

A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations Us and Them Beyond Orientalism, by Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), xvii + 338 pp., ISBN: 978-1-84904-097-6, £30 (hb)

Since the publication of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* in 1993, the idea of a "clash regime" or "clash mentality" – that is, the idea that civilizations (which Huntington understands as defined and unproblematically fixed) are engaged in inevitable ideological clashes – has been either taken seriously in circles of foreign policy or, alternately, critiqued vehemently. Fully appreciating his predecessors Foucault and Edward Said's idea that discourse precedes history, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam's (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) book *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them Beyond Orientalism* steps back from the debate itself to offer a metahistorical critique of the clash regime and how it has come to have such a central place in twentieth-century discourse. Adib-Moghaddam notes how the idea of the clash regime is so central to our thinking that even some critics of Huntington's theory find themselves wrapped up in its binary oppositions and reinforcing its very foundations. In other words, for some readers, Huntington is taken as wrong not because he postulates the existence of distinct "civilizations," but because he claims that they are "clashing." It is precisely the history of these postulated divisions between civilizations – either viewed as Manichean or not – that Adib-Moghaddam aims to examine. His method is to proceed more or less chronologically, but also through multiple disciplines where the clash regime has found its most fertile ground, namely history, religion, and philosophy. In this sense, his study takes us far beyond a mere description of the history of the clash regime to an examination of the ideological positions that have allowed its production in the first place.

Adib-Moghaddam's exploration of the historical trajectories of the clash regime acknowledges its tremendous influence on Western relations with its "others" (primarily but not always limited to "Islam") and its almost infallible ability to muster support for armed conflict. His goal in the first part of the book is to address the question of where the binary thinking about tension between conceptions of

“self” and “other” come from. This kind of inquiry into the self-other binary leads to the question about whether or not the very discipline of history as an authoritative discipline is itself always already engaged in narrating such differences between us and them. For example, in Herodotus’ writing of the history of the Greek city states’ conflict with the ‘barbarian’ Persians, the heroism of the former is contrasted with the cruelty and chaos of the latter. Although this initial framework by the “Father of History” does not mean the inevitable lack of any speck of “objectivity” on the part of his successors, one can still make the case that history is “born in myth and *out of political considerations*.” (my emphasis; 33), and this will apply to historians on any side. Indeed from western antiquity onward, the discipline of history is dependent on the construction of a lesser, barbarous other to contrast to western civilization. These types of historical examples from antiquity that note divisions into “good” and “evil,” “civilized” and “barbarian” provide a deep well from which contemporary adherents to the clash regime are able to draw their “evidence” that the clash is inevitable because “it has always existed.” Adib-Moghaddam’s task is not to show that these historical divisions are true or false, but to show that evidence of their existence in historical documents is not evidence of its inevitability in human relations, indeed the clash is “exactly non-existent outside of such discourses suggesting it.”

Perhaps the most well-known critic of Huntington’s work is the late Edward Said, and Adib-Moghaddam recognizes the importance of Said’s voice in giving lie to the ideology of the clash regime. Said’s work is held up to a serious critique in this work, but critical comments about Said come from an author who clearly respects Said *and*, perhaps even more importantly, understands him. To state it briefly, some of what is raised as problematic from Said’s *Orientalism* is his focus on the colonial period as the formative one with respect to a European creating of “the Orient.” This focus on European power as the formative power in creating the Orient does not allow for the existence of an Orient which was at the same time narrating itself as well as accessing to and appealing to its own vast historical epochs. To put this in another way, the discourse of Orientalism as recounted by Said is not true enough to Foucault’s analysis of power, which for Foucault was not only understood in terms of domination, but also in terms of challenging oppressive and repressive institutions. In Said’s *Orientalism*, power is always one directional

and top-down, and this leads to a certain understanding of history that does not have room for alternate narratives of resistance until a certain historical moment, namely the post-colonial one.

