

Perspectives

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One of the most interesting and least-examined episodes in the career of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), the influential Egyptian ideologue of Islamism, is his sojourn in the United States from November 1948 to August 1950. Egypt's Ministry of Education had sent the 42-year-old Qutb to the US to investigate American instructional methods and curricula, a task for which his career as an educator in Egypt had well prepared him. A number of materials exists that allow the researcher to reconstruct the main lines of Qutb's itinerary in the US and to explicate his thoughts on the essential nature of American society and culture. These include articles, 'letters home' written by Qutb and published in the Egyptian periodicals *al-Risala*, *al-Kitab*, and *al-Hilal* and, interestingly, documentary materials available at the University of Northern Colorado, where Qutb studied in 1949.¹

► **The administrators of the Colorado State College of Education noted Sayyid Qutb's presence on Campus.**

What becomes evident upon examining these sources is that Qutb infused his reportage of life in America with commentaries and images designed to distance Egyptian culture conceptually from the civilization of the West. Although Qutb accepted many features of modernizing the Egyptian nation-state, he also believed that history in general, and the Qur'an in particular, had stamped Egyptians and other Muslim peoples of the East with a 'spiritual' outlook on life. This differed appreciably from what he felt to be the abject materialism of Western and, more particularly, American life.

Such a stance was consistent with Qutb's long-standing concern with the identity of the national Self, which he believed was endangered by the steady encroachment of Western political and cultural power on Egypt. As early as the 1930s, Qutb had composed articles that severely questioned the Mediterranean and Western identities grafted onto Egypt by writers such as Taha Husayn. By honouring the indigenous and the culturally authentic over the foreign, Qutb constructed a classic boundary mechanism that marked off politically marginalized and economically distressed Egyptians from the westernized political culture favoured by elements within the dominant order. In so doing, he provided the quest for Egyptian national empowerment with a 'cultural affect', grounded in the self-validating sentiments of pride and identity. We need not agree with the often-repeated contention that Qutb's stay in the United States was the formative experience that converted him to Islamism. Yet the trip did contribute to his sense of national exceptionalism by generating experiences that confirmed the vertical lines of distinction that he had long believed separated his authentic, moral self from erosion by Western 'otherness'.

'The taste of Americans'

Qutb's first direct experience of America was in New York City, where he arrived by sea during the Thanksgiving and Christmas season of 1948, only months after the completion of his first explicit Islamist work, *al-Adala al-Ijtima'iyya fi al-Islam*. Although Qutb had never before travelled to a Western country, his previous journalistic efforts to evoke, from afar, the essential characteristics of Western civilization provided him a template with which to understand and assess what he was now seeing and experiencing first hand. In a published letter, Qutb described New York as a 'huge workshop', 'noisy' and 'clamouring', and explained how he pitied the city's pigeons which, like its people, were condemned to live their lives joylessly amidst the traffic and hustle of the urban landscape. In much the same way as many modern-era Europeans who travelled to and wrote about the 'Orient', Qutb either

Sayyid Qutb in America



PHOTO: COLORADO STATE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION BULLETIN, NO. 12 (17 OCTOBER 1949)

purposefully ignored or simply did not see anomalies that contradicted his view of America as the moral 'Other'.

Early in 1949, Qutb enrolled at the Wilson Teacher's College, presently the University of the District of Columbia. His priority there was to improve his English language skills. In Washington, Qutb appears to have suffered his first real pang of homesickness. In a letter penned to the well-known Egyptian author Tawfiq al-Hakim, Qutb explained how he yearned for the 'spirit of the East' and for a friend with whom he could discuss literature and the world of ideas. As Qutb writes, 'How much do I need someone to talk about topics other than money, movie stars and car models.' Americans, Qutb opined, were crass people, generally disinterested in life's aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. As evidence, he painted for al-Hakim a vivid picture of an American youth seated at a nearby table whose torso, barely concealed by his sweater, was covered with the gaudily coloured tattoos of a leopard and an elephant. 'Such', says Qutb to his friend, 'is the taste of Americans.'

Greeley

Qutb's feeling of estrangement from his host society deepened as he made his way westward to Colorado. After a short stay in Denver, he travelled to Greeley, a prosperous agricultural and ranching community shadowed by the Front Range of the Rockies, where he enrolled at the Colorado State College of Education. He spent the summer session following an elementary English composition course, which appears to have further enhanced his competence in English, for, as he wrote in a letter, it was during his Colorado stay that he began for the first time to feel comfortable with the language. Qutb involved himself in campus life. He was a member of the college's International Club and contributed a short article to *Fulcrum*, the magazine of the English Department's literary society. In the simply written article, Qutb castigated the West for its support of Zionism and alerted his college hosts to Egypt's rich spiritual and intellectual heritage.

