BOOK REVIEW

The Muslims Are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror, by Arun Kundnani. Verso, 2014. 336 pp., Hb., \$27.92
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The Muslims Are Coming is worth purchasing even if you won't have time to read it, since it doubles as a sociological experiment. Based on its title and cover, my fellow public transportation riders assumed (and seemingly approved) that I was reading a book about Muslims taking over Europe. Actually, this book compiles and analyses data to combat such pervasive false assumptions (that are now rampant in our public sphere). I can only imagine how much time and effort has gone into researching this book, which closely examines the domestic war on terror in both the US and UK, often relating it to incidents in other countries. *The Muslims Are Coming* is also remarkably up-to-date including events that are still being discussed in the media. For all its strengths, this book has several weaknesses, which I will consider as I summarize the key chapters.

The introduction considers the intersecting issues that have led to the problematic association between Islam and radical or extremism, the process by which Islam has come to be framed as a religion of violence, and the failure on the part of "Western" liberals to take responsibility for their policies. Kundnani aims to demonstrate that while the neoconservatives might have invented the war on terror, during Bush Jr.'s reign, it was President Obama – a liberal – who normalized it (7). The book loosely follows this two-fold division by considering how on the one hand, conservatives (or culturalists) explain terrorism's roots in Islam's failure to modernize—in contrast to the fictional "Judeo-Christian" civilization. On the other hand liberals (or reformists) explain terrorism as a twentieth century phenomenon by which Islam has been politicized. Kundnani's claim throughout is that both these approaches do not consider the structural racism directed at Muslims both domestically and by means of foreign policy. Because of the US/UK governments' failure to understand the problem they can't solve it. Instead, they rely on increased surveillance of Muslims, they impose conflict-causing divisions between "good" and "bad" Muslims, and they transgress their own supposed "Western" values of equality, freedom

of speech, privacy, freedom to gather, etc. What Kundnani calls for and develops in the conclusion is a genuine political alternative, reviving freedom and debate (15) and directing our gaze inwards, away from Muslims and toward the Western states, their violent foreign policies, and the supposed neutrality of liberalism.

Chapter 1 demonstrates the process by which Muslims have become “the ideal enemy” of Western states in the aftermath of the Cold War (a role vacated by the communists). This chapter was very helpful to me, a scholar of Islam in continental Europe, as it presents the history and background of immigration to the US and UK and current Muslim demographics. However, its main claim is that the Western state fails to recognize how important a role the history of colonialism plays in today. Ignorant of the past, we continue to approach these questions with a culture-based analysis that ignores history, politics and racism. This misleading cultural frame has also led to the assumption that there is a cause-effect relationship that leads to the production of terrorism.

Chapter 2 further examines the culturalists’ vs. reformists’ interpretations of supposed Muslim extremism. Kundnani’s claim, with regard to the former, well supported by sociological literature, is that “culture here plays the same role as race: a hidden force that underlines a whole people’s behavior; a single rule that can be applied everywhere to explain anything that Muslims do” (58). In essence the culturalists demand that Muslims give up their Muslim identity. By contrast the reformists maintain that Islam is not fundamentally political but that there are simply a rising number of ‘bad apples’ who are radicalizing Islam and making it violent and political. Their strategy is to try to empower, by illiberal means, what they define as “moderate Muslims” to combat the “bad apples.”

Chapter 3 probes the roots of “liberal rage”—it is both one of the most interesting chapters and one of the most problematic. Kundnani explains how the 1968-generation that fought for so many leftist positions has now turned these into idols being attacked by Islam, an attack leading to their rage. What these liberals fail to realize is that liberalism has become a hegemonic player in the game of identity politics. Denying this fact, liberals disavow the structural violence masked by their supposed neutrality, a violence that “radicalizes” others while also suspending basic liberal laws and rights (114). This belief in liberalism’s absolute neutrality veils the role of foreign policy in creating a conflict between the West and Islam. It also denies responsibility for the current tensions in the public sphere.

Where this account goes awry is in its misunderstanding of Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Kundnani uses this work to clarify the link between ideology and repressive practices in a totalitarian system. First, Arendt is not analyzing the Cold War—she barely even engages with Stalinism—she is analyzing Nazi Germany, and she distinguishes that totalitarian regime from other authoritarian or tyrannical regimes in which there was neither private nor public realm. The Nazi regime is not comparable either to the Cold War or to the war on terror. Unfortunately, the failure to understand Arendt leads to, in my opinion, the most significant problem with the book—a problem Arendt explicitly seeks to avoid in her analysis of antisemitism in the nineteenth century (part 1 of *Origins*): the total victimization of Jews to such an extent that their potential agency is denied. This is a danger that repeatedly arises in Kundnani's project with regard to Muslims living in the US and UK.

Chapter 4 engages the study of radicalization, which has been used to scientifically justify and account for terrorism, and claims to provide an account of why Muslims become terrorists. This claim is then supported by three chapters (5–7), focusing on the US and UK contexts respectively, describing how these theories of radicalization have been (and continue to be) implemented. In essence, any dissent by Muslims is defined as extremism and viewed as suspicious by the government and its wide array of informants. Chapter 8, as with the first chapters, is very informative and engages with a topic I hope Kundnani will explore further in future writings—the correlations between antisemitism and Islamophobia, the use and abuse of Israel and Zionism by the right-wing racist parties such as the English Defense League, and the political-theology behind the war on terror. Chapter 9 concludes the book, bringing us back to pop culture's role in the war on terror, by way of the television series *Homeland*, and an appeal by the author to rethink the current strategy which further destroys democracy by punishing dissent and denies the role of racism in Islamophobia.

The lesson to learn from this much-needed contribution to the academic and public discussion about the connections between Islamophobia and the domestic war on terror in both the US and UK, is that while one ought *not* to judge a book by its cover (or an individual by her appearance/presumed belonging), it is essential to *judge*. Political judgments—informed and publically debated—are sadly in short supply on these topics. As Kundnani shows, these topics are often framed as matters of state-security better left to technocrats and

military strategists, thereby side stepping public scrutiny. This book makes this information available in a publically digestible format and creates a much needed space in our dark times for an informed and political debate about the problems raised in *The Muslims Are Coming*.