

Armando Salvatore: “The Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power and Civility.”

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With this book, Armando Salvatore, Professor of Global Religious Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, presents the first volume of a forthcoming trilogy on the sociology of Islam. This introductory volume focuses especially on the role and function of civility in Muslim thought and practice, considering mainly the timespan of the Middle Periods, which are in academic and public discourse often associated with the slow cultural, religious, and material decay of the realm of Islam, up until the postcolonial present. In contrast to resting on the simplified and defective notion of retrogression, Salvatore challenges the reader to dare go beyond those rather naïve and basic (dis)qualification in a quest to examine the unique and ambivalent ways through which civility was crafted and remained intact in the Muslim world. To accomplish this, the book introduces a row of adjustments to key significations that are relevant in the respective academic and public discourse. Crucially, the very notion of *civil society* – a recurring trope in the analysis of Islamic societies and their presumed deficiency regarding their modernizing potential – is unmasked as a quite distinct feature of an essentially European quest for modernity and in its static and circumscribed quality unfit to present itself as a coherent concept for evaluating the

attendant qualifications in non-European societies. Another word and concept that is crucial for understanding Salvatore's approach is the term “Islamdom,” borrowed from Marshall Hodgson, to clarify the three-dimensional frame of comprehension followed through in his analysis: the religious (Islam), civilizational (Islamdom), and meta-institutional or traditional (Islam/Islamdom nexus and node) aspects of what is commonly referred to by using the disclaimer *Islam(ic)* (286). By understanding *civil society* as the specific way of institutionalization of civility in a European context, determined by the theory of the State as it emanated from the Westphalian order and attendant political theory, Salvatore argues for a more open conceptualization of civility to be able to incorporate divergent forms of comprehending and instituting forms of the knowledge-power equation.

In acknowledging the challenge that Islam poses to solidified sociological categories, Salvatore reminds us about the strong focus (or obsession) of sociology as a field of knowledge production with the concept of modernity and equates that with “initial paradigmatic limitations of Western sociology”, as it proves unable to escape the comparative mode of sociological research (2). Here, he rephrases an argument he made in the edited volume *Islam*

and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates, where he expounded that “if the sociology of religion of European origin is intimately connected with the sociology of modernity, which has been primarily understood as a distinctive product of European civilization, then Islam is both internal and external to this historical trajectory: while it constitutes an ensemble of social and cultural potentialities that never became ‘Europe’, and, so, truly modern, it has posed a permanent challenge to European modernity through the development of a lively and for a long time [...] powerful counter-model.” (Masud et al. 13-4). Commonly, then, sociology keeps being trapped in the “iron cage” of Western modernity from where all observations are questioned through a blueprint of the Western paradigms, making it impossible to research respective phenomena and conceptualizations on their own terms as they emanated from diverging cultural or religious patterns, leading to much more diverse theoretical considerations than a strictly Western perspective could accommodate (143). As a case in point that specifically relates to the case of Islam, sociology tends to conflate religion with tradition, understanding both as the principal opposite of modernity and its related social and cultural qualifications, like *civil society* or *civility*.

This form of Western universalism inhibits crucial insights as it substitutes a “multi-universe” of perspectives on human agency into a universe where the sole existence of patterns and ideas originating in the specific course of European history are tested and compared to the original blueprint (Masud et al. 15, 258). A sociology of Islam with a critical angle, proposed in this book, would in contrast enable *Western modernity* to free itself from universalizing its unique way of rupture with tradition. Salvatore understands civility as based on spatial and temporal specificities and as a form of meta-institutional force that recreates reality by providing a civilizational reservoir for shaping solutions to social problems (13). Civility is thus negotiated in the realm between knowledge and power, what Salvatore describes as “imperfect metaphors of the dialectic between material coercion and social cohesion.” (16). Modulating tensions in the knowledge-power equation, civility depends on a shared idiom and is best recognized in *everyday life* rather than in the workings of institutions. Its formula consists of the management of ego’s relations to alter with recourse to a “bit of symbolic and material violence” and by implementing a connective modus on the premise of a corpus of shared social knowledge (63). Accordingly, “civility is intrinsically plural

