

Desiring Arabs

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According to historian and intellectual Joseph Massad, Arab cultural traditions have always included a measure of tolerance for same-gender sex practices, without recognising a separate socio-sexual categorisation for those who engage in such practices. Recently, however, there has been an attempt by certain Westerners and Westernised Arabs to universalise arbitrary and exclusivist sexual identities, including heterosexuality and (more problematically) homosexuality. This initiative has caused a backlash in Arab countries against those who identify themselves as homosexual – an identity associated by many Arabs with Western cultural imperialism – but also against people who engage in same-gender sex without considering themselves homosexual.

How did this happen? In ‘showing the influence and impact that Orientalism has had in shaping the Arabs’ own perceptions of themselves’ (p.48), *Desiring Arabs* provides much historical background to the current debate. Massad demonstrates how, since the mid-19th century, many Arab intellectuals have placed the Arabs’ cultural trajectory on a Darwinian civilisational scale at whose teleological end lies ‘the West.’ Concurrently, the manipulation of history to make the Arab past conform to Western morality became standard; history had come to be perceived as a pedagogical tool to mould contemporary Arabs. When Victorian morality was ascendant in the West (1837-1901), Arabic poetry’s historical tradition of ribaldry and same-gender sexual material began to be suppressed. And having been set in motion, the trend continued; Massad shows how early Abbasid-era poet Abu Nuwas (c.750-c.810) – renowned for his bawdiness and praise of pederasty – was often explained away or even disowned by 20th century Arab intellectuals.

Yet this exercise in blind emulation of Western mores remains tricky, because the lodestar represented by ‘the West’ keeps changing course. Indeed, ‘while the premodern West attacked medieval Islam’s alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern West attacks its alleged repression of sexual freedoms in the present’ (p. 175). With this in mind, Massad discusses representations of same-gender sex in modern Arabic fiction, wherein homosexuality is rarely perceived as mere sexual orientation, but endowed with moral significance. The author shows that Western-influenced Arab

authors have tended increasingly to view homosexuality allegorically, usually as a symptom of national decline, but occasionally as indicative of societal liberation.

Ultimately, however, *Desiring Arabs* is not a work of history, but an intellectual polemic. Massad directs much of his fire at what he derisively terms 'the Gay International' (p. 178), which arrogates to itself the right to label all those who engage in same-gender sex as 'homosexuals' and to agitate on behalf of their rights, even if such action redounds to their harm. Crucially, Massad views the current gay rights campaign as a form of Western nativism whose proponents are strikingly ignorant of other cultures and traditions. According to Massad, in the Arab world 'it is the publicness of socio-sexual identities rather than the sexual acts themselves that elicits repression' (p. 197). In forcing Arabs who engage in same-gender sex to go public, 'the Gay International is destroying social and sexual configurations of desire in the interest of reproducing a world in its own image, one wherein its sexual categories and desires are safe from being questioned' (p. 189).

Massad's multi-pronged attack on 'international gay brigades' (p. 43) is fraught with conceptual problems, even though the author rarely fails to register a valid criticism of Western gay rights activists before launching into a dogmatic tirade against their allegedly imperialist agenda. Similarly, when taking to task those Arabs – whatever their ideological orientation – who fail to interrogate the 'epistemological underpinnings' (p. 174) of modern Western conceptions of sexual identity, his opening shot often proves effective even if the subsequent assault fizzles out.

For example, Massad laments Arab intellectuals' adoption of a modern Western taxonomy responsible for 'transforming sexual practices into identities' (p. 195) and considering all who engage in same-gender sex to be homosexual. He points out that, ironically, this approach has been especially prevalent among Islamists. Indeed, 'Islamists adopted the very same vocabulary and classifications of the Gay International to disqualify the very same gayness that the Gay International had been trying to legitimize' (p. 265).

