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From Marxism and Islam to Marxism and Feminism

Maxime Rodinson, *Marxism and the Muslim World*, with a foreword by Gilbert Achcar, Zed Books, 2015, 248 pp., \$18.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781783603367.

Shahrazad Mojab, ed., *Marxism and Feminism*, Zed Books, 2015, 400 pp., \$30.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781783603220.

These two volumes fit together into a general discussion of the relevance of Marxism—both as theory and as a political movement—to the problems of the last century and to the contemporary world. The collection of Rodinson’s articles is mainly from the late 1960s and 1970s, whereas the collection edited by Shahrazad Mojab involves contemporary reflections on the relevance (or otherwise) of Marxist theory to a range of critical theoretical issues. To some extent, as I shall argue shortly, these volumes present a mirror-image of each other. Rodinson has nothing to say about gender or women’s issues and a lot to say about Islam and communism, whereas *Marxism and Feminism*, apart from some passing comments on Islamic conservatism and the Iranian Revolution, has no chapter on Marxist theory and religion. Perhaps for good reason neither volume has any analysis of the pressing crises around political Islam, religious fundamentalism, and the rise of ISIS.

In many respects French academics have perhaps unsurprisingly been at the forefront of Marxist theory. One thinks of Louis Althusser. They have also dominated much of early Orientalism and Islamic Studies such as Jacques Berque, Claude Cahen, and Louis Massignon, and more recently Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel. Rodinson in many respects combined both Marxist theory and Islamic Studies. His *Islam and Capitalism*, published in French in 1966, was the first publication to explore systematically the debate about the connections (if any) between Islam and capitalist development.¹ Indeed, *Islam and Capitalism* had a significant impact on my *Weber and Islam*² at a time when there was little available in

¹ This important volume was translated by Brian Pearce and first published in 1974 by Allen Lane. It has been republished, with a foreword by Roger Owen, and published by Saqi Books in 2007. We should also refer here to his *Muhammad*, which was published in French 1961; see: Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, trans. Anne Carter (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2002).

² Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

sociology relevant to questions raised by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*³ with respect to Islam.

We cannot fully appreciate his work without understanding the man and his context. Rodinson (1915-2004) grew up in a secular, Jewish, anti-Israeli household. His parents, who had escaped from earlier programs, died in Auschwitz in 1943. Rodinson had, like many secular Jews, joined the Communist Party in 1937, but turned against communism in response to the excesses of Stalinism. In his academic career he studied at the *École nationale des langues orientales vivantes* in 1932 where he mastered Arabic and Hebrew. In 1937 he entered the National Council of Research to study Islam and in 1940 he was appointed to the French Institute in Damascus. After the war he became Director of Studies at the *École Pratique des hautes études*. In his political career he was critical of Israel as a colonial state and as early as 1967 contributed an article to *Les Temps modernes* with the title “Israel, fait colonial.”⁴ Later he wrote *Israel and the Arabs* (1982) and *Israel: A Colonial Settler State?* (1988).⁵

Rodinson is probably best remembered for his work on Islam where he can be said to have established a French rationalist sociology of Islam but from a Marxist perspective. In my *Weber and Islam* I drew attention to the conundrum of secular sociology to make sense of the claims of extraordinary revelations by a charismatic leader. Rodinson as a Marxist atheist responded to Muhammad’s revelation by combining Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism to claim that the Qur’an emerged in the Prophet’s unconscious and was forged from “his actual experience, the stuff of his thoughts, dreams and meditations, and memories of discussions that he heard.”⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly the book was banned in many Arab societies. We might note however that Max Weber’s treatment of the Prophet was equally controversial and reflected his view that Islam in the age of empire had ceased to be a religion that promoted salvation through a rational ascetic drive. Instead Islam had become, according to him, geared toward war and the conquest of territory.

In retrospect Rodinson’s book on capitalism has been the most influential. The core of his argument was that Islamic societies had experienced the growth of a capitalist sector that was created by rich merchants, businessmen, and small industrialists. This sector gave rise to new institutions (banking) and new values (the honest merchant), but the sector remained narrow and constrained by the existing tribal, nomadic, and pastoral framework that was exploded by the dynamic of rational capitalism.