and prone to circulation, transgression, and metamorphosis”, as it covers the intersubjective nexus among agents and the mode of subjectivity and agency (64, 65). In the book, Salvatore singles out two distinct features of the Islamic ecumene – a term deliberately chosen by Salvatore to refer to “a mobile set of patterns of normativity and civility” (10) – that are crucial to understand the specific ways of approaching the question of civility in Islamdom as they crystallized and institutionalized themselves during the Middle Periods: the Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭarīqah*) and religious endowments (*waqf*). Both concepts help in comprehending the ways in which the relationship between knowledge and power furthered civility as a social force negotiating the space between the ruling class and the sphere of knowledge production. Salvatore stresses both, *ṭarīqah* and *waqf*, as meta-institutional rather than merely institutional due to their “elastic yet formative relation to Islamic normativity” (80). In describing the brotherhood of the Sufis as “dynamic mode of social connectedness” that shape weakly institutionalized, broadly consensual models of civility, Salvatore is able to convincingly argue for their key role in instituting and preserving civility during the Middle Periods (88). While the authority of the jurists and the legal system (*fiqh*) instituted a judicial dis-

course based on the *sharī'ah* and the *ḥadīth* that embraced self-rule and furthered social autonomy up to a certain point it remained unable to provide the populace with permanent trust, something the brotherhoods endeavored to approximate through their focus on *ḥaqīqa*, i.e. the uncovering of the underlying truth in religious scripture and the example of the prophet (149, 78-82).

In contrast to the understanding of civility as the collective body of those living inside the city walls, i.e. assuming a principal urbanity as crucial for the establishment of civil society, Salvatore argues that in the Islamic case civility contains a connective bond and agential capacity over long distances (99). This is due to not only the recourse to the normative idiom that is strongly connected to concepts like *‘aṣabiyya* (tribal solidarity) and the specific mode of expansion of the Islamic realm, but significantly to the Sufi brotherhoods whose spread depended significantly on travelling masters, instrumental in the diffusion of the teachings and practices of the brotherhoods. This solidarity, rooted in the pre-Islamic social bond constitutive for tribal communities, is for Salvatore a better-suited substitute for what Max Weber famously coined *charisma*, a faculty the founder of sociology in the West identified in exceptional leaders who were able

to alter the formula of the knowledge-power equation and foster civic cohesion (111). Rather than through formalization, institutionalization, and personal attributes of charismatic leaders as well as a strong focus on urbanity, the Islamic mode of civility is characterized by movement, multiplicity, flexibility, and a prominence of the interrelation between urban centers and the desert or steppe. This unusually flexible social order of Islam remains unmatched in history according to Salvatore, with hindsight to the fact that Muslims derived rights and gained social access through identity rather than locale (114). This, he argues, can additionally be observed through the consideration of the role of the *waqf* for long-distance trade, as markets, schools, mosques, and fountains were often provided through its mechanisms (118). These institutions, which were neither private nor public but rather cutting through both spheres in pertaining to the “ultimate Other,” i.e. God, were additionally able to facilitate a flexible and inclusive understanding of the civil (119). *Waqf*-institutions included the commoners in their consensus regarding their “living goal” through considering their expressions of interests and their acceptance or dissent (121).

In his argument for understanding meta-institutions like the ones outlined above as

instrumental for the emergence and enduring relevance of a civility that is specific to Islamdom or the Islamic ecumene but still qualitatively comparable to other civilizing enterprises in the world, Salvatore contends that “the golden nexus between particular and public interests is [...] provided by the communicative process itself [...]” and goes on to claim that “while the legal and communicative process is universal, the type and level of institutionalization is subject to civilizational and cultural variations.” (156). Clearly, then, the comparative model that places the European experience at the center, reducing all other impulses for the transformation of the knowledge-power equation to mere “useful backgrounds for elegant comparisons,” is discredited (154). This, for Salvatore, represents the *real problem* with the Orientalist approach: it frequently trivializes the complex antinomies of the knowledge-power equation within Western modernity and adopts it as the self-evident benchmark of comparison (166). Outlining his argument further, he describes the Orientalist paradigm of an inherent tension between Islam and modernity – a “natural” outflow of this trivialization – as “beyond essentialism” and “gravely lopsided ideologically and methodologically.” (168). The European success should not be seen as a token of inherent and

transhistorical superiority (168). The “iron cage” that limits the scope of comprehension is thus responsible for not only a lack of academic scrutiny and analytical precision; it additionally limits the ability to understand the manifold forms civility is able to take due to the wider socio-historical context to the effect that

country- [or cultural-] specific trajectories of social and cultural transformations can only be understood as simultaneously integrated and dislocated across permanently shifting centers and peripheries, each with their own agencies and resources. (208).