Greeley was obviously very different from New York and Washington DC. Established as a utopian community in 1870, the city proudly maintained in the 1940s the moral rigour, temperance, and civil-mindedness that were the hallmarks of its founding fathers. Greeley's highly touted civic virtue, however, made very little impression on Qutb. In his mind, the inhabitants of Greeley, far from representing a kinder and gentler population of Americans, carried within themselves the same moral flaws of materialism and degeneracy that were characteristic of Occidental civilization in general. He explained, for example, how the care Greeley's citizens devoted to their residential lawns was symptomatic of the American preoccupation with the external, material, and selfishly individual dimensions. He also explained how the pastors of Greeley's many churches would compete for congregants in much the same way that store owners competed for customers. He recounted how he once attended a church dance and was scandalized by the occasion's 'seductive atmosphere'. As Qutb wrote, 'the dancing intensified,' and the 'hall swarmed with legs'. In order to create a 'romantic, dreamy effect', the pastor dimmed the lights and played on the gramophone the popular big band dance tune, 'Baby, it's cold outside'. Qutb's American writings are laced with such anecdotes, which reveal a strong concern with moral issues, especially concerning matters of sexuality.

The shallow American

After departing from Greeley, Qutb spent time in the Californian cities of San Francisco, Palo Alto, and San Diego. Judging from his essays and letters, Qutb saw much of the United States during his 20-month visit. He was genuinely taken by the vastness of the land and by the inventiveness and organizational expertise of its people. But all of these traits and accomplishments, he believed, had been gained at the expense of basic human values and moral and aesthetic depth. 'High culture', Qutb says, 'must be imported from Europe, and it is only Ameri-

ca's great wealth that makes this possible.' In his view, it was 'logical' that the one art form in which Americans excelled be the movies, combining, as they do, 'craftsmanship and primitive emotions'. Qutb admitted taking a liking to select films such as 'Gone with the Wind', 'Wuthering Heights', and 'The Song of Bernadette'. Yet he derided the Westerns and police thrillers that were the staple of the American movie industry. He condemned white America for its racist attitudes towards black Americans. He wrote about how he was astounded at the bright, vivid colours of American fashion, which 'were more outrageous' than anything to be found in the Nilotic countryside. 'I am afraid', Qutb summarized, 'that there is no correlation between the greatness of American material civilization and the men who created it.'

It would be easy to dismiss Qutb's characterizations of American society as simplistic and even cartoonish. Yet for all of its caricatures and gross generalizations, his discourse on the United States bore a degree of logic, for beneath the exaggerations and historical reductionisms lay a number of truths that discomfited Qutb and other Egyptians. These truths included the dominance of the Western-oriented elite, which was either unable or unwilling to push effectively for Egypt's full independence. Additionally, they included the post World War II emergence of the United States as a power with global interests and reach. Qutb was particularly chagrined by America's support of Zionism. As the British philosopher Terry Eagleton has said of the myths that gird other examples of nationalist and communal struggle: 'However retrograde and objectionable [these might be] they are not pure illusion: They encapsulate, in however reductive, hyperbolic a form, some substantial facts.' Following Eagleton, we may regard Qutb's discourse on America as providing opposition-minded Egyptians with a motivating mythology for their struggle against political and cultural forces that they considered responsible for the desperate condition of Muslim peoples in modern times. For, Eagleton continues, 'men and women engaged in such conflicts do not live by theory alone...it is not in defense of the doctrine of base and superstructure that men and women are prepared to embrace hardship and persecution in the course of political struggle.' They require collective symbols that encapsulate and define their social being.² Qutb appears to have recognized this fact, if only intuitively, in fashioning portrayals of America that facilitated the setting of community boundaries. In so doing, he laid the groundwork for his later, radical Islamist equation of the moral universe of Abd al-Nasir's secular Egyptian Republic with the *jahiliyya*, the 'cultural barbarism' of the peninsular Arabs prior to the advent of Islam. ◆

Notes

1. For a study on Qutb in the US, see Calvert, J. (2000), 'The World is an Undutiful Boy!': Sayyid Qutb's American Experience, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11 (no. 1), pp. 87-103.
2. Eagleton, Terry (1991), *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso, p. 190.

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