Rodinson as atheist and Marxist was nevertheless sympathetic to Islam, or at least he sought to correct common misunderstandings of it. He was critical of Orientalism before the term became a general critique of western views of Islam in the seminal publication of Edward Said in 1978.⁷ In *L’Islam, politique et critique* he was not impressed by the notion of “fundamentalism” which had become common in the English-speaking world, and favored the concept of *intégrisme*—meaning a religious orientation that combined or integrated all of the main religious, legal, political and cultural dimensions of Islam into a single religious identity.⁸

³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002 [1905]).

⁴ Maxime Rodinson, “Israel, fait colonial,” *Les Temps modernes*, No. 253 (1967): 17-88.

⁵ Maxime Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) and Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial Settler State?* (New York: Monad Press, 1988).

⁶ Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 77.

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Vintage Books, 1978).

⁸ Maxime Rodinson, *L’Islam politique et croyance* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

Unlike Michel Foucault who welcomed the Iranian Revolution as a spiritual revolution, Rodinson allegedly coined the term “Islamic fascism” to describe the Shi’ite revolution of 1979. However the origins of the term are much disputed with one source being Michel Onfray in *Atheist Manifesto: The Case against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*⁹ where he spoke of the Islamic revolution giving rise to “an authentic Muslim fascism,” and another being Malise Ruthven in an article in *The Independent* newspaper where he used the term “Islamofascism.”¹⁰

Given Rodinson’s enduring influence, this collection of essays is a welcome publication for students who are interested in Marxist theory and how it was applied through sociology to Islam. The articles made available here cover the period 1958 to 1972. In reading them we need to be clear about Rodinson’s intentions as a Marxist atheist. When he refers in the title to “the Muslim world” he is perhaps less interested in Islam as a religion and more concerned to understand nationalist politics and communism in societies where the majority was Muslim. Gilbert Achcar makes this point in his short Foreword to the book. In the 1950s and 1960s, Marxism was “in the air” and Marxist categories were widely embraced by Arab intellectuals. However, in his 1978 Preface Rodinson lamented, “there are fewer grounds for hope in the Muslim world than six years ago: fewer regimes are committed to the struggle against the domination effect exercised, under American hegemony, by the capitalist system. Conservative state bourgeoisies have developed” (3). The main theme of my review of Rodinson’s work is to understand the gap between the role of Marxism in the Middle East between the 1950s and the 1970s and the role of religious ideologies today in shaping not only the Middle East, but global politics—especially the role of political Islam. In short, Rodinson’s reluctance to take Islam as a religion seriously left Marxism incapable of understanding the role of “public religions” in world politics.¹¹ Despite Rodinson’s influence, the irony is that, while Marxism as an ideology has largely disappeared from modern politics, various forms of militant Islam, militant Buddhism, Christian conservatism, and ultra-Orthodox Judaism play a major role in secular politics.

While Rodinson contributed to the development of the sociology of Islam in France, his materialistic Marxist perspective focused on Islam as a social and economic phenomenon. This approach contrasts, therefore, with perhaps the main contender in the twentieth century—namely the sociology of religion of Max Weber. His Protestant Ethic Thesis was often taken as a reply to the ghost of Marx, but this interpretation is misleading. Weber was only too aware of how political and economic considerations were often determinative. Yet values were the switchmen on the railroad of history. Thus, Weber’s philosophy of social science and the development of *verstehende Soziologie* have an undeniable edge over Marxist reductionism in taking the claims of social actors seriously. At one level Rodinson dismissed the “internal” claims of Muslims about the nature of their faith, the unique character of the Prophet, their historical destination, and Islamic spirituality. What mattered for Rodinson was the role of Islam as a social movement alongside and comparable with twentieth century communism. Marxism only takes us so far. The most important development of Weberian historiography was undertaken by Marshall G. S. Hodgson whose three volume *The Venture of Islam* (1974) remains the definitive social historical and sociological account of Islam from

⁹ Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (New York: Arcade Publishing Inc., 2007).

