

# Progressive Islamism and the global

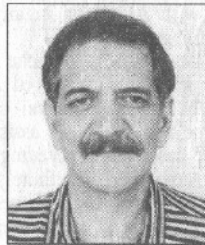
Dr. Islam  
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A LEGACY OF THE 9/11 TERRORIST ATTACKS on the US is a sharp polarisation in the mutual perceptions of many Americans and Muslims. Indeed, in an interview in *Counterpunch* shortly before he died last year, intellectual activist Edward Said had expressed his dismay on the distortions that prevailed on both sides of the divide. On the one hand, Said lamented, Pentagon policymakers and US media were marketing Iraq's occupation using simplistic ideas about "terror, pre-emptive war, and unilateral regime change". And on the other hand, Muslim regions were sold to "an easy anti-Americanism that showed little understanding of what US is really like as a society". Even so, Said contended that there would have been no war, had American policymakers outgrown their 'orientalist' dogma — that the Muslims "were not like us and didn't appreciate our values".

Many Americans share Said's critique. Some are even voicing the need for engaging Islam in the struggle for creating a just global order. One of the most eloquent of such voices is that of Susan Buck-Morss, professor of philosophy at Cornell University. Her book *Thinking Past Terror* (Verso, 2003) challenges western orientalist judgment of Islam "as an irredeemable obstruction to historical progress", even as she spotlights progressive Islamism and critical Marxism as potential partners in a new global Left.

Buck-Morss holds that "Islamism is not terrorism" but a "discourse of opposition and debate" about social justice and ethical life that "challenges the hegemony of Western political and cultural norms". Moreover, while Islamist extremists are militantly violent and terrorists dominate the media, Islamism

## HISTORY



SUROOSH IRFANI

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remains "a site for social movements in civil society, struggling to come to grips with the inequities of modern life". She further notes that in its origin, Islamism is "a critical discourse articulated by intellectuals and educators", and there is much here that western critical theorists could learn from. Indeed, the intellectual and social struggles of Islamism, she goes on, are reflective of *jihad* as well, for *jihad* "is struggle on three levels, only one of which — a last resort least pleasing to God — is violent".

At the same time, noting that Islamists have little tolerance for dissenters and non-believers despite the Quranic injunctions to the contrary, Buck-Morss cites the spiritual humanism of Indonesian Islamic leader, AbdurRahman Wahid, with much admiration: Strongly influenced by Latin American liberation theology, Wahid's "secular vision of democracy was religiously motivated to protect the rights of Indonesia's religiously diverse populations, as is required by the Islamic idea of tolerance".

Clearly, far from a monolithic ideology, Buck-Morss' view of Islamism reflects a vibrant milieu of contending discourses spanning an entire political spectrum — "from terrorist networks to right wing authoritarianism to secular-state egalitarianism". This being so, she rightly bewails that the media in the "democratic US" has failed to educate people about the diversity in Islamist discourses and politics. In fact, rather than attempting to understand the contending movements within Islamism, the US media has latched on to a simplified scenario of good vs evil peddled by President Bush as a sop for the blunders of the war on terror. Such simplification reflects an

American desire to forget about the complexities that underpin the vagaries of US policies in Muslim regions: where Osama bin Laden is a product of US-backed destruction of the Afghan Left, and the Ayatollahs' Iran an outcome of the CIA-led subversion of Iranian democracy in 1953.

Such a track record of subversion abroad and collective amnesia on the home front makes it imperative for Americans to know that there is more to Islam than violence, and that as a source of critical debate against an unjust world order, progressive Islamism seems a natural ally of the Left.

To be sure, such an alliance could be routed through an 'intellectual cosmopolitanism' that Buck-Morss calls 'immanent criticism': a critical method used by many political movements, including Gandhi's anti-colonial movement that invoked "the colonial power's belief in liberty and democracy to challenge the legitimacy of colonial rule". 'Immanent criticism', then, is critique from within that tries to show the gap between the concept and reality. For example, here the discourse of democracy or Islam is used to show that the so-called democracies were undemocratic, or the self-proclaimed Islamic governments were un-Islamic. In the Middle East, a compelling example of immanent criticism is the intellectual activism of Ali Shariati, the revolutionary thinker whose Islamic rethink laid the intellectual foundations of Iran's revolution. Indeed, through pamphleteering, public lectures and summer courses where thousands of students enrolled from all over the country, Shariati helped universalise personal interpretation (*ijtihad*) as internal critique in the Islamic dis-

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courses of post-revolutionary Iran.

No wonder, then, that the Islamist feminists in Iran, as Buck-Morss notes, are the “*avant-garde* of a progressive Islamism” and a crucial influence in the struggle for social liberalisation. Here, women have effectively invoked the principles of Islam in their struggle for equality and social recognition as political activists and producers of art and culture. Moreover, in challenging the patriarchal interpretations of the law by showing that Islam and patriarchy are not identical, Islamist feminists have made a cognitive breakthrough in their “emancipatory struggle from patriarchal entrapments”. In doing so, Iranian women have broken out of the kind of Islamism that Edward Said believed was “built out of rote learning and the obliteration of competitive knowledge”.

To be sure, in his *Counterpunch* interview (August 4, 2004), Said identified the disappearance of Islamic *ijtihad* as “one of the major cultural disasters of our time”, for it led to the erasure of “critical thinking and individual wrestling with the problems of the modern world”. However, as Buck-Morss’ study and the intellectual ferment of many post-revolutionary Iranians testify, the spirit of *ijtihad* is alive and kicking in the ‘immanent criticism’ of progressive Islamism.

An alliance of progressive Islam and the Left, then, may yet emerge as a global moral force for healing the ravages of capital and power in a common struggle beyond the cultural divide.

*Suroosh Irfani is co-director of the Graduate Programme in Communication and Cultural Studies at National College of Arts, Lahore*