Although he is writing a metahistory, Adib-Moghaddam constructs his metahistory by first engaging in a scrutiny of microhistories. In other words, he looks to historical moments in history, religion, and philosophy in order to see how the clash regime is continually re-inscribed in order to function in the service of particular historical and political projects. So the “martyrdom movement” in Muslim Spain, the Christian Crusades for the Holy land, the colonial period, etc. are all individual historical movements in which it is not so much “The West” versus “The East” or “Christianity” versus “Islam” but conflicts between precise political or ideological agendas which were always specific in their details. Yet in order to legitimate their aims and muster enthusiasm for their conflicts, such movements invoked variations of the discourse of the clash regime repeatedly. Although always generally belligerent and almost always accompanied by calls for war, this invoking of the “other” as different and threatening involves something more permanent in the colonial period in the Middle East: the continuous struggle until the other is annihilated.

Adib-Moghaddam’s work is particularly helpful in his – albeit brief – sketching out of some of the philosophical ideas that are interesting either for the way in which they contributed to a clash mentality, or did not. He reads Classical philosophers of Islam and finds in the Fārābian/Avicennian tradition no trace of the kind of carving out an exclusive “Muslim” identity or a Muslim access to knowledge as being above and against the “West.” This formation of a Muslim identity set against the Western other will come, but it comes quite late upon the scene, after modern European philosophers had already forged a relationship between knowledge and power that emphasized their non-Oriental identity. Furthermore, when it does come, it does not do so out of any philosophical tradition – even post-Classical philosophical traditions. As it is initially conceived, Muslim identity can never exist without the presence of the Christians and Jews, because Islam sees itself as a continuation – even perfection – of them. So Adib-Moghaddam notes that even the most polemical refutations of Christian beliefs from the Classical period of Islam do not attempt to undermine the prophecy of Jesus, and refer to him in respectful terms. Islamic opposition to the “People of the Book” was

theological, not existential. It could not afford to be so, given that its own genealogy leads straight back to the prophet Abraham.

When Adib-Moghaddam looks at the contemporary period, he does so with particular attention to the field of contemporary International Relations, a field that helps serve the nation state as its chief discipline of legitimation. In a shift from the explicit jingoism of the colonial period, the Western nation state manages to promote itself (and its values, defined as both western and superior) using the vocabulary from international relations, primarily that of international law, thus giving itself a veil of legitimacy. War is waged by western nations (primarily by the United States), in order to have an “ordering effect” on other nations, that is, to retain their hegemony over developing and underdeveloped nation states. This makes the clash regime in the contemporary period particularly pernicious, because legalistic code words mask the hysteria against the non-Western other and give that hysteria a veneer of legitimacy. In order to illustrate some of these points, Adib-Moghaddam takes the reader through some of the academic and political discourse that has supported the “War on Terror” and its use both of racial profiling and the U.S. Justice Department’s legal definitions of the people caught up in that war.

Of course, one might expect that if western discourse about its (predominantly) Muslim “other” will mutate, so will the response from the discourses of Islam. Adib-Moghaddam carefully delineates differences in what could be termed “Islamic” responses to the clash regime prior to the nineteenth century and contemporary Islamisms, which negate previous understandings of Islamic conceptions of its “others” which at least acknowledged a shared past with Christianity and Judaism. In fact, he notes that these neo-Islamic discourses do not engage intellectually with their own past traditions. As a consequence, the authoritative voices from the Islamic legal traditions are easily ignored, and prohibitions against things such as killing civilians do not factor into considerations of how or when it is appropriate to wage war.

This is a book worth reading and re-reading. Readers are taken on an eloquent and thorough tour through intellectual history of the past two thousand years that illuminates the road leading to ourselves and our current situation, where we continue to swim in the discourse of the clash regime. Yet in a way that is reminiscent of Said, who I will

argue was perpetually optimistic (often quoting Gramsci: “Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will.”), Adib-Moghaddam does not hopelessly condemn us to our narrow ideological swimming pool. His book offers some of the tools we will need to get out.

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