¹⁰ Malise Ruthven, “Construing Islam as a language,” *The Independent*, September 8, 1990.

¹¹ See: José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

its origins until the twentieth century.¹² Like Weber, Hodgson analyzed the rise of Islamic empires after “the classical age of Islam” in the first volume. In the final volume Hodgson had a genuine interest in world history and explored Islam as a global movement. In passing, one failure of traditional Orientalist perspectives (including Rodinson’s version) was always to treat Islam in Asia as inconsequential despite the fact that Indonesia is the largest Muslim society. But Hodgson’s main concern was how the inner core of religious consciousness, or “Sharia-minded” spirituality as he called it, was compromised by the power and the interests of dominant elites. The logic of Marxist sociology is either to ignore the religious mindedness of social actors, downplay the historical role of Sufism and millenarian Shi’ism, or to reduce religion to a thin ideological veneer covering and disguising real economic interests with (from a rational point of view) false beliefs.

However, having read Rodinson’s essays sympathetically, what strikes me more than anything is the distance between the world of the twenty-first century and the period in Europe when these articles were published in the 1960s and 1970s. I simply provide a list of crucial changes, in no particular order, that distance our world from Rodinson’s Marxism. Firstly, there is the transition of four major communist societies of the twentieth century to some form of capitalism or reconciliation with the capitalist world, or political and economic reintegration with the West: Cuba, Vietnam, China, and East Germany. Indeed perhaps the only remaining communist society is North Korea, which has also experimented with capitalist development sectors but centralized planning remains the norm.¹³ No Middle East society became communist although there were socialist states or parties such as Nasser’s Egypt or the Ba’ath Party in Iraq. Whereas Rodinson was optimistic about the prospects of Marxism as theory and practice, he did not imagine that religion could be important in political and social developments. I have already commented on his negative response to the Iranian Revolution, but as of writing this book review in November 2015 global politics are primarily shaped by radical Islam—ISIS through Syria and Iraq (and probably Libya), Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab and various radical Islamic movements stretching from Indonesia through Afghanistan and Pakistan to Turkey. Secondly, the nature of social movements and global communication systems has changed radically. In Rodinson’s world workers’ opposition and working-class movements found their expression through trade unions, socialist political parties, nationalist organizations, working-class communities, and organizations promoting international associations. Modern social movements are best illustrated by Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the Umbrella Revolution, and so forth. These movements are driven by educated, largely middle-class, young people who have little trust or interest in organized politics (of the left or the right) and they use social media rather than community groups and workers’ organizations to mobilize their members. They draw heavily on women and women’s associations, and women have played a conspicuous part in these new social movements. Therefore, the distance between Rodinson and contemporary social theory is further defined by gender issues, recognition of women in social movements and the public, and feminist social theory. This final point is the natural introduction to Mojab’s edited collection on *Marxism and Feminism*.

Although the authors are from diverse national backgrounds, many of them have a close connection with the University of Toronto and their reading of Marxism is drawn from a primarily Anglophone environment. There are scattered references to Althusser, Baudrillard, Foucault, Mouffe, and so forth, but the primary inspiration is drawn from mainstream

¹² Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 Volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

¹³ See: Paul French, *North Korea: State of Paranoia* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

feminist theory—Michele Barrett, Susan Brownmiller, Judith Butler, Shulamith Firestone, Mary McIntosh, Sherry Ortner, and Dorothy Smith. Having said that, the principal aim of the book is to engage with Karl Marx, his legacy and Marxist theory. This collection thus addresses a number of fundamental problems in Marxist theory with the aim of developing a fruitful conceptual engagement between Marxist and feminist theory. The chapters systematically cover social and economic changes in the modern world that require rethinking Marxism from a feminist perspective: democracy, financialization, intersectionality, patriarchy, reproduction, and standpoint theory. However, the principal direction of these essays is established by Mojab in terms of a contest between what she calls, following Teresa L. Ebert, “ludic feminism” and “red feminism.”¹⁴ *Marxism and Feminism* is basically an attack on “ludicity” in the name of a radical feminism agenda (red feminism) to rethink feminism via a debate with the legacy of Marxist materialism.

