



Kitap Tanıtımı / Book Review

The Clash of Modernities:

The Islamist Challenge to Arab, Jewish, and Turkish Nationalism

Khaldoun Samman, Routledge, New York, 2011, ss. 260

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The story of modernization process in the Eastern World is an ongoing phenomenon. Because of having multiple aspects and a rich sample, this issue generates various discussions in academic as well as non-academic circles. By taking into account the alternative arguments defended in all these discussions, we can comprehend better that there is no single particular modernization experience in the Eastern World. Also we know that this process is still continuing to affect the region, and it brings some ruptures along to these societies. Thus, it forms a basis for emerging different reactions and disputes. The other side of the coin is that, although ‘Orientalist’, and ‘Eurocentric’ approaches are deeply criticized in the Western academia, these frameworks are still influential in both practical and theoretical approaches. In sum, when the causes and effects come into existence in the region, we may discuss these issues for a longer time.

Before to review this book it is good to give some physical features of it. Samman’s book includes an introduction, six main chapters and conclusion section. He organized his book properly and comprehensible. In the first chapter he gives his theoretical bases about this book and then next chapters he

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provides some cases to carry out his theories. It can be understood easily the idea of this book when looking contents part.

In this project, I will review one of these works which discusses these mutual effects by analyzing different cases of alternative modernities. In his book, *The Clash of Modernities*, Khaldoun Samman broadly examines the modernization processes in the Eastern World comparatively, and he also analyzes how these mutual effects resulted in different trajectories of modernization process. In his book, Samman compares the cases of Kemalism, Arab Nationalism, Zionism and twentieth century Islamism. He examines how these different ideologies face the modernization process and its results in their own regions. According to Samman, although these effects -with different backgrounds, reached to different conclusions, they coincide with each other to a great extent in utilizing very similar arguments and methods. With that regard, one of the most important contributions of this book is that different reactions to “modernity” in the Eastern Societies reproduced it through their own instruments with realizing it or not. So this clarifies that current ‘relation forms’ are still influential, and these reactions to modernity could not move out from these all-pervasive and powerful forms. Moreover, these reactions either reproduced the Western modernity in an identical way (as in Kemalism and Zionism), or approached to it in schizophrenically (as in Arab Nationalism), or discarded it totally but established it reversely (as in Islamism).

“... result of all this was to bring yet another absolutist ideology into the region not unlike that of their predecessors. Because it was so dependent on colonial modernity, it, too, reproduced the essentialism that was embedded in Eurocentrism and proceeded to Project a monolithic reading of Islam onto the population... () to return to our time-traveling vehicle analogy, they hoped to remove the old drivers (Arab nationalists and Kemalists) and replace them with a new and improved operator, who is better situated to drive them toward the finish line...” (Samman,20011, p.184)

Samman first evaluates some views like ‘Eurocentrism’, ‘Social Darwinism’, ‘Orientalism’ etc. with the arguments of Hegel, Montesquieu, Renan etc. to construct his theoretical framework. (Samman,20011, p.97-100). According to him, these and suchlike discussions are significant to determinate Western approaches to Eastern Societies. In other words, he defends that the current polarizing discourse primarily relies on these arguments. In a sense, it is possible to say that Samman criticizes and tries to overcome this polarizing discourse - called “us” vs. “them” in his work. He writes:

“... the book also implicitly suggests that we need to construct a social and political imaginary in which such a divide is restricted that is aimed at placing pressure on its hegemonic agents rather than placing the blame on its global subalterns... (Samman,2011, p.215).”

Samman takes his argument to a further level, and suggests some solutions to overcome this problem:

“...we will need to challenge the Thomas Friedmans and Samuel Huntingtons of the world...” (p.218); “...we have to offer a new social and political imaginary that permits us to see in ways that articulate nonessentialist forms of politics...” (p.219); and “...in other words, we need a new epistemology of resistance...” (p.219).

Although these suggestions are exciting, the solutions he proposes are so abstract that they cannot provide a roadmap to reader at the first stage. However, in general, what he offers is firstly to start demolishing the glass and tools through which the hegemon rules, and to perpetually shift our political discourse so that we can maintain our focus on the hegemon. And then he suggests to minimize ideological polarization to replace more liberal and egalitarian values both in Western and Eastern societies.¹

Although Sammam elaborates four different cases in his work it could be mentioned that there are three kinds of reactions to modernity in his book. Firstly, Kemalism and Zionism, get on the same ground against modernization, and it is called “Occidentalizing Projects” by the author. According to this approach, it must be get rid of all of the “Eastern World” arguments and values. However, it accepts all values and tools coming from the “Western World”, and aims at adapting itself to these new values indemonstrably. Even though it is acquainted with this approach more in Turkey, this book is important to show the same discussions also in Zionism. Hence, Sammam thinks that Zionism is also a nationalistic movement and project like Kemalism both of which have the same Occidental approach (Samman,20011, p.49). Both ideologies distanced

1 Because of these concerns he was very pleasure at the beginnings of “Arab Spring”. He says: “... “... this is precisely why I am very excited about these recent uprisings. Their message is clearly a challenge to this old and tiring civilizational and racial script, offering an alternative social justice rights-based approach to their liberationist arsenal while sidelining the old culturalist, civilizational, identity politics that has dominated the thinking of the old vanguard.” (p. xi) But, when we look from now, we know that his worst fears came true.

themselves from their “past” (we can say history), and try to establish a “new history” narrative to indoctrinate their followers and others with their ideology. According to Samman, Zionists generally use three basic ways to put their ideology into practice. Firstly, they implement some demographic policies and, try to make Palestinians disappear from the land.² Secondly, they try to produce a Judeo-Christian biblical narrative; and the last one is the monopoly over the archeological representation of the Holy Land (*Samman,20011, p.215*). There are many similar examples in Turkey, especially, during the early years of the Republic. All these examples show that one of the reactions to modernity in the Eastern Societies is the struggle for adaptation to modernity with all aspects, and further try to indoctrinate their societies with this model.

According to Samman’s analysis, the second kind of reaction to the modernity is basically formulated by Arab Nationalism, and is characterized as “cultural schizophrenia” in his work. In fact, this kind of a challenge to modernity is very common in the colonial world especially after the demise of colonialism. Thus as Samman cites from Chatterjee’s book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* specify:

“many postcolonial nationalists understood their new polities as divided into two domains ‘the material and the spiritual’. The material, he argues ‘is the domain of outside (...) a domain where the West has proved its superiority. (...) ‘The spiritual’, on the other hand, is the inner domain, bearing ‘the essential’ marks of cultural identity.” (Samman,20011, p.13)

Such an argument is very similar to Ziya Gokalp’s comparison of “hars” and “civilization”; and it is important to remember that Ziya Gokalp is the prominent thinker for Turkish nationalism. Arab nationalists also try to focus on some ancient civilizations which were established in the lands of modern Arab states, like Ancient Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria (*Samman,20011, p.121-126*). At this point, we can recognize that Samman has some difficulties to show the differences of Arab Nationalism from others nationalism. In one way, while Arab Nationalism resembles to Islamism in some aspects, it also resembles to Kemalism in other aspects. To be more precise, some Islamists defend uniting both traditional and modern values as we told in detail above as Arab Nationalists. And also Kemalism tries to feature some ancient civilizations like

2 This strategy depended on a three-tiered structure, in which Ashkenazi (European) Jews were the most preferred candidates for citizenship, the Mizrahim (Arab or “Oriental”) Jews were second in line, because they were assimilable, and Palestinians were least desirable, because they were cast as Israel’s inassimilable Other. (p.68 cited in Khazoom; the Great Chain of Orientalism, p.489)

Sumerians, Hittites.

In the last kind of reaction type, Samman discusses Islamism and Islamists argues and characterizes then “self-orientalists” in his book. However, discussing this approach with reference to Islamism causes similar problems we mentioned above. The author, firstly, emphasizes that Islamism is a modern case which I agree (*Samman, 2011, p.160-162*). Nevertheless, to assert that Islamism is totally an anti-Western ideology is true only for the Islamism of post-1960s. In fact, due to discussing Islamism through the ideas of Qutb and Khomeini, Samman wants to consider this situation in his mind. However, as we move further in the book, arguments and examples Samman uses gets more complicated, and one asks “which Islamism” or “what kind of Islamists does the author talks about?” For example, Samman claims in his work that emphasizing or defending the date of “1453” by the Islamist is very important in Turkey; and juxtaposing “Sultanahmet” against “Taksim” has a symbolic function for them. But we can easily assert that these kind of approaches cannot represent “Islamism” in Turkey in its totality. On the contrary, these approaches are more appropriate for “Turkish nationalists” or “nationalist-conservatives” in the context of Turkey. In sum, as we see in the Arab Nationalism discussion, generally these approaches can be in parallel to each other, and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between them. Despite all these, Samman means that while “Islamism” objects to “modernity” or “colonialism”, it reproduces them by using their means in a similar way. By this way, Samman’s concern about “Us” and “Them” conflict is strengthened instead of being weakened.

After all, these discussions are very important to understand the “modernity” and “colonialism” in the Eastern societies in the 20th century. Even though “colonialism” was destroyed formally in these societies by the 1950s, we can recognize that its effects are still in operation in different ways. Especially the ideologies which object to “colonialism” and “modernity” are not exempt from this process. Moreover, these approaches use the methods and tools of “modernity” and “colonialism” to establish their justification. Because of revealing this reality in a comparative method, Samman’s work is remarkable in this field.