

Islam and the Theory of Statecraft

Mehrzad Boroujerdi (ed.)

Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013. 465 pages.

Everyone seems to be interested in Islamic political thought these days, no doubt as a result of the rise and fall of Islamisms/post-Islamisms and other contemporary configurations of Islam and politics. And then there are the

claimants for a new caliphate. However, most concerns with political thought – with the exception of the large *Princeton Encyclopaedia* edited by Patricia Crone and Gerhard Bowering – tend to focus their attention on either the early and classical debates on the imamate (e.g., Crone), classical philosophy and the “Arabic context” for Platonopolis (e.g., Nelly Lahoud), or the medieval *akhlāq* literature (e.g., Linda Darling and Muzaffar Alam), or even modern permutations (far too many examples to mention). It is a rare work indeed that tries to bring a range of perspectives in a diachronic analysis over space, time, and political theologies into a single volume. The success and achievement of Boroujerdi’s volume is to do precisely that and to collate contributions from some of the most acute and incisive scholars writing on issues relating to Islam and politics in contemporary, metropolitan academia.

Roughly half of the contributions consider the pre-modern period, including the significance of the Greek and Persian inheritances; the remainder deal with issues related to Islamisms, contemporary political thought, cosmopolitanisms, and working around ideas of state and common good/order. However, most of the contributors deliberately try to engage in a thematic approach that draws upon medieval precedents and works through their modern implications (or even vice versa). It would be interesting to speculate about how some of them would respond to and engage with two recent works published around the same time: Wael Hallaq’s deconstruction of Islamist demands for an Islamic state and the categorical rejection that such an entity ever existed, and Abdullahi an-Na‘im’s insistence that Muslims ascribe to and strive for a secular political framework that is best for rendering their moral obligations demanded by their faith.

One would also like to see how these arguments fit with wide-ranging attempts by Muslims and others to accommodate a Rawlsian form of liberalism and a search for an overlapping consensus that somehow domesticates and “normalizes” Muslim political thought in terms of categories that political theorists would find familiar and that also de-exoticizes Islam (e.g., Andrew March). Boroujerdi’s introduction is primarily a summary of the chapters; one would have liked to see him engage in precisely these other interventions.

Asma Afsaruddin’s chapter is typical of her scholarly style of a careful genealogy of a concept – in this case the public good (*maṣlahah*) – and how it developed from the early period alongside the theory of the caliphate through to modern times and its role in contemporary law-making. Perhaps the one aspect of her analysis that is lacking is a recognition of the centrality of *maṣlahah*-based reasoning to the increasing dominance of the discourse around the purposive goals of the Sharia (*maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah*) that animates much of contemporary Muslim public ethics in Sunni and Shi‘i contexts.

The next few chapters focus on the Perso-Muslim context without engaging in a rather facile distinction between “Islamic” and “Muslim” political thought that is reminiscent of the distinction between the “Islamic” and the “Islamicate.” Said Amir Arjomand, Javad Tabatabai, Louise Marlow, and even Muzaffar Alam suggest the futility of the separation. Alireza Shomali and Boroujerdi’s own contribution is a brief study and a complete translation of Sa‘di’s treatise on *Advice to Kings*, which one could imagine being used profitably in the classroom. However, I do wonder about the use of “secular reasoning” to define the discourse of justice, and I am not sure how useful the comparison with Hobbes is on social contract – at the very least, it smacks of prolepsis.

Arjomand’s contribution is a typically wide ranging and iconoclastic defence of the need to read statecraft in classical texts as a carefully formulated blend of the Indo-Persian Sasanian tradition with the desire to find clues in the scriptural traditions, thus making it difficult and even foolish to attempt to separate out the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the Islamic political tradition. Tabatabai is similarly interested in de-centering Arab Islam and stressing the importance of the Persian theory of kingship – or what I think more accurately should be called the Turco-Mongol-Persian theory of sovereignty – that dominated pre-modern Islamic political thought focusing upon kingship. Perhaps the oblivion of the Persian – not to speak of the Turco-Mongol – is partly the historiographical legacy of the modern anxiety in an age of Arab nationalism about the *‘ajam* and in an age of recidivism about the need to recapture the pristine golden age of “Arab Islam” and hence occlude the preceding centuries of scholarly tradition.

Marlow’s contribution is a thick descriptive study of a rather unknown work of advice literature that perpetuates her position, which is widely held, that such *Fürstenspiegel* works tend to illuminate issues around political norms at court and society far more than previously thought both in Europe and in Asia. The section’s final chapter is Alam’s study of the Mughal cosmopolis and the importance of considering *akhhlāq* literature as both statecraft and making sense of the cosmopolitan and multi-confessional nature of the Mughal period. To his contribution, one needs to supplement the theory of Azfar Moin who, in his *The Millennial Sovereign* (Columbia University Press: 2014), argues for a theory of sacral kingship that sits above confession as central to notions of authority in the Safavid and Mughal contexts.