The ludic variety is essentially how postmodernism, cultural studies, and literary theory turned Marxist critique—and we might add much of the social sciences—into a reflection on cultural representations in late capitalism. A related issue was the impact of social constructionism—an epistemology that questioned the facticity of our taken-for-granted world. In the study of Islam, Said’s *Orientalism*, whatever its merits as scholarship, encouraged young researchers to abandon conventional empirical research such as ethnography in order (to use the jargon) “deconstruct” hegemonic representations of reality. “Discourse” replaced “ideology” in the vocabulary of “critique.” The impact of the cultural turn, literary theory, social constructionism, relativism, post-history, post-structuralism, and postmodernism cast a long shadow over western research and its effects are still with us.¹⁵

If Rodinson’s work was based on the assumption that there was an enthusiasm for Marxism among intellectuals in the Arab world with the ending of colonialism and the rise of various socialist movements, then Mojab’s book opens with a quotation from Mary White Orvington proclaiming that, “Socialism and Feminism are the two greatest movements of today. The one aims to abolish poverty, the other to destroy servitude among women.”¹⁶ There is probably general agreement that, with the development of communist totalitarianism, enthusiasm for Marxism as theory and practice was severely compromised. Mojab also thinks that the cause of women’s emancipation is still underdeveloped. She notes that “while gender and women’s studies programmes proliferate in higher education in Western countries, anti-feminism is hegemonic in popular culture and the mass media, wherein feminism is rejected, even by some self-styled feminists, as ‘extremist’ and as exhibiting an ‘anti-male bias’” (3). The answer has to start with a robust rejection of ludic varieties of feminism and a renewed engagement with Marxism to restore a feminist materialism adequate to the needs of women in modern capitalist societies. This engagement will also re-connect with the revolutionary universalism of Marxism of the past and disengage with the relativism and contextualism of recent cultural theory (Chapter 14, “Revolution,” by Maryam Jazayeri). Thus many of the chapters attempt to engage with changes to capitalism (such as Chapter 6 by Jamie Magnusson on financialization) and with the impact of biomedicine and bio-technology on human reproduction (Chapter 13 by Michelle Murphy).

¹⁴ Teresa L. Ebert, *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

¹⁵ See: Simon Susen, *The ‘Postmodern Turn’ in the Social Sciences* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁶ Mary White Orvington, “Socialism and the feminist movement,” *New Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1914): 143.

How successful is *Marxism and Feminism* in revitalizing Marxist-feminist theory? One basic problem is finding some agreement about the character of modern capitalism. Does capitalism still exist? Modern economies of course have plenty of crises and the causes of the 2008-2011 ongoing crisis have been much debated. Inequality, injustice and poverty are plentiful. The contemporary enthusiasm for austerity packages by western governments has indeed given rise to a revival of interest in Marxist economic theory. The general interest in Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* would be an obvious example.¹⁷ However, if the work of Rodinson and the chapters in Mojab's critical response to ludic feminism are to be plausible and relevant, then it is important for their theory and political practice that capitalism continues to have recognizable features that have not changed beyond recognition since Marx wrote *Capital*. There is the rub. There is very little agreement in modern sociology (to take one discipline) that capitalism is a unitary enduring phenomenon. In contemporary sociology, there is general disagreement about the unity and diversity of capitalism, about its historical continuity and about its peculiar modern properties. The overriding issue is whether capitalism in Japan and China (or state capitalism) has any typological similarities with liberal western capitalism.¹⁸ In the light of these debates about whether capitalism (in its raw nineteenth century version) still exists, the question remains whether the legacy of Marxist theory as a critique of capitalist exploitation is still valid or relevant? The answer is inevitably uncertain: probably, but only in limited doses.

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¹⁷ Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014 [2013]).

¹⁸ See: Johann P. Arnason, "Theorizing capitalism: Classical foundations and contemporary innovations," *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2015): 351-367.

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