“Civility,” Salvatore argues,

is rather interesting, theoretically and empirically, precisely for its resistance to being folded into a fully globalist and conceptually universalistic normalization (241)

giving us a hint as to why he singled out this concept for the initial volume of his work on the sociology of Islam (241). In trying to institute the idea behind this approach he stresses the need for the academic discourse on the matter to realize that civility “depends on cultural patterns and traditions” and account for the “vari-

ance of the knowledge-power equation underlying the variety of networks at play.” (242). This is to be observed even more scrupulously with hindsight to the complex relations the two dimensions of the equation inhabit depending on the wider material, cultural, and discursive context. Culture, history, and the self are crucial in understanding and balancing the equation and point to the generally fluid and globally heterogeneous character of respective factors. The processes of civility, its recurrence and transformations, and its institutionalizations and patterns, are “deeply marked by ruptures, unequal levels of knowledge of rules and resistance against these rules.” (246). This is furthered by the fact that, as Salvatore claims, “the habitual internalization of power through knowledge is not centrally steered, not linear, and not irreversible” but presents itself as the simultaneous working of external factors and the inner, individual construction of the citizen (247). Thus, and crucial for Salvatore’s argument for a sociology of Islam,

civility is not merely a dystopian ghost of the fading civilizing mission of the West but a transversal tool to better appreciate civilizational, intercivilizational, and transcultural dynamics (257).

Understood like this and followed through in such a way as presented by Salvatore in this important and timely treatise, the idea and concept of civility – stripped of the “defective universality” the Western perspective too often still includes – represents a highly functional tool for the comprehension and analysis of patterns of civility on their own terms.

Considering the theoretical depth and the brilliance of the argument, this book is highly recommended for those interested in and working on the sociology of Islam but also to anyone interested in religion, ethics, culture, or even sociology, historiography, and social science in general. Not only does Salvatore accomplish his goals through his convincing and concise as well as well-written treatise to establish a theoretical framework through which a sociology of Islam can be stripped of the universalizing bias of its academic discipline; the arguments made are additionally sufficient to serve as starting point to critically engage with theoretical paradigms and patterns in other disciplines and can be used to question universalizing frames of knowledge production, aiding in the quest for a more nuanced and profound perspective on respective research and observation. Despite this, Salvatore is obviously bound to use vocabulary that originates in the European

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intellectual tradition, which remains his principle audience. That might serve as an explanation for his reluctance to engage in a theoretical discussion of *culture* understood as those practices, languages, signs, and symbols that humans use and constantly re-create to make sense of themselves and their surroundings. While reading *The Sociology of Islam* one might repeatedly wonder how Salvatore constantly refers to culture without using that exact term. While he explains his reluctance to do so at the end of the book, his argument refers to culture ("cultural determinants") in a much more static way – which strikes the reader acquainted with cultural theory as rather odd (257). This can be even more the case through considering Salvatore's use of *culture* in his introduction to *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates*, where he argues that "a civilization always combines power and culture in original ways" (Masud et al. 8). While it is clear that in his recent thinking culture is replaced by knowledge, the relation between culture and knowledge remains rather sketchy considering the vast scholarship on the matter. However, considering the potentially wide audience for his book, Salvatore might be right to dismiss the term as central to his theory. "Civility" is not as overused and re-inscribed as a theoretical construct and by

that arguably more prone to serve as a focus point in this context.

In this recent publication by Salvatore, he is able to follow up on his older arguments in *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity* and develop them further. The essentialism of much scholarship on the question of *Islam and modernity*, a recurring and distorting theme now unmasked thanks to Salvatore himself among others, as well as the critical questioning of the position and role of the researcher, are focal points in his work. Raising attention to the context of the researcher or observer, he claimed already in 1999 that

Islamic, 'faith-driven politics' begins to be a phenomenon in the moment the authorized (mainly Western) observer feels the urgency to reflect on it (Salvatore, *Political Discourse* 143)

and urged us to realize the need

of recognizing Islam as 'true' and autonomous, capable of developing a dynamic subjectivity, not merely a shadow civilization (Salvatore, *Political Discourse* 143,161).

Going well beyond the concept of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt) due to the theoretical depth and complexity of his

assessment of civility in Islamdom, Salvatore continues to successfully and convincingly make a case for the re-evaluation and critical questioning of general paradigms of knowledge production, especially regarding the transcivilizational discourse on Islam and the West but applicable and suitable for other areas and fields as well. Finally, the possibility of inciting original thinking and a critical assessment of the discursive, material, spatial, and temporal context of the subject as well as the institutional frames of knowledge production makes Salvatore's book extremely relevant and urgently needed.

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