With Peter Gran’s interesting consideration of Tahtawi’s journal and whether it is travelogue or advice literature, we move into the modern period. To an extent, any work of travel literature is – as one finds even in utopian literature – a mirror held up to the society in which it is disseminated. One even thinks of *Gulliver’s Travels* as Swift’s political satire of Hannoverian England.

As such, Tahtawi's work is also a key moment in the rise of Muslim modernism. Charles Butterworth's chapter, which follows, makes a rather significant intervention in our reception of Ali Abd al-Raziq, often considered to be the secular manifesto of the modern Islamic world. He argues, in fact, that it is a work steeped in the Islamic learned traditions. If anything, he faults him for not referring back to the most prominent model of political thought in Islam, which he sees as the Farabian account of Platonopolis. It is somewhat of a lacuna that there are no further contributions on this strand – and one would also then have to deal with the modern critique levelled by Muhammad Khatami and Javad Tabatabai that if Platonopolis constitutes the primary mode of political thought in Islam, then this discourse has been dead for over a millennium – an exaggeration that is partly meant to show up the significance of its revival by Khomeini.

Bruce K. Rutherford follows up with a discussion of thinkers close to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and their defence of constitutionalism that sits alongside other more illiberal positions. In fact, there is clearly a need for a serious and more wide-ranging study of how ulema in the modern period have defended constitutionalism and what it means – most studies focus on the Iranian constitutionalist movement and particular instances. But we need a richer and broader picture that explains, for example, how one might locate the MB's positions alongside the argument made by Abdul Aziz Sachedina and Juan Cole (to take one case) of Sayyid Sistani's espousal of constitutionalism in contemporary Iraq (and perhaps even Rashid al-Khayyun's study in Arabic of constitutionalism generally in the shrine city of Najaf).

Şerif Mardin's chapter draws upon Kuran to take us into the realm of political economy and the constraints to political corporate development. Roxanne L. Euben's study on cosmopolitanism continues the tack of "provincializing Europe" noticed by Chakrabarty, Bhabha, and others, that rejects the hegemonic model of European metropolitan cosmopolitanism to finds cosmopolis in many parts of the world as a natural expression to understand others and incorporate them into one's world. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is a natural aspect of Muslim (and other) societies that has been forgotten through self-orientalised notions of one's own past. Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's own works, along with many others such as Fischer, shows the significance of travel literature in developing these notions of pre-modern cosmopolitan selfhood.

Şerif Mardin's chapter draws upon Timur Kuran to take us into the realm of political economy and the constraints to political corporate development. Roxanne Euben's study on cosmopolitanism continues the tack of "provincializing Europe" noticed by Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi K. Bhabha, and others, that rejects the hegemonic model of European metropolitan cosmopolitanism

to find cosmopolitanism in many parts of the world as a natural expression to understand others and incorporate them into one's world. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is a natural aspect of Muslim (and other) societies that has been forgotten through self-orientalised notions of one's own past. Alam and Subrahmanyam's own works, along with many others such as Michael Fischer, shows the significance of travel literature in developing these notions of pre-modern cosmopolitan selfhood.

The final (and longest) chapter is Aziz Al-Azmeh's deconstruction of the sui generis nature of the study of Islam in his critical appraisal of Anthony Black and Patricia Crone's works on Islamic political thought. In particular he faults them for three positions of normativity: the privileging of the Arab over the non-Arab (and certainly most of the contributions in this volume demonstrates the facile nature of such an assumption), the focus on authority and legitimacy ("idealism") and not the simple rule of law and need for public order that animates much Islamic political thinking (e.g., on the law of rebellion), and the assumption that Islamic political thought (and indeed sacred history) needs to be legitimated through recourse to early precedent scriptural or otherwise. It raises key issues – and particularly the need for a careful historical and diachronic understanding that points to weaknesses in the field of Islamic studies. And it is entirely consistent with his oeuvre, especially *Islams and Modernities* (Verso: 1996, 2009), that argues not for relativism, as often assumed, but for a somewhat old-fashioned French enlightenment desire to historicize religion.

There is little doubt now that there is a consensual position of most historians to study Islam as a feature of late antiquity. But if we focus too much on historical processes and structures, one wonders what happens to ideas. Can ideas and thought never be the dynamic of history? While many of us who do textual work have an inherent bias toward the authors who write the texts that we study, it still is important for us to pay attention to their actual writings and consider their contexts and influence. The anxiety over origins, the modern desire and obsession to refer back to transcendental foundations, as well as the concern for authority and legitimacy cannot be merely set aside, for they still require explanation. Overall, this fascinating and engaging volume can and must be read profitably if we want a more nuanced and sensible conversation about the nature of Islam and politics in our contemporary world.

Sajjad Rizvi

Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History
Head of Department, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies
University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom