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That Thing that You Do (Comment on Joseph Massad's Interview: Empire of Sexuality)

Lama Abu Odeh¹

Massad's thesis is simple, in fact, perfect in its simplicity. Empire is a terrible force that wants to penetrate, overpower and hegemonize. It has a center, a head quarters if you like, the West. It functions with two arms: capitalism (later neoliberal) and Euro-American hegemony. The first arm represents the objective drive of capital that transforms sites and cultures as it spreads the market in the shape of commodity exchange. It has become a universal system, Massad contends, though with varying effects on the center (West) from the periphery (rest). Whereas its march on the former has been totally transformative, in the latter, only so. In the center, not only has capitalism become the dominant mode of production, but it has also, following Foucault, witnessed the emergence knowledges/powers that have instituted categories, binaries, taxonomies, in short, epistemologies that were unknown in the pre-capitalist era. These epistemologies produced new subjects. One of those was the hetero/homo distinction in which people came to know their "hetero/homosexuality" as their most inner truth.

Luckily it was not so calamitous at the periphery. Something happened, though we're not quite sure what exactly. We know that the expression of capitalist relations in the periphery was not as transformative as it was at the center, leaving a "difference", an aspect of the periphery's "self" that is unmappable on the center even though they have both witnessed, indeed were brought together, under the totalizing system of universal capitalism. This difference, according to Massad, bothers empire and therefore Euro-American hegemony, the "subjective" arm of empire, will have to be dispatched to finish the unfinished business of sloppy capital. Departing from Edward Said, his mentor and the source of many of Massad's quotes,

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the center as West is not invested in the difference of the East so that it can construct itself as superior, as Said had argued. Quite the opposite in fact, it is deeply bothered by the difference of the East which has to now be eliminated. Why? Because the periphery will have to be prepped up for “the imposition of American understandings of the future of (a neoliberal) humanity”.

If capital wants to generate profits by selling you goods, Euro-American hegemony by contrast, wants to win your heart and mind. Compared to sloppy capital with a trail of unfinished business, it is an ambitious totalizing monster: it wants to penetrate your culture, substitute a new ontology and epistemology for the one that is your own, and produce you as a subject of imported foreign knowledges; but more to the point of Massad’s intervention, it insists on naming that thing you do when you insert your penis inside another man’s anus as “homosexual”. In short, it wants to grab you by the balls!

Sneakily it deploys the Gay International for the task, and if the US Supreme Court has to be called upon to reverse its position and overturn all the acts criminalizing sodomy in the US “in one swoop to better advance” the project of hegemony, so be it! Indeed, if the Evangelicals have to be deployed in conjunction with the Gay International, their historic enemy, the one turns you homophobic and the other homophobic in punch one punch two act, so be it. The West stops at nothing to transform the East into its identical twin!

More deviantly still, and here the plot thickens, the Gay International uses already “commoditized” locals –those dupes who have already been transformed by capitals’ march in the first phase and who in abandonment of their cultural contemporaries have decided to identify as Gay-as the Trojan horse for Empire. Two gay activist organizations are referred to in Massad’s interview one based in Beirut the other in Israel. The activists of those organizations are “complicit”, Massad repeats, in the nasty business of hegemony of Empire. Their project is ambitious and radical: it is to transform same- sexers into homosexuals! And since the Gay

International is sneaking up in this unseemly manner, hiding behind locals, caution is in order.

Massad is not short of words to signal to cultural contemporaries the seriousness of the threat lurking at their cultural gate. The threat is of a pernicious nature: it promises to “produce” “institute” “assimilate” “normalize”. The cultural product comes as “commodity” not unlike the one you buy at the store, more like an inviting piece of chocolate which if you suck on you will cease to identify your authentic self. Because of the seriousness of the matter at hand and because cultural penetration has already occurred (the two lone organizations!) scouting operations have to be performed. Theoretic/political formulations about the Arab world that evoke the sexual and sexuality have to be handled with utmost care. Not only should hetero/homo normativity be shunned, but every thing that resides within its conceptual scheme as well. The closet, homophobia, discrimination against the homosexual, gay rights, all should be treated with an overdrive of suspicion. Indeed the very question of the sexuality of the Arab should not altogether be posed, for to posit the category “sexuality” is to already be “complicit” in a knowledge/power conglomerate that wants to take you over. Be on guard, if the question of sex/sexuality pops up in your head, and you find that you’re tempted to make it into a public matter, this may very well be a sign you’ve already been had!

Since “difference” is what is to be protected, Massad appoints himself as its spokesman “It *is* same sex act, it is *not* homosexual”, while also erecting a wall of “defense” around it, essentially prohibiting any expression of difference (from Massad) about the truth of the difference (of the Arab). For only Massad knows when you have strayed off too far into treacherous terrains!

Yes the structure of Massad’s argument is paranoid but there is nothing strange about that for most theories that hail from the left have a paranoid structure. Leftist always look behind “appearance” to posit the “truth of the matter”- behind freedom to note inequality, behind democracy to note the tyranny of “special interests”,

behind “civil and political rights” to note the absence of social/economic rights, etc. Moreover, poststructuralist theorists including Foucault, whose name and idiom are continuously evoked by Massad, have put into question the historic achievements of the enlightenment in toto creating a “left” position, very prominent in US academia from which Massad hails, that is suspicious of all things “enlightened”. For Foucault behind what appears “enlightened” there lurks insidious regulatory and disciplinary power. So *be* suspicious!

But there is something quite peculiar about Massad’s argument that makes the quality of its paranoia of a particular kind, one that is not identifiable within the left spectrum of paranoid thought. Let me explain.

Massad has taken heed of the criticism of Edward Said and instead of marrying Foucault to liberal humanism as Said did, incompatibles given the former’s anti-humanist stance, he marries Foucault to Marx! Not a happier match exactly given the “textualism” of the former (power resides in language) and the realism of the latter (power resides in the social relation). He matches the unmatchable by dividing the theoretic labor between the two theorists letting Marx speak of “capital” in a realist way while Foucault speaks of “sex ” in a linguistic way. For the Arab world, the one (capital) *already* “commoditizes” and presumably exploits, the latter (the language of homo/hetero sex) *promises* to regulate and discipline (assimilate and normalize) *if* it is allowed to succeed. But between that which is already commoditized and that which promises to discipline and regulate, the remainder difference of the Arab world is left untheorized. Neither is Foucault allowed to interrogate its techniques of power nor is Marx allowed to search for its “social contradiction”. It just *is*. In that “is” lies SAME SEX ACT, idealized. Neither compromised by power nor shot through with domination and exploitation, only changing it is, our difference escapes the reach of the theorists whose work is evoked by Massad. To where does it escape? To the precious domain of the cultural authentic which is already despoiled if theory so much as touches it.

And that is the difference in the paranoia underwriting Massad's intellectual argument. It is a paranoia that is directed against cultural invaders, that sniffs collaborations and complicity everywhere and one that is mobilized to protect and safeguard an authentic cultural self/sex that is viscerally resistant to the feminist motto: the personal is the political. It is far more reminiscent of the paranoia of the cultural right than that of the structural left despite its heavy Marxist economic talk, poststructuralist evocations and intimations that the Arab world is in fact *queer avant la lettre!*

Having said all that, I will now move to, on the one hand agree with Massad's argument while also unlocking it from the paranoid drive that undergirds its logic. I will do so by subjecting "the cultural remainder of difference" Massad obstinately protects from theory by subjecting it to social theory to discover the power behind its "idealized" practice. I will do what Massad obstinately refuses to do. I will treat it with the brutal dissecting pen of the leftist feminist.

Massad is absolutely correct in two respects:

1- Introducing the homo/hetero divide will indeed change things as a great many people, in the Arab world, though by no means all, identify as same sexers and not as homosexuals; and

2- There are those, mostly working class men who engage in what they regard as same-sex acts, who will be "bummed" by the introduction of those categories. In Massad's words, they will be rendered "visible" where now they enjoy the bliss of invisibility. And such visibility might indeed result in two things: either drive them away from same sex practice to solely different-sex practice if they can manage it, or, alternatively, find themselves exposed to homophobic reactions if they persist.

Unlike Massad though, I will ask: At what cost is this same sex identification sustained? Who loses when those men who practice same sex contact insist that

they are not “homosexual”? What social resources, privileges, and set of entitlements are marshaled in order to sustain this negative identification with homosexuality? Is it really true that homosexuality is solely an import or does it already lurk inside the culture, indeed always had, as a possible form of identification? Are the new gay activists simply importing an identity “homosexual” or mobilizing one that has remained under in the sea of same sex identifications? If such an identity has always existed, isn’t the insistence of same sexers not an expression of an age-old internal conflict inside the community of those practicing same sex contact? Is it possible that this conflict predates the introduction of the category “gay rights” which indeed is new and that the introduction of “gay rights” simply veers into resolving this internal conflict in one direction rather than the other? If so, how should we judge, politically this form of resolution? Is it emancipatory or oppressive? Is it good or bad?

I contend that same sex identification is sustained at the expense of two social groups and through marshalling a set of social entitlements and privileges that are socially associated in Arab culture with masculine men. Those two social groups are: 1- women married to men who practice same sex contact who are kept in the dark about their husbands’ sexual shenanigans and 2- the practitioners of same sex contact who are visibly effeminate and who are derogatorily hailed as “khawal”, unable to enjoy the privilege of invisibility.

What Massad calls invisibility associated with same sex identification is nothing but a capacity to “pass” by some – their bodies and affects do not bear the signification “khawal” because they have mastered masculine performance to the teeth- and that their insistence on same sex identification is in fact a dissociation from and avoidance of the derogatory delineation “khawal”. Why? Because, Khawal is “woman” and woman in a structurally misogynistic culture such as the Arab one do not fare very well!

The intervention “gay rights” in essence outs those who pass on the ruins of women and khawal by insisting that they should either identify as gay or desist. That is no doubt transformative of a sexual practice organized in its current particular fashion, as Massad insists. But it does so by rendering powerful two social groups made powerless by the culture of same sexness, which turns out to be precious only to the “manly man” and sustained by the privileges attributed to masculinity in Arab culture.!

“Gay rights”, I contend, is the vengeance of the feminine exacted over the masculine poking the eye of misogyny that undergirds the hatred of women/khawal. And that is why, to my mind, import or not, they are a good!