

Tocqueville in Arabia

Dilemmas in a Democratic Age

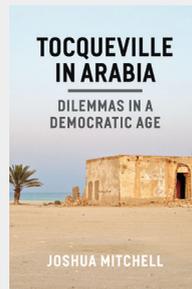
By Joshua Mitchell

Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, xii+195 pages, \$20, ISBN 9780226087313.

Reviewed by Abdessamad Belhaj

WESTERN political philosophy still shies away from including the Muslim world in its scope. Some political philosophers simply disregard Islam because it is not Western (a fate it shares with other traditions in Asia and elsewhere). Other scholars, more sophisticated, maintain that the vocabulary and the problems of Muslim political thought are specific, and thus, Western political philosophy cannot make sense of them. In a globalized world, this essentialist paradigm fails to withstand criticism. In his book, Joshua Mitchell proves Arabia, and other Muslim areas, to be understandable from the perspective of modern Western political philosophy. In particular, the author, perceptively, describes the transformations generated by modernity in the United States and the Arab countries. After the doubts cast by the failure of the Arab spring to promote democracy in Arabia, this book revives the discussion and hope about the prospects of democratization in the Middle East.

One can approach the structure of the book from two vantage points: autobiography and political philosophy. Autobiographical elements dominate the prologue, the first chapter, and the epilogue. In the prologue, the author recalls the bitterest encounter he had with the Middle East when he attended the death of his father in Cairo (his father is Georges Mitchell an American diplomat and well-known scholar of Islamism). Joshua



Mitchell has roots in the Middle East: his grandfather is a Christian Orthodox immigrant from Lