to reflect on the conventional nature and political effects of this distinction and ultimately to reconsider the value of the concept of culture on which it depends. (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 137)

I am not persuaded by this self-assuredness, especially as I demonstrated in my book that neither feminists nor 'halfies' (let alone those with Arabic or Muslim andronyms) have necessarily succeeded in unsettling the distinction when it comes to European liberals and Muslims, indeed that many of them, like Abu-Lughod herself, end up reinforcing the distinction despite their best efforts.

During the Cold War, liberal US academics accused their detractors of being 'ideological' while presenting their own commitment to liberalism as a form of non-ideological 'objectivity'. In the light of this established liberal orthodoxy, Mitchell's confusing my questioning of imperial epistemologies for a mission is unfortunate, as it risks being understood as a tactic to delegitimize critics of liberal missionaries by reversing the charge levelled against liberals.

I should mention in conclusion how thrilled I am with the optimism of these readings of my book and their desire that it covers more aspects of the issues it explores and studies. I sincerely hope that the book and these important expectations and desires will generate more scholarship on these very questions by scholars of liberalism.

Reference

- Abu-Lughod L (1991) Writing against culture. In: Fox R (ed) *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, pp. 137–162.