

Review - A Fundamental Fear

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DYLAN LOH, JUN 29 2013

A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism

By: Bobby S. Sayyid

Zed Books, 2003

Problematizing Hegemony

Based on Sayyid's writings, 'Islam' is placed in a privileged position by virtue of it being the only available counter-hegemonic discourse to Kemalism^[1] (and by extension the West). Other anti-Kemalist discourses such as 'liberalism, socialism, democratization, etc' (Sayyid, 1997, p. 88) cannot gain traction because they are ultimately based on western political theory, which is what Kemalism, in essence, is founded upon as well. What Sayyid does here essentially closes off the possibility of a discourse successfully mounting a challenge against an incumbent hegemonic discourse as long as both are based upon or share the same precepts (in this case 'modernity' and 'westernization'). But this cannot be, for then contestations between hegemonies would cease to exist unless under extremely strict circumstances. Furthermore, although Sayyid identifies the foundational similarity of alternative

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discourses to current hegemonic discourse as the reason why they fail to be a successful anti-incumbent discourse, he is silent on how such 'foundationally similar' alternative discourses materialize in the first place in spite of their similarity. Sayyid is also unclear on what he calls 'dissenting elements inherent in hegemony' (Sayyid, 1997, p. 86). Are these 'dissenting elements' anti-hegemonic discourse? Most pertinently, is 'Islamism' part of these *inherent* dissenting elements?

Given these questions, I seek to challenge Sayyid's keynote conclusion (that the rise of 'Islamism' is due to the erosion of the 'West') that Sayyid arrives at by problematizing several key concepts he utilized throughout the book. More specifically, I latch onto and interrogate his: usage of 'hegemony'; articulation of the 'Rest' and the 'West'; and his account of the 'provincialization' of Europe. I shall begin with Sayyid's narrative of 'hegemony' which I find to be unsatisfactory.

If Islamism is part of the aforementioned dissenting elements then it would inescapably be couched within the western/modern hegemonic discourse of Kemalism since Islamism is an inherent part of it. This poses an interesting question to Sayyid's thesis because his argument is grounded primarily on how Islamism falls entirely outside the orbit of the West and secondly on how Islamism culturally/politically challenges the West as an alternative 'center'. On the other hand, if Islamism is not inherent in the existing hegemonic discourse, it can only form, emerge and challenge Kemalism from the 'exterior'. Such a reading of hegemony is also puzzling. How can Islamism be exterior to Kemalism when we consider Islamism as an anti-Kemalist and anti-Modern/Western political enterprise? For Islamism to be an anti-hegemonic discourse, it has to 'attach' (and be the constitutive other of Kemalism) itself in opposition to Kemalist discourse in its formation, emergence and subsequent challenge. Moreover, the assertion of 'Islamism' as the counter-hegemony to the West would unavoidably involve 'Islamism' being set up in opposition to the West. Following this logic, Islamism then derives its self-identity and fills its contents precisely because of its antagonism to the West thus placing the West/Eurocentrism as the 'constitutive other' of Islamism. What this implies is that 'Islamism' is still stuck in structuring and organizing itself against the West therefore confirming the hegemony of the West.

A Fair Dichotomy of 'West' and 'Rest'?

"It is the deconstruction of the relation between modernity and the West that produced a space into which Islamism could locate itself; and it is this positioning that can account for its emergence as a politically significant discourse." (Sayyid, 1997, p. 120).

Since Sayyid makes no attempt to create distinctions within the category of the 'Rest', one can thus substitute other religious-political projects of the 'Rest' with 'Islamism' in his equation. This is where I feel things get murky. While I acknowledge that his entire venture is centered on Islamism, it does not de-problematize his conflation of 'Rest' with 'Islam' when he seemingly uses the terms interchangeably. At first glance, this might seem like a trivial problem of terminology usage but this triviality gets accentuated when one considers his admonishment of Zubaida for using 'West' and 'Modern' interchangeably (Sayyid, 1997, p. 99-100). Besides, if Islamism is the *only viable* counter western/modern discourse as he contends, it cannot be that other religious-political projects of the 'Rest' (which remains silenced due to his non-articulation of these projects but also remains present and 'substitutable' owing to his conflation of 'Rest' and 'Islamism') can also fulfill the task that Islamism does. Therefore, his conflation of the 'Rest' with 'Islamism' is problematic.

