

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror*, London: Verso, 2015, 336 pp.**

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The book's cliché title *The Muslims Are Coming!*, mirror the ancient siren "The Barbarians Are Coming!", signifies Muslims as the current image of threat, barbarity, and terror for the convention of Western civilizations. Muslims are the "Barbarians of the day", the label which according to the author was previously held by the communists, starting from the end of World War II to the conclusion of Cold War, owing to the United States (U.S.) propaganda through Hollywood films' punch lines, "*The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!*". Published by Verso, the book now leads other works published by this "radical" publisher with Islam or Muslims as the subject matter. It is interesting to see that eventually Islam and Muslims have attracted the spotlight of such reputable critical theories' imprint as parts of key issues within such anti-capitalist discourses.

The author, currently New York University's Adjunct Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication, who won the 2007 New Statesman's Book of the Year through his *The End of Tolerance: Racism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain* teaches terrorism studies at John Jay College. Kundnani was the former editor of the distinguished leftist post-economic determinism journal, *Race and Class*. He specializes in the relationship between identity politics, particularly of Muslims, and the late postmodern capitalism.

Kundnani's epigraph to the introductory chapter, taken from the eighth thesis of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century German Jewish mystical critical theorist, Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*, to some extent has eccentrically synergized with the problematization of the contextual discussion of the book. In fact, each chapter begins with an epigraph with a number of them having similar analogical but unconventional sense, ranging from quotations from Martin Luther King Jr. (American Baptist Minister), Richard Wright (African-American black-rights novelist and poet), Sam Harris (New Atheism philosopher), Terry Eagleton (Marxist literary theorist), and C. B. Zubatov (a tsarist police director). These epigraphs forewarn readers about Kundnani's stand: religion has small weight to carry when it comes to the question of terror particularly when talking about Muslims that populated within these two "advanced democracies" of the occidental world. In this introductory chapter, it is appealing when Kundnani relates the storyline from Steven Spielberg's futuristic sci-fi film *Minority Report* that portrays the ability of law enforcement agencies to stop prospective crime at its initial stage through the help of psychics with the modus operandi adopted by the U.S. and the United Kingdom (UK) in combating domestic terrorism - which is by paralysing potential "home-grown" terrorists at the very beginning stage i.e. before they develop the "terrorist's" signs i.e. as argued by Kundnani the often misunderstood concept that are actually non-other but "cultural markers associated with Muslimness (forms of dress, rituals, languages, etc.)". Kundnani made a shocking disclosure when he revealed that if the signs are not clear enough, then the typically poor and desperate suspects would be tempted (usually with a handsome amount of money) or force into committing or producing one. Such bounties were also promised by the law enforcement agents to other fellow Muslims to entrap each other. If the bait did not work, then these suspects would be arrested under whatever

charges deemed appropriate backed by convincing reports, at least in the eye of the public, from mass media-journalists. As noted by Kundnani: "It proved easier to convict the imam of terrorism in the court of public opinion than in the court of law".

In other words, the book's kernel proposition, as outlined in the book's introduction as well as in chapter one entitled "An Ideal Enemy", is that the U.S. and UK capitalist regimes have been riding on the back of racist politics in order to maintain their hegemony, causing confusion among the multitude in terms of identity and emancipatory politics. For instance, Kundnani argues that UK's Muslims excessive identitarian politics is actually the result of their disillusionment with the anti-capitalist struggles. The seeming complexity of challenges now faced by Muslims has always actually been the result of the ever expanding evolutionary yet exacerbated form of capitalism. In fact, Kundnani had consistently highlighted throughout the book that African-Americans, especially those of the Black liberation, antiwar, and civil rights movements; Puerto Ricans; and leftists alike, as predecessors to such xenophobic persecutions and in the Muslims' case these come under the brand of "War on Terror". Both the introductory chapter and chapter one are able to detail the U.S. and UK government-orchestrated convictions of terrorism over domestic Muslims subjects through the offshoots policies of war on terror, supported by real cases presented in those "caught on act" TV shows manner, in addition to shocking accounts from Muslims of Detroit's West Side and "Londonistan" ghettos as well as FBI's special agents, NYPD, and the Scotland Yard. Still, the timelines and plots in some parts of these retold incidents are lacking in terms of credible references for both chapters.