This may be true, but isn't it possible to construct an Islamically sound argument against same-gender sex without reacting to the encroaching Western notion of homosexuality? In such a scenario, the dilemma of whether to label those who engage in such activity as 'sodomites' or 'homosexuals' becomes irrelevant; any doctrinal Islamic position on the immorality of certain sex acts would remain

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unaffected by the Western construction of a social identity (homosexuality) around such acts.

The author also claims that Western gay rights activists forcibly channel polymorphous sexual expression into two constrictive categories of identification. 'By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact *heterosexualizing* a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary.' (p. 188). This is transparently alarmist; after all, haven't gays and lesbians in the West been forced to come to terms with bisexuals and transgender people, whose very existence shatters any hetero/homosexual binary? There is little to suggest that Western gay rights activists seek anything other than making available to Arabs an additional option in the realm of sexual identification.

Still, Massad forcefully demonstrates the insensitivity with which many Western gay rights activists treat the nuances of Arab same-gender sexual traditions. Most Arabs who engage in same-gender sex do not identify themselves as homosexual and were never consulted about the objectives of a gay rights movement which purports to speak on their behalf. This is Massad's strongest point, though it shouldn't be overstretched. Granted, it is invasive to 'out' people who wish to maintain sexual privacy, simplistic to impose labels such as 'gay' or 'lesbian' on all men and women who practice same-gender sex and foolish to assume that such people invariably seek homosexual romantic coupling. Yet what is so objectionable to creating a cultural space for those who *voluntarily* choose these things? Massad's relativism – stemming from his accurate observation that 'homosexuality' is alien to Arab same-gender sexual traditions – is so extreme that he refuses to support a call for universal freedom of sexual identity.

To his credit, Massad refuses to exaggerate traditional Arab tolerance of same-gender sex. He admits that 'different forms of social shame' (p. 376) would be experienced by those known to engage in the practice, and that the possibility of homosexual romantic coupling – undoubtedly desired by some – was out of the question. Yet he would have us believe that improving this sorry situation is virtually impossible, especially if the impetus for change comes from Westerners or Westernised Arabs. Crucially, should the attempt at change be met with violence, it is the fault of 'the Gay International.'

Indeed, in addressing the 'Queen Boat affair' in Egypt, an incident of openly displayed homosexuality to which the Egyptian state responded with a brutal

clampdown on homosexual activity in the country, Massad goes so far as to assert: 'The Gay International and its activities are largely responsible for the intensity of this repressive campaign.' (p. 184). Later, citing a Syrian play to demonstrate the inadvisability of going public as homosexual, Massad is even more direct; of Arab gays and lesbians taking this route, he writes that 'this new situation may very well bring about their social and physical death from which the Gay International claims it is trying to save them in the first place' (p. 376).

In postulating the inevitability of (heterosexual) Arab violence wherever there is gay and lesbian assertiveness, Massad pre-emptively exonerates the perpetrators – whether individuals or the state – of any wrongdoing. However regrettable their behaviour, those Arabs who react violently to the gay rights campaign are not perceived by Massad as responsible for their actions, but as caught up in a broader struggle against 'imperialism,' to which the gay rights movement is wedded. After all, 'the very same discourse that calls for the "liberation" of Arabs from dictators and "defends" them against human rights violations is what allows both imperial ventures and human rights activism' (p. 47).

Massad's certainty about Arab violence makes for the most tragic aspect of his argument against gay rights activism in the Arab world. For all his purported defence of Arabs who engage in same-gender sex, Massad wants to force them to choose the lesser of two evils: either accept the current shame-ridden and legally murky situation, or openly embrace a homosexual identity and suffer mindless violence and explicit legal restrictions as a result. Compare this to the rotten political choice presented to Arabs by those opposed to removing authoritarian regimes in the region: for those of you complaining about iron-fisted and nominally secular rule in Syria, Egypt and (formerly) Iraq, know that Islamic extremism is your only alternative. Apparently, this cruel and false dichotomy, a variation of which is continually used to quash efforts at improving the lot of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities in the Arab world, has now been extended into the realm of sexual freedom, thereby completing the wilful suffocation of Arabs who look to the West for help in achieving social and political reform.

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