Is the West Decentered/Decentering?

Sayyid himself is cognizant of problems associated with this claim and attempts to pre-emptively deflect them. He raises two potential counter points to his 'de-centering' claim: First, Fukuyama's 'triumph of the west' (which he credibly breaks down) and second, the argument that the West is still the center of power (Sayyid, 1997, p. 132). Sayyid is unconvincing in his defense against the second point. He himself notes that "...the international system is still hierarchically organized..." and he cherry-picks his way around this structural-given by his insistence that while the world is still western-dominated, it is not hegemonic anymore (Sayyid, 1997, p 132-133).

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There are two difficulties with such a view. The first is quite obvious; Sayyid fails in his attempt to minimize the extent to which the West is still currently dominant. He mentions globalization as a process that has destabilized the relationship between the West and the 'Rest' therefore eroding the economic centrality of the West. To my mind, this causal link that Sayyid puts together is somewhat spurious. According to some scholars, like Andre Frank (1998), globalization is a process that has started since the third millennium B.C. Thus, Sayyid's location of 'globalization' contemporarily is problematic. Even if we do not adopt a deep historical view of globalization, one has to question why the 20th Century (when he wrote the book) is, and not any earlier time, *the* time for the West to de-center because of globalization. Additionally, his attempts to suture the link between globalization and the economic de-centering of the West is frail and he offers no real evidence to prove his case. Ultimately, while the West's dominance in global economic, political, military and even ideological/cultural spheres is challenged, as it has always been, it is still the central 'template' by which most societies and countries are ordered with or against.

The resilience of the West is due to its ability to co-opt and generate new ideologies and exercise cultural leadership in almost every generation. One contemporary example would be the lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT) movement. It is a movement that gained the most power and attraction in the West (White, 2008) and has slowly spread to engender other LGBT movements around the world. Governments that legalize or are legalizing gay marriages, such as America (some states), France, Denmark, Netherlands, etc are seen as 'forward looking' and countries that resist and silences the same movements are viewed as 'backwards'. This (and many others) cultural-ideational production and leadership of (seemingly) 'global' causes serves to further sediment and reproduce the unequal relationship between the West and the Rest. Instead of any 'decentering' taking place, we are witnessing an increasingly understated and inconspicuous affirmation and entrenchment of 'old' western ideals and relations masked under more benign contemporary movements.

The second problem with Sayyid's claim of a de-centering West has to do with reconciling how the West can be globally dominant in almost all spheres of the world order (which Sayyid himself acknowledges) *without* being hegemonic. His attempts to explain this apparent contradiction is rather blithe and is encapsulated in this statement:

"This loss of hegemony can be seen in the way the cultural leadership of the West has been challenged by groups who have an 'undecidable' relationship with the West" (Sayyid, 1997, p. 133).

He does not identify who such 'groups' are and what is so special about them as to be able to break down the hegemony of the West. His usage of the term 'undecidable' is also suspect. 'Undecidability' according to Derrida (Sayyid cites him in the making the statement above), is an attempt to trouble and show how unstable dualisms or dichotomies are. Derrida gives the examples of 'ghosts' and 'hymen', amongst others, to show that there are constructions that falls outside an apparent dichotomous relationship or that are located in both polarities (Reynolds, 2010). Is the ghost both present and absent? Is the hymen inside, outside or both?

Who then are these groups that fall outside 'West' and the 'Rest'? (Do these groups co-exist with both?) Can the concept of undecidables/undecidability be employed this way? Unfortunately, Sayyid's statements generate more questions than answers.

In conclusion, Sayyid's laudable and theoretically innovative attempts to move away from a foundationalist accounting of the 'rise of Islam' by theorizing 'Islam' as a master signifier should be recognized within international relations. However, that does not remove some of the doubts raised about his key argument (that the rise of 'Islamism' is due to the erosion of the 'West') because of the manner and way he employs several key concepts in constructing it: the problematical way hegemony was used; the questionable dichotomy of the 'West' and the 'Rest'; and his unconvincing claim of the 'decentered/decentering' West.

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[1] Kemalism can be understood as a *secular* political discourse, developed in a bid to modernize Turkey, which heavily involves removing 'religion' from the 'state'. This involved demolishing all religious institutions, establishments and norms of the precedential Ottoman Empire, such as the abolishment of the Caliphate and the banning of headscarves for Muslim women.

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