In the context of U.S. and UK as the nodal points of today's Empire, Kundnani's "domestic" approach in addressing the war on terror is unique in the sense that the discussion focuses on the subjects of Empire that populate within its own cosmopolitans i.e. the Empire's very main core of the core-periphery sense. This somehow has been missing in previous texts that are typically more focused on exploitation of subjects within the Empire's protectorate countries. The book's critical theory perspective on the "boomerang" effect of foreign policies of war on terror is contradistinctive in the subject of terrorism. Kundnani is right about these ricochet consequences from such imperial foreign policies towards the regimes' domestic subjects. Definitely, local Muslim citizens are the ones to bear the brunt as victims of such imperial gaze. These are reflected when reading chapter two entitled "The Politics of Anti-Extremism", and chapter three entitled "The Roots of Liberal Rage". In chapter three, under the subheading of "Identity Liberalism", Kundnani is exceptional when he detects the individualistic element of liberalism as the factor that leads to the failure of Western liberal societies in their attempt to establish a common identity in order to resist other alien identities.

Hence, the challenge for further problematization of ambivalence as a postcolonial concept has indirectly been opened. The two-faces of the U.S. and UK government as seen by their Muslim citizens i.e. as the ruling regime and at the same time as the colonial master, requested for change in the classical definition of duality of emotions of the colonized towards the colonizer. The archetypal ambivalence that had existed within the domestic subjects that is genealogically close to immigrants has now become more complex resulting in the formation of a hybrid form of Manichean identity politics. Admiration as the typical binary opposition of hate for the colonial master has now been replaced by the spirit of nationalism i.e. love for mother country; hate for its regime's colonial adventures over "brothers and sisters of faith" abroad. Not to mention the accumulation of grudge when seeing such chauvinistic discrimination being practised over domestic fellow citizens of

identical religious faith. These can be echoed from the points made in chapter four entitled “The Myth of Radicalization” (the book’s longest chapter) and chapter five named “Hearts and Minds”. Though realised it or not, through these chapters, Kundnani had actually made a basic sketch on this hybridity of ambivalence especially when he described the information from a Channel (U.K.’s countersubversion program) informer (a youth worker) about surveillance on U.K. cities’ youngsters: “None of the young people referred to this youth worker had adopted anything like a systematic ideology, nor was there any real interest of in or knowledge of Islam – *just conspiracy theories mixed with a Manichean identity politics*”.

Thus, it is not about the foreign elements of Muslims’ religious and cultural identity, instead it has always been about capitalists imperial adventures over the richness of natural resources of the Others (the Middle Eastern soils as in the case of post-Cold War era) that simply need a *raison d’être* (the Muslims’ identity) to ignite the imperialists exploitative projects under the same classic chants of “God, Gold, and Glory”. As Kundnani successfully demonstrates in chapter six, “No Freedom for the Enemies of Freedom”, both incompatible camps of the far Right terrorists and the Muslims are unable to differentiate between racist politics and capitalism, and this has proven that the capitalist regimes have successfully diverted capitalist’s exploitation from the focus of the multitude and turn it towards the struggle of identity politics.

Chapter seven, the book’s shortest chapter with the shortest title called “Postboom”, further exposes the ricochet effects of the war on terror foreign policies towards the American Muslim community particularly the Somali-Americans. These include being brutality assaulted by police officers and rigidly interrogated at public malls, to name a few, which in turn made militancy as the worthy alternative for revenge, simultaneously giving rise to the recruitment of bona fide terrorists among Somali-Americans’ diasporas into the Al-Shabaab. Chapter eight entitled “Twenty-First-Century Crusades” portrays retaliations faced by the U.S. and UK Muslims from Islamophobic individuals and groups such as the mutilation of a Muslim taxi driver by an anti-Muslim passenger and intimidations from multi-racial yet xenophobic English Defence League (EDL). The skilful revisionist Kundnani spotted: “...most strikingly, in its (EDL) appropriation of the socialist slogan “Black and white, unite and fight” (no longer against the bourgeoisie but against Muslim radicals)”. In chapter nine entitled “Dream Not of Other Worlds” (apparently the chapter’s title is taken from the title of Huston Diehl’s 1970 memoir on educational discrimination over black students in a “Negro” elementary school of Louisiana during the period of segregation between the blacks and whites) Kundnani re-warns about the “trappings of democracy” through totalitarian rule over racialized subalterns as a means for hegemonic maintenance of the majority in these so-called advanced liberal democratic societies.

Since this 2015 copy is the paperback version of the previous 2014 hardback issue of the book, it comes with an afterword. This time, Kundnani briefly addressed the abruptly established Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group. He reiterated his argument: “The pattern is the familiar one repeated over the last decade: the group’s spectacular violence is not seen as the product of a political context in part created by US and UK foreign policy; instead, it is assumed to be the result of “extremism”, that bad version of Islamic belief which somehow takes hold on Muslim minds”.

Above all, the book’s sources of data are impressive and wide-ranging. Well-constructed oral histories through saturated “grassroots” information gained from personal blogs, focus group discussions, and face-to-face as well as telephone interviews with non-in-

power subjects i.e. those regular Muslims of suburbia who had directly experienced the backlash from the war on terror in these two advanced Western democracies. Kundnani deserves commendation due to his efforts to enter these ghettos to interview the subjects despite of the fragile security condition of its environments. These grounded data are then supported by reports from the American and British reputable presses such as the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and definitely the leftist-inclined *the Guardian*. Nonetheless, as mentioned, some of these proletarian stories are somehow opaque when it comes to citation, leaving readers to wonder about the validity of sources of these non-mainstream histories. On the other hand, mainstream accounts were also considered through interviews with law enforcement officials, policy makers and government advisors. More importantly, governments' official documents and legal cases, in addition to classified materials of enforcement bodies apropos "legitimate" persecutions of Muslims in both countries were unveiled as part of the data, added startling facts to readers. Kundnani did not put his nose into these secret and confidential files without a back-up. He came with the Freedom of Information Act as supported by civil liberties organization called Liberty. Besides, theoretically and contextually authoritative academic works of both liberals and critical theories camps i.e. Huntington's, Fukuyama's, Arendt's, Chomsky's, Eagleton's, Fanon's, Said's, Ahmad's, Mamdani's, among others, as well as the works of Muslim scholars like Sayyid Qutb and Tariq Ramadhan, were finely consulted, giving good starting points for sophomores to further snowball on debates surrounding these discourses.

Nonetheless, eccentrically, throughout the research, Kundnani (as highlighted in his acknowledgement for the book) is sponsored by the Open Society Foundations, a philanthropy organization founded by George Soros (and obviously the name "Open Society" was taken from Karl Popper's magnum opus *The Open Society and Its Enemies*) that promotes democracy as its main goal. As a sign of courtesy, Kundnani did emphasize Popper's liberal proposal for open society, but Kundnani did not abandon his anti-capitalist stand when he criticized the abuse of Popper's texts by war on terror liberals particularly the "not to tolerate the intolerant" adage as legitimizer for their oppressions towards non-conformists alike.

Furthermore, doubts obtrude the reader's Muslim postcolonial perspective: if Muslims with citizenship are being treated in such brutal and undemocratic ways, what worst could happen to foreign Muslims? The U.S. extrajudicial killings of its own Muslim citizens on foreign soil by drone driven by premature convictions as underscored by Kundnani further indicate Islamophobia is now at its zenith. In addition, even though Kundnani at his best has outstandingly redefined "terrorism" and "extremism", however, his definitions of religious-related concepts such as "Islamist", "Islamic fundamentalism", and "moderate Muslims", theologically, are debatable.