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# Book Review

GEST, Justin. 2010. *Apart: Alienated and Engaged Muslims in the West*. London: Hurst. xvii + 288pp. ISBN 978 1 84904 076 1. Hbk. £47.50. Pbk. ISBN 978 1 84904 075 4. £15.99.

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Gest's central thesis is that the distinction between alienated and engaged Muslims in the West comes down to individual choice. He develops his case carefully on the basis of extensive fieldwork in London and Madrid, but in essence his argument is that whether or not an individual feels alienated or engaged with the current political system of the West boils down to the extent to which their expectations of that system have been met. Thus those who are most alienated are those who have the highest unfulfilled expectations.

*Apart* begins by orientating the reader to the debate over the presence of Muslims in Europe. Gest makes some salient points, especially about the heterogeneity of the Muslim population in Europe. I would concur with his point that the term "European Muslim" is of very limited heuristic potential, as it encompasses such a diverse range of people, whilst recognizing, along with Gest, that its limited use is necessary. Furthermore his decision to engage in a "bottom-up" study focused on individuals he encountered in his fieldwork is a commendable one, and gives the study a freshness and insightful take on some of the positions adopted by European Muslims.

Gest's criticism of the term "alienation" and development of the alternative category of "anti-system behaviour" exposes a problem with "alienation" as a piece of sociological terminology. Often those who are categorized as "alienated" are in fact actively engaged in opposing the system, and indeed I would argue that resistance is in fact a form of engagement. Furthermore, terms such as "deviant" or "oppositional" carry too much emotional baggage and include value judgments as to the correctness (or otherwise) of a given course of action, and so are not useful categories for explaining these types of behaviour. Arguably "anti-system" is at present a more neutral term, although its widespread (ab)use may mean it too takes on a loaded meaning. In Gest's analysis, both engagement and anti-system behaviour are further subdivided into active and passive categories, providing a four-fold analytical framework that is used throughout the study.

Having developed his framework, Gest then sets out his case for believing that the level and fulfilment of individuals' expectations about the political system are the central determinants of anti-system political behaviour. In doing so he initially examines a number of other theories, which he broadly categorizes as politico-theological, socio-economic, public discourse and identity construction related. In each case he argues that the theory in question does not accurately explain the observed data. There is a danger of a circular argument in this process since Gest's data were the source of his theory which he developed in opposition to the other theories he now debunks. But on the whole Gest's reasoning is sound

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and his arguments are cogent. His main emphasis is difficult to refute, namely that two individuals in the same situation with similar backgrounds make very different choices, and these differences seem to come down primarily to how personal expectations are fulfilled.

This is certainly the picture that he develops when he reports on his fieldwork, first in Tower Hamlets (in London's East End), where he focused on the Bangladeshi community, and then amongst the Moroccan community concentrated in Lavapiés, a barrio region of Madrid. One major weakness of this study is that the precise nature of Gest's fieldwork is left vague. There is an appendix that outlines some points, but it is quite short (only 11 pages of the 285 in the book), and does not give detail as to how, for example, he identified his "about 100 individuals" whom he interviewed. This may simply be because of the nature of the fieldwork. Gest appears to have simply hung around on the streets and got chatting with individuals, relying on both his ability to make contacts and also on introductions from those he first encountered. Whilst it might be understandable that Gest did not want to go into too much detail about how he arrived at his sample, and who they were, a bit more detail would have strengthened the foundations upon which *Apart* has been built.

Nevertheless, Gest does paint an informative picture of these young men, their lives and the decisions they have made regarding political engagement. In particular, I would agree with his suggestion that for many young people, Islam becomes a clear and easily deployed boundary marker as they struggle to form their identity in a confusing world which makes multiple, and often conflicting, demands on their loyalty and sense of belonging.

Having set out his findings for each city at some length, Gest then compares the two cases, restating and reinforcing his claim about individual experience of political expectations being fulfilled as a key determinant of the type of political engagement adopted. His conclusions are aimed primarily at the United States of America, but with a glance also at European states. Gest argues strongly that unless democracies act urgently to ensure that Muslims' expectations are met, then the number of cases of "apartism" will only rise, and with it "anti-system" behaviour.

*Apart* is a well-written and well-researched book, which develops its case carefully and convincingly. I agree that individual experience of political expectations being fulfilled is the key factor in determining whether an individual engages with political systems, and the shape which that engagement takes. Gest completely de-emphasizes all other possible factors, perhaps a little too zealously. Furthermore, since the focus of his study was European Muslims it is perhaps unsurprising that he does not discuss other groups, but it is questionable whether his findings are unique to the Muslims who live in Europe, or whether they apply equally to other groups. All Gest's research subjects were under 28, a generation that is widely recognized as being less politically active than its predecessors. Although this does not undermine his case or take away from the value of the book, I was left wondering whether it was possible that Gest might have found similar results if he had spoken with other groups present in London or in Madrid.

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