

Critical Dialogue

***Political Islam Observed.* By Frédéric Volpi. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 244 pp. \$34.50 Cloth**

Political Islam Observed by Frédéric Volpi: A review

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In *Political Islam Observed*, Frédéric Volpi aims to give a multidisciplinary critique of the mobilization of “Political Islam” in the social sciences. Presumably, the volume is intended for social science methodologists, students and scholars of contemporary Islam, and others in the social sciences seeking to engage or understand political Islam. It succeeds in considerable measure despite serious flaws of structure and exposition.

As the author explains, this book was a product of his own frustration with the shortcomings in both the academic and policy analytic communities’ efforts to formulate an empirically defensible problématique of Islamism, particularly in the post-September 11, 2001 period. Prior to September 11, 2001, Islamism was at best an issue of marginal relevance to the social sciences. Since then, nearly every branch of social science has spawned a coterie of purported experts on Islamism, Islamist movements, and Islamist actors. While some of this nascent analytical interest in political Islam reflects a sincere intellectual inquisitiveness, other efforts reflect, at best, an instrumental interest. As Volpi notes, this explosion of uneven studies of political Islam has resulted in a cacophony of narratives about political Islam that confuses more than it explains the phenomenon. It is into this milieu that the author steps in hopes of “introduc[ing] a modicum of order among the many disciplinary views on political Islam that have gained recognition in contemporary social science debates” (ix).

Volpi, however, is not interested in offering up a more refined or even accurate exposition of political Islam; rather, he is interested in understanding the process of *observing* political Islam, as suggested by the

volume's title. In the volume's introduction, Volpi reminds his readers that the production of scholarship on political Islam is an exercise in power "to construct and control a subject that has little opportunity to contest either the interpretation or the terms of the discourse; the powers to dictate the parameters of the field, from which experts regularly pronounce the identity, meaning and function of a movement without reference to the adherents' own understanding of the connection between action and meaning" (3). Volpi attempts to critically examine how the notion of political Islam is understood and mobilized in relation to seven disciplinary sub-fields within social science: (1) postcolonial studies; (2) international studies; (3) sociology of religion; (4) democratization studies; (5) multiculturalism; (6) security studies; and (7) globalization studies.

In each of the seven sub-field specific chapters, the author attempts to describe first how scholars define their subject matter in an effort to make sense of what they see as the constitutive parts of political Islam and second, how they use these features to explain the phenomenon in relationship to the theoretical commitments of their respective disciplines. In doing so, Volpi hopes to produce an epistemological narrative that "connects different social science approaches to political Islam" (17). In the final chapter, Volpi brings together these varied analytical strands: not in an effort to proffer a unified notion of political Islam that could encompass these different disciplinary approaches, but to put forth a narrative that identifies the contributions of these interpretive positions to the "dominant 'western' readings of Islamism today"(20).

While the effort is heroic and at times breathtaking, Volpi is only partially successful. He first presumes a level of knowledge about his subject that makes the book inaccessible to the wider array of scholars who could benefit from his efforts. Second, he takes many categories as given when in fact, they are contested. For example, the volumes fundamentally presupposes both a "western" and non-western "other" optic; however, Volpi never genuinely defends these categories as analytically useful. Are diasporan scholars located in the "west," "western" by virtue of their locality? What makes one "western" and, by extension, "non-western"? Given the volume's commitment to theoretical rigor, this dangling category vexes. The author's geographic scope of the Muslim world seems inordinately limited to North Africa and the Middle East with rare forays east in the occasional reference to Afghanistan or Pakistan and, even more rarely, to South East Asia. This omission is stunning as most of the Muslim world lives in South and Southeast

Asia. Nor does the author justify why the seven sub-fields he explores are the most important loci of his inquiry.

Equally problematic are the structure of his volume and chapters and lexicon employed throughout. The chapters' structure and exposition are often deeply unhelpful in achieving any of the goals of the volume generally or the chapters in particular. The author never defines robustly the sub-field in question or expositis what theoretical commitments set one field apart from the other, or equally importantly, what ties them together. While the author identifies several intellectual architects in each chapter, these same authors continue to appear throughout the volume, underscoring the degree to which there is greater horizontal intellectual integration of these subfields than the author concedes up front.

The chapters themselves are poorly organized and give the sense that one has intruded on a conversation that is *medias in res*. In many instances, the chapters read as highly detailed bibliographies, which lack genuine intellectual coherence and structure much less a narrative. For this volume to be generally useful to the scholars in the social sciences (or other disciplines), the author should have made a greater effort to use language that would be accessible beyond those who specialize in political Islam in area studies, religious studies, philology, and other specialized subfields. Instead, the author's lexicon remains rooted in the language of social anthropology, which is hardly accessible to scholars outside of this and allied fields. As one who is far outside the remit of social anthropology, I found myself asking, "For whom is this volume written? Was this volume genuinely meant to begin a serious discussion about how political Islam is observed, and by whom?"

These shortcomings are regrettable and could have been mitigated with greater editorial assertiveness and commitment to the author's stated goals. The author's knowledge of the vast literatures of political Islam is breathtaking. At moments, the author's genius shows through in his ability to put multiple, disparate scholars in an important — but all too brief — dialogue. However, in the end, the author's principle aim of bringing order to chaos remains elusive.