

11-1-2012

Carool Kersten. *Cosmopolitans and heretics: New Muslim intellectuals and the study of Islam*. London; New York: Hurst, Columbia. 2011.

Chiara Formichi Ph.D.
City University of Hong Kong, c.formichi@cityu.edu.hk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Formichi, Chiara Ph.D. (2012) "Carool Kersten. *Cosmopolitans and heretics: New Muslim intellectuals and the study of Islam*. London; New York: Hurst, Columbia. 2011.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 4: No. 1, Article 11.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1123

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol4/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Carool Kersten. *Cosmopolitans and heretics: New Muslim intellectuals and the study of Islam*. London; New York: Hurst, Columbia. 2011.

Cosmopolitans and heretics makes another dent in the view of the “Islamic world” as comprised of a center and a periphery. But the challenge this time is not grounded on literary manuscripts, archival documents, or scholarly or khutba networks of the seventeenth-nineteenth century; instead, Carool Kersten pursues a theorized analysis of the intellectual genealogies—and the writings—of three “new advocates of Islam’s wider civilizational heritage” (p. xv), from Algeria to Indonesia. Indonesia is here brought to the forefront not only as a producer of new ideas but also as an important pool from which to draw potential audiences interested in progressive interpretations of Islam.

Cosmopolitans and heretics is his first monograph, and it has already received much praise from the academic community, with nominations for the AAR Prize as Best First Book in the History of Religions and for the Asia Society's Bernard Schwartz Book Award. In this book, Kersten brings together three “new Muslim intellectuals” who challenge established scholarship in the field of Islamic studies in the West, as well as in Muslim countries, by embracing both traditions. They display varying levels of engagement with politics, establishing a conversation between academe and socio-historical developments. Such dynamics warranted labeling these intellectuals both “cosmopolitans” and “cultural hybrids” on the one hand and “heretics” on the other.

Born under European colonial rule, raised in Muslim countries and religious environments, and receiving both Western and Islamic educations, the Indonesian Nurcholish Madjid, Egyptian Hasan Hanafi, and Algerian Mohammed Arkoun have much in common. Socio-political change markedly affected their intellectual development, yet “these events functioned as catalysts rather than immediate causes” (p. 5) of their political engagement in the 1950s as well as in the 1990s. Kersten does a very good job at giving the unacquainted reader the information necessary to understand the juncture between intellectual engagement, socio-political milieu, and historical circumstances in Indonesia, Egypt and, Algeria.

Post-colonialism, Third Worldism, the Non-Aligned Movement, the center-periphery debate, and the position of Islam in politics are just some of the debates these thinkers address in their writings. As the introduction provides the reader with the necessary guidance to follow the imaginary conversations among these intellectuals, the conclusions skilfully weave together the themes in comparative perspective. Kersten opens his book with some “heuristic considerations ... employed to capture the epistemological underpinnings of these new Muslim intellectuals” (p. 24). Thus, chapter two, “Refashioning the study of Islam and the Muslim world,” focuses on “the continuing importance of phenomenology and hermeneutics, the significance of the secularization debate, and the viability of employing a postcolonial vocabulary” (p. 24). While readers from outside the field of religious studies might feel cheated by the early statement that Kersten would be “going light on theory” (p. 24), chapter two is dense in names and jargon and

heavy with references (with one hundred and one footnotes for 16 pages of text). Still, as the conceptual foundations are laid down, Nurcholish Madjid, Hasan Hanafi, and Mohammed Arkoun come to life through the narrative.

The author has selected Madjid, Hanafi, and Arkoun as representatives of the “first generation of Muslim thinkers reaching intellectual maturity in the post-colonial age” (p. xiv) and re-engaging Islam’s philosophical legacy, strong in “their acquaintance with contemporary achievements of Western scholarship in the human sciences” (p. 10). Thus, Madjid, Hanafi, and Arkoun find themselves in the “liminal cultural hybridity” created by their dedication to applying the knowledge they acquired in Western academe (at the University of Chicago and the Sorbonne) to Islamic methodology, epistemology, and philosophy. The book has a well-defined composition, with nine core chapters—three per intellectual. Kersten has chosen to apply parallel structures to the examination of these individuals: He covers their early years and education, their political context and engagement, the influence of Western scholarship on their thinking, a detailed analysis of selected works from their publications, and the responses of others to their writings. All sections lead to the ultimate consolidation of Madjid, Hanafi, and Arkoun as both “cosmopolitans” and “heretics.”

Chapters three to five examine the intellectual life of Nurcholish Madjid. Known as the “young Natsir,” this leader of Indonesia’s Muslim students (Himpunan Muslimin Indonesia) was more inspired by Natsir’s interest in Western and Islamic philosophy than in his political leadership (53). Beginning in the mid-1960s, Madjid is exposed to international academe in America and in the Middle East; he starts advocating for a modernization that would avoid “Western secularist ideologies,” yet he retains terms such as liberalization, secularization, and desacralization, “which provoked a storm of criticism from fellow Muslims” (pp. 55-56). At the same time, he calls for cultural Islam, Islam as a “living tradition,” and Islam rasional (p. 66), embracing both Indonesia’s geographical specificity (pp. 77, 85, 88, 99) and Islam’s inherent pluralism (pp. 86, 93-94).

These are the seeds of Madjid’s pembaruan, a renewal of Islam that would balance between political Islam and secularism (p. 102), tradition and modernity, stimulated in Chicago by his encounter with Fazlur Rahman and the study of the classical Islamic heritage. This approach was later translated in the slogan “Islam Yes! Islamic Party No”! which would grant him protection under the New Order regime of General Suharto with the bestowal of the title of guru bangsa (p. 80) but would also cost him a fatwa in 2005.

Chapters six to eight link Indonesia to the Arabic-speaking world through Hanafi, the Egyptian philosopher who “found an audience among Indonesians with an interest in innovative and progressive interpretations of Islam” (p. 105). Hanafi was primarily concerned with the universal validity and chronological particularity of Islam, which led him to seek a general philosophical method of enquiry based on the heritage of ‘ilm usul al-fiqh. After completing his undergraduate studies in Cairo in the mid-1950s, Hanafi joins the Muslim Brotherhood. His acquaintance with Sayyid Qutb and his “personal disillusionment over the demise of the Muslim Brotherhood ... was alleviated by the exposure to the new intellectual influences he received in Paris,” at the

Sorbonne (p. 110). There, influenced by Ricoeur and Husserl and his concerns with the crisis of Western philosophy, Hanafi approaches his philosophical studies with the aim of emancipating the Third World. Not only do these chapters include detailed analysis of Hanafi's selected works (The methods of exegesis, The exegesis of phenomenology, and the Heritage and Renewal Project), but they also reveal the lens through which Kersten illustrates the shift of Hanafi's focus from philosophical enquiry to political engagement, itself followed by a scholarly transformation of his understanding of the field of Islamic studies from theology to anthropology (Chapter 8; p. 165).

Chapters nine to eleven delineate "various intellectual influences which have [had an impact not only] on Arkoun's reassessment of the Islamic heritage but also [on] his proposition for a different conceptualization of the study of Islam as an academic specialization" (p. 179). Arkoun had studied in French and Arabic schools in Algeria before moving to the Sorbonne at a time of great political turmoil. Kersten identifies Arkoun's prose and scholarship as fragmented (p. 178), a characteristic that has made it difficult for his innovative methodology—"Applied Islamology"—to have a strong impact. Like Hanafi's, Arkoun's foremost concern is the development of a new method of enquiry. But his exposure to the Annales school, Le Goff and Duby's ethnohistoire, and Bourdieu's micro-history, structuralism, and post-structuralism, pushed Arkoun towards a "vision of critical history as an all-embracing discipline among the social sciences" (p. 181) and inspired him to seek "interdisciplinary cooperation within an international community" (p. 186). It is this "eclecticism that underlies the cosmopolitan attitude of culturally hybrid intellectuals" (p. 184), which earns him the label of border crosser. He had "to cope with a considerable degree of disregard for his innovations," and often even his own students were reluctant "to adopt his radical methodologies" (p. 225). Despite this, Indonesian students, activists, and young intellectuals have instead proven to be particularly receptive to his ideas (p. 226).

Rather than contrasting and comparing the details of these three intellectuals' paths towards the contested status of cosmopolitans or heretics, Kersten attempts a macro analysis of post-colonial "Muslim Islamicists" using McCutcheon's taxonomy then seconding Mark Taylor and Tylor Roberts in their rejection of McCutcheon's "methodological reductionism or agnosticism" (p. 230). Then, claims Kersten, "the respective approaches of Madjid, Hanafi, and Arkoun can be related to the increasing critical distance reflected in the taxonomy" (p. 230): Nurcholish Madjid is the theologian, Hanafi, the humanist phenomenologist, and Mohammed Arkoun, the "anthropologist of credibility" (pp. 18, 27-28, 230-231).

Kersten goes well beyond the boundaries of the lives and ideas of these three figures, providing the reader with their contextualized and expanded intellectual genealogies. With this approach, resembling a Chinese box structure, *Cosmopolitans and heretics* offers a deep insight into the state and development of the study of Islam—and of the study of religions in general—in Paris, Chicago, Germany, Cairo, and Indonesia in the second half of the twentieth century. It is the very fact that these three individuals occupy a "Third Space," a terminology borrowed from Homi Bhabha and applied to the intersection of cultures and academic disciplines, that they earn the

double label of both cosmopolitans and heretics. Their influence appears to be fairly weak and unimportant amongst fellow Muslims, other intellectuals, and institutions, and this is mostly because of their obscure jargon. Indeed, often enough, those who do understand their overall “westernized” message call them heretics. Yet Kersten is confidently positive, saying: This strand of Muslim intellectualism can be expected to grow in importance because of future demographics throughout the Muslim world. In the decades to come, the middle classes will increase not only in absolute numbers but also proportionally as a cohort of the total population. This, in turn, will lead to an expansion of the student body in higher education, which is the constituency producing and consuming these particular discourses. (p. 13)

If one had to find a fault in this work, it would be Kersten’s overuse of quotes, which often leads to confusion over who is the voice, and also perhaps the fact that the analyses of Madjid, Hanafi, and Arkoun too often appear to be developing in parallel rather than in conversation with each other. Overall, however, Kersten illustrates well the dynamics of cultural hybridity and the reception of culturally hybrid notions, placing these concepts in the context of the intellectuals’ home-countries and situating them within the scholarly debates that have been circulating the academic world in the past half-century.

Chiara Formichi, PhD
City University of Hong Kong
c.formichi@cityu.edu.hk