

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

April 7, 2016

Rula Jurdi Abisaab and Malek Abisaab, *The Shi'ites of Lebanon: Modernism, Communism and Hizbullah's Islamists*, Syracuse University Press, 2014, 392 pp., \$49.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780815633723.

The authors of *The Shi'ites of Lebanon: Modernism, Communism and Hizbullah's Islamists* propose a fresh conceptual paradigm for understanding an entrenched field: Communists versus Islamists in the Lebanese Shi'i political landscape.

The authors, the husband and wife pair of Rula Jurdi Abisaab and Malek Abisaab, who respectively teach Islamic Studies and History at McGill University, draw on their scholarly interests and disciplinary backgrounds, and take up a novel space to build their argument and analysis: a middle-ground that draws on a fertile gray-zone whereby communist ideas and Shi'i political emergence have entangled genealogies that cannot so easily be parsed as part of this side or the other. This is a promising and also fulfilling trajectory of inquiry: to break away from dated partisan analyses and stale narratives that reproduce rock-hard ideologies and go no further than a riven local discourse. The authors seek to revitalize the field and shake up the intellectual status quo and the Abisaabs do this through both solid scholarship that builds upon an interesting and comprehensive variety of primary sources (interviews, archives, films, and video clips) and Arabic, Persian, and "Western" secondary sources, and by drawing on path-breaking theoretical approaches like the work of Talal Asad, among others. The authors also frame their objective within both wider and deeper historical and political processes, thus shedding new, invigorating light on old arguments.

They write:

Local history involving an understanding of long-term political processes, socioeconomic conditions, relations to the nation-state, and colonialism rarely figure in the accounts on Arab Shi'ite Islamists—in particular, the Lebanese. Our study stresses the importance of communal and revolutionary ideology to the reshaping of the political sphere in Lebanon. The stories we tell in this book weave together the local picture and transnational political forces as well as the profound interactions they entail. Contemporary historians have largely neglected the Islamists' approaches to religious modernism and communism. Worse, there is little attempt to account for the secular processes and ideas shaping the modernists, Communists, and the Islamists and for their overlap with religious sensibilities (xxiv).

It is quite a radical proposition, given the field, which can be both intellectually conservative and politically charged, to suggest a meeting-place or “overlap” between commonly opposed secular and religious camps both politically and in theory. Yet the authors unfold their argument methodically and clearly in the course of eight historically organized chapters bookended by a prologue and a conclusion. The account is comprehensive: it begins in the era that saw the end of the Ottoman Empire, the takeover by the Mandate powers, and the subsequent creation of the “colonial state” (208) of Greater Lebanon or *Grand Liban* by the French (1920s and 30s), through the early years of Lebanese independence, the creation of Israel and the Palestinian *nakba* or Catastrophe (1940s and 50s) and the wars with Israel, invasions and occupation (1960s and 70s), the formation and rise of Hizbullah (1980s and 90s), through the end of the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon in 2000, and concludes in the post-occupation era leading up to the present with Hizbullah’s successful entry into the Lebanese public sphere and a discussion of its ambiguous relationship to the secular Lebanese state and western ideals of modernity and progress.

In a narrative that is sensitive to sectarian, class, and also flags gender issues, the authors portray the salience and the interplay of these often eclipsed historical dynamics to the formation of the differing political subjectivities of Shi’ism within the Lebanese polity (and Iraq, where the Shi’ite seminaries are formative and an extension of the Lebanese Shi’ite landscape). The authors show that Communism and Islamism, far from being diametrically opposed ideologies and camps, emerged in conversation with each other and with historical, structural, moral, political realities and currents that shaped the life-worlds of the Shi’a in Lebanon and beyond. That is to say that those political formations, far from being essentially opposed, should be understood as variously addressing the dominant concerns of the Shi’ite community-cum-constituency as it was—with difficulty and also resistance—enfolded into the jagged political landscape of modern Lebanon.

The emancipatory potential of both discourses—communism and Shi’ism as ideologies of the oppressed encompassing “notions of social justice, righteous governance and revolutionary change” (209)—fed each other’s fire and enabled members of an emerging, historically silenced demographic in Lebanon that included a majority of disenfranchised peasants and workers in addition to clerical and national elites, to meaningfully draw from both traditions to formulate powerful responses to burning modern realities like state-endorsed class oppression and the need for political mobilization. The representation of the struggle between Communists and Islamists simplified and distorted by many accounts as that of a progressive, secular, western political movement versus a conservative and religious Islamic tradition is carefully depicted as wrong-headed by the authors who show the many ways in which the political and philosophical traditions of Shi’ite Islam and communism both overlapped and converged. That the Communists and the adherents of Shi’ite Islamism (Amal and Hizbullah in particular) came to be opponents within the modern Lebanese context and elsewhere was due in part to the nature of these movements’ appeal to the same demographic (the neglected Shi’ites of South Lebanon and the Bekaa and the war-displaced and dispossessed Shi’ite peasants cum proletarians who had moved to the “belt of misery” surrounding the capital Beirut), and the political struggles that ensued within a modern nation-state context (not least of all for hegemony over the Resistance or *muqawama*), and not a result of a timeless or essential incompatibility or wholesale rejection by “backwards” religious traditions of “progressive” atheistic ones or vice versa. The authors convincingly show, in tracing the biographical trajectories of several key figures and thinkers (e.g., Husayn Muroeh and Mohammad Husayn Fadlallah) who, despite being claimed by either camp—Communist and Islamist, respectively—actually, in thought and deed, creatively combined

elements of both traditions in constituting their moral and political subjectivities. Thus, the Abisaabs' analysis highlights the area in which these political formations and subjectivities dovetailed and entwined before jumping into a discussion of their fraught and also occasionally bloody history.

Relatedly, other dominant binaries the authors seek to complicate and destabilize are the commonly deployed "sacred versus secular" and "tradition versus modernity" in understanding movements like Islamism and communism within a modern, that is to say secular, nation-state formation. The authors cogently illustrate how such discourses are genealogically constituted as fluid traditions that are constantly formed and reformed in relation to each other and institutions of power (following the work of Asad) and not inflexible, timeless dogmas; they show how "Islamism" is as much a product of modernity as communism (and secularism) is, cohering as a stable formation in a certain time and place yet drawing its authority and horizon from alternative moral and philosophical sources to those hegemonic in dominant Western political traditions, formulating alternative, competing "indigenous" (209) political motives and paths. They write:

Out of this local modernism emerged also a religiously grounded Marxism. The religious modernists and the Marxists emerging from the *'ulama* families fitted particular features of Western modernism to Islamic tradition using distinct cultural resources. At the same time, they expressed unease with the narrative of linear evolutionary progress, insisting instead on the simultaneity of renewal and conservation. They also doubted that scientific knowledge and reason alone could have revelatory powers. Thus although the religious modernists and the Marxists were not "autonomous" agents of modernism, they did not reproduce European experiences of modernity or congruent European arguments for its justification. Rather, the Shi'ite thinkers looked for ways to negotiate modernity from within their local tradition and to reinterpret "progress" on the basis of the personal, intellectual, and historical materials available to them at a particular time. (49)

The hybrid space that this book opens up for understanding communism and Islamism as discursive traditions shaping the life-worlds of Shi'ites in Lebanon (and Iraq) as they grapple with multiple struggles at the level of empire, nation, state, class, family and more, is key to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of these movements, something we are in sore need of in academia as well as in mainstream media (and this book is written in accessible, jargon-free language that can also appeal to an informed readership beyond academia). In this view, far from being like oil and water, leftist thought cohered with Shi'ite traditions and tropes of struggle and emancipation and created powerful political dynamics that cannot be parsed dichotomously as part of one tradition or the other. In Iraq and in Lebanon, "Local leftist culture did not chase God and the spirits out of the life of the common Shi'ites. Rather it produced alternative sources of enchantment to public religion" (212). The authors exemplify the movement of the dispossessed or *mabrumin* spearheaded by Sayyid Musa al-Sadr in Lebanon in the early 1970s as such a confluence of various traditions and histories that came together in a powerful formation to address pressing social and political realities. "Given the rich history of Shi'ite anticolonial, nationalist and leftist activism before this point, Sayyid Musa's *mabrumin* movement was hardly an 'awakening' for the Shi'ites. The *mabrumin* movement came to have a life of its own that Sayyid Musa could not have predicted or controlled. It became a vehicle for promoting contradictory and

overlapping streams: Lebanese nationalism, accommodation of the state, state reformism, Islamic leftism, and political Islam” (Ibid.). They continue:

With Sayyid Musa, then, we see a new modernist discourse centered on citizenry and conformity to the national state and its main secular-sectarian features. Therefore it is crucial not to envision Sayyid Musa merely as the man of the shar’ia and the Communists as antireligious secularists. Each side supported a distinct arrangement for religion and its place in civil society. In the postcolonial public sphere shaped by the leftists, the secular meant something specific and had to be derived from local conditions. The secular has always been connected to other forms of communal ideologies and religious experiences but it was a real option, not an illusion. (213)

The negotiation and ambiguity of this process continues into the present with the ascendance of Hizbullah in the Lebanese Shi’ite political scene, a “civil *and* jihadist movement” in Lebanon, that the authors describe as encompassing both modern and post-modern dispositions. Hizbullah’s success lies in part in its ability to absorb strands of the various political genealogies discussed by the Abisaabs, ranging from the leftist to the Islamist, its canny and pragmatic transactions with the Lebanese state, “its adaptation to the democratic forces of the public sphere, its military successes against occupation and its efforts in social and economic aid” (214).

As the Abisaabs write in the conclusion about the “public Islam” negotiated by Hizbullah’s leadership:

Islamist thinkers challenged universalizing ideas of Western modernity as they defined and shaped their local modernity. They considered the use of *ijtihad* a vital medium for societal renewal and cultural advancement. Jihad as a militant defense against Israel and a struggle against Western domination, also fulfills modern demands for human “freedom” and “progress.” Despite the unique facets of Islamist modernism, it holds unresolved theoretical elements. For one thing, the Islamists’ unease with the secular apparatus of the modern nation-state carries an anti-modern element. The shari’a to which the Islamists resort for organizing this life and the hereafter contradicts the secular legal processes instituted by the modern state relating to family, education, defense, the economy, leisure and others. For another thing, the Islamists’ critique of Western modernity converges partially with postmodern positions. On the one hand, the Islamists, much like postmodernists, confront a local system of domination and challenge the foundations of secular democracy and the alleged “triumph of reason” in human history. But inasmuch as the Islamists insist on final truths, that God and religious morality are ultimate sources of meaning and human happiness, they remain strangers to postmodernism. Islamist modernism therefore carries tensions and irreconcilable features that continue to develop in relation to new historical conditions. (215-216)

The authors leave off on an open-ended note of inquiry that we are now equipped to investigate more meaningfully.

My only criticism of the book is a literally superficial one: the cover falls short in both content and finishing. Strangely pixelated and dark, it quotes the imagery often deployed by Hizbullah to propagandize, including expected images of overturned burning tanks, celebrating militants, the Qur’an and prayer beads ominously popularized by martyrs’ last

video testaments. A faded Communist flag lurks in the background. The cover does not cohere with the lucid, clear and critical contents of this excellent monograph, instead falling back on expected or stereotypical representations of a complex and multifaceted movement and tradition that the authors clearly show is so much more than this thin image that dominates mainstream thinking about them.

But as we all know: never judge a book by its cover. The content of this book, as described above, is original, comprehensive and interesting. This book should be essential reading for anyone interested in the modern history of Lebanon, Islamism, modern Shi'ite history, the emergence of Hizbullah, landscapes of Shi'ite struggle, genealogies of religion, and formations of the secular. It provides much needed substance to the often shallow, yet much-touted discourses surrounding Hizbullah (and the Shi'ites) as a political force in Lebanon and the region.

Munira Khayyat
Assistant Professor of Anthropology
The American University in Cairo

© 2016: Munira Khayyat

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Khayyat, Munira, Review of *The Shi'ites of Lebanon: Modernism, Communism and Hizbullah's Islamists*, *SCTIW Review*, April 7, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1073>.

ISSN: 2374-9288