

Thompson, E. F. (2020) *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of Its Liberal-Islamic Alliance*. London: Grove Press UK.

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Elizabeth F. Thompson's *How the West Stole Democracy from the Arabs: The Syrian Congress of 1920 and the Destruction of its Liberal-Islamic Alliance* is an accessible narrative of Syrians' aborted experiment with modern democratic governance in the wake of World War I. The book traces Arab nationalists' efforts to attain an independent, democratic state in Greater Syria (comprising present-day states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine), as well as the fateful decision by the Great Powers and the League of Nations to deny Syrians admission to the family of nations and reduce them to colonial subjects. The result of this failure to set aside Western imperial ambitions and racial prejudice, Thompson argues, was the subsequent Arab disillusionment with universal liberal principles and the demise of any prospects for democracy.

Central to Thompson's narrative is the formation, between 1918 and 1920, of a liberal-Islamic alliance that set the precedent for compromise. Not only had the alliance secured the commitment of parties with seemingly incommensurable sensibilities and interests (liberals and Islamic traditionalists, Ottoman loyalists and Arab nationalists, landed notables and new professionals), it had also promised to keep at bay some of the excesses which later plagued Arab politics, such as authoritarianism, elitism, and illiberal Islamism. That such a coalition existed proves that "[t]he true cause of dictatorship and the anti-liberal Islamist threat lies in the events of a century ago, not in the eternal traits of so-called Oriental culture" (Thompson 2020: xviii).

The book explicitly targets audiences in policy circles and the media, as well as Arab activists looking to revive hopes for democracy. In fact, the ouster of Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi and the subsequent massacre of his supporters in 2013 directly spurred the writing of the book (pp. 371–2). Thompson attributes the breakdown of democratic transitions in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011 to the failure of liberals and Islamists to build a coalition akin to the one formed in Syria in 1919. Elsewhere, she accurately argues that "[o]nly a return to first principles and recognition of the origins of the cleavage can offer hope of transcendence" (2019: 14). It is these origins of the "liberal-Islamist schism" (2019: 1) that *How the West Stole Democracy* purports to bring to the fore.

Thompson's foregrounding of colonialism's role in the present Arab predicament, as well as her recognition of the need to redress the humiliation inflicted by colonialism for any democratic future to be possible (p. 14), is a move long overdue. Her

narrative effortlessly gives a multifaceted account of the multiple sites where diplomacy and political mobilization were carried out in the struggle for independence. It offers a clear glimpse into how the discourses and instruments of the nascent international order shaped the aspirations and strategies of Arabs seeking independence.

However, the narrative's unproblematized liberal reading of the events of 1918–20 gives rise to a number of contradictions which not only cast doubt on the viability of the democratic moment being celebrated, but also challenge the author's own analysis of the roots of the present-day "schism" beleaguering Arab politics. While Thompson recognizes the extent to which the liberal idealism of the "Wilsonian moment" structured the demands and aspirations of Arabs seeking democracy and – through it – independence (p. 204), her account falls short of investigating the political and societal dynamics instituted by these discourses and their impact on the quality of democracy to come.

The Arab nationalists' struggle for independence is portrayed as mainly premised on the imperative of proving to the Great Powers at the Paris Peace Conference that Arabs possessed the capacity for self-rule (p. 220) and, therefore, deserved admission to the "family of civilized nations".

Thompson's account endorses that argument. On multiple occasions, she cites Arab nationalists' knowledge of Woodrow Wilson's writings, the legal instruments of the League of Nations, and principles of liberal democracy to emphasize they were worthy of independence (pp. 37–8). Yet, she does not interrogate the oppositions implied in these basic premises, even though instances of the detrimental dynamics they instituted appear throughout the book.

The narrative unproblematically employs the designation of a group of nations as "civilized" without questioning the supremacism/racism inherent in it. While Thompson unequivocally condemns colonialism's reduction of its subjects to a "subcategory of humanity" (2019: 10), her use of the category of "civilized nations" frames her condemnation not in terms of a rejection of colonialism itself, but of the colonization of *Arabs* on the grounds that, having demonstrated they were civilized, their colonization was unjustified.

The reproduction of this supremacism in Arab politics is downplayed. Justifications by Arabs of their right to self-rule through comparing themselves favorably to "the Bulgarians, Serbians, Greeks and Romanians" (Thompson 2020: 115), while distinguishing themselves from less advanced Arabs in the Hijaz (p. 78) and "the most savage and least civilized countries, like Senegal" (p. 311), are either straightforwardly recounted or attributed to "anxiety about racial status" (p. 93). Thus, they come across as innocuous gestures meant to sway Western leaders or, at most, as a result of frustration that "unleashed Syrians' lower instincts" (p. 282). They are not treated as following from the principles organizing the colonial order itself and future Arab relations within and outside their own states.

These exclusions are aggravated by the persistence of binaries that pit (Western) democracy against an Orientalist construction of Islam as the negation of the West (Sayyid 2014: 12), despite Thompson's aim of challenging the notion of an immutable Oriental culture and her denunciation of colonial lobbyists' and diplomats' deployment of Orientalist tropes about Muslims and Islam as backward (pp. xviii, 83–4, 259–62). The hierarchy of the West over the Orient continues to structure her reading of the Syrian democratic experiment. Her rejection of the use of Orientalist tropes in reference to the Arab nationalists seems to lie less in a rejection of the category of a backward Orient and more in her observation that Arabs receiving that treatment did not warrant it, as they were, in fact, liberals. The frontier between the West and the Orient remains in place; it is only pushed slightly to let some Arabs in.

Hence, she celebrates how the Syrian 1919 constitution laid the principle of equality (p. xvii) and an “inclusive, democratic political system” through the revolutionary disestablishment of Islam (p. 239), introduced a system of checks and balances where the monarch had “no sacred status” (p. 209), and made no mention of the caliphate. The proposition that Congress start its sessions by the phrase “In the name of God the merciful and compassionate” – abstracted from its ubiquitous, vernacularized usage and referred to as “a Qur’anic phrase” – (p. 215) is cited as a sign of Muslim *clerics*’ “determination to protect religious *tradition* in public affairs” (emphasis added), which is met by opposition that, “in the *new* era, politics must reflect the values of the entire nation, not those of a particular *religion*” (emphasis added).

The existence of these oppositions, even at the heyday of liberal-Islamic compromise, demonstrates how they had been constitutive of the different parties negotiating the establishment of the new polity. The schism between these was not the solely the result of French rule (p. 337); the *demos* of the nascent Arab nation was coming into being with the schism already running through it. As the highest good sought after by Arab nationalists was defined in terms of attaining (Western) civilization (defined exclusively as liberal democratic governance and contrasted with markers of an Islamic Orient), those articulating demands in an Islamic register could only have been seen as uncivilized and in need of “de-Orientalisation” (Sayyid 2014: 81).

The derision and fear instigated by expressions of Muslim political agency evident in the narrative, which were also central to the polarization plaguing the Arab transitions of 2011, even in Tunisia (Marks 2018: 99) where coalition-building is considered a success, demonstrate that the divide between liberals and non/illiberals, Western and non-Western, is mapped onto a divide between civilization and barbarity. Segments of the *demos* marked as uncivilized could only be seen as enemies of the new polity whose demands cannot be considered legitimate

(Mouffe 2011: 20). Compromise with parties articulating those demands could only have been seen by liberals as compromising democracy itself. That the pressures of achieving independence enticed these parties to compromise is beside the point, since polarization and hostility had already undermined the quality of democracy to be enjoyed by the *demos*. Hence, demands to render a democratic reformulation of Islamic institutions had to be accompanied by *assurances* to fellow citizens that they would not threaten democracy (Thompson 2020: 168). Women who opted for Western dress (and, inadvertently, its markers of “progress”) become targets of violence (Thompson 2019: 8–9) as their dress became another metaphor for the attempted displacement of the Islamic by the “civilized”.

Several instances in the narrative demonstrate that this deep-seated schism already threatened to turn any democratic enterprise into a high modernist, enlightened despotism. The narrative’s liberal protagonists are set against a backdrop of unintelligible (and often violent) actors whose discourses and actions are only portrayed as negations of the formers’ enlightened liberalism, and whom the budding democracy was to rein in (Thompson 2020: 177). Opposition to the formulas liberals came up with is attributed to rigid religious convictions, the urge to preserve earlier privilege, or sheer violence that has no face. Only the discourses steeped in Western jargon are rendered legible and legitimate. Violent revolt only acquires a face when it purportedly aimed to “fight the French in order to uphold ‘the principles of the French Revolution and the Rights of Man’” (p. 316).

These oppositions ultimately turn on the fundamental denial of agency that is inherent in wedding universal rights and principles to particular Western markers. The notion of demonstrable capacity for self-government reinforces self-rule as something which must be *learned* (incidentally through perusal of Western political thought). Even though Thompson criticizes the duplicity of requiring only certain (non-White) nations to demonstrate their capacity for self-rule (p. 92), the notion continues to be a cornerstone of her narrative. That this denial of agency lies at the heart of the injury of colonization, and that it in turn detracts from the substance and quality of democracy by reducing it to mere technical administration (Sayyid 2014: 177) and alienating its citizens, escapes her analysis.

This emphasis on liberal instruments and categories of thought amounts to denying the epistemic authority of colonized communities to *author* and *legislate* distinctive forms of self-rule. Any discourses and practices that a community may have historically had for the collective regulation and legitimation of authority and power are effectively erased, as they cease to qualify as self-government. Forms of coexistence and institutions that have no counterparts in European history are rendered illegible or backward. The violence carried out on them becomes invisible.

Most significant is the violence inflicted on Muslim political bonds beyond the emerging nation-state. Not only were these political loyalties severed by state

borders, they were also rearticulated as markers of a residual backwardness to be disciplined. For example, the new state was celebrated for being “not a Mohammedan nation, but a national one around which move Muslims, Christians, and Jews” (p. 27). Beyond the borders, the new racial logic also reconfigured Muslim political ties. While Arab identity was conflated with a backward Muslimness of which the new Turkish Republic had to be purged, Arab nationalism similarly structured Arabs’ relationship to non-Arab Muslims and to Islam itself. Even advocates of Islamic unity under a caliphate, like Kawakibi, argued that Arabs were better suited for leadership and blamed Turks for the degeneration of Islam (Shahin 2009).

Not only does confining Islam to the liberal category of “religion” empty the institution of the caliphate of any political significance, the Caliphate itself (still intact at the time) remains absent from the narrative, giving the impression that the new Syrian state was emerging in complete isolation from it. Attention to whether (and/or how) the Ottoman Caliphate figured in discussions about the future of the Syrian state, especially in the discourse of figures such as Rashid Rida, would provide much needed context and nuance to the precedent of compromise over the disestablishment of Islam in the Syrian constitution.

Had the Syrian experiment with democracy succeeded, the consequences may definitely have been preferable to the blatant authoritarianism that followed throughout the Arab world. A system of checks and balances, government accountability, and representative formulas for managing relations between the new categories of “majority” and “minorities” may have set emerging Arab public spheres on more promising trajectories. Despite its omissions, *How the West Stole Democracy* offers great insight into how the contradictions of anticolonial struggles make and break opportunities for meaningful democracy. What is needed on top of this account, however, is a collective coming to terms with the structural dynamics put in place by these contradictions, which had always portended the implosion of any democratic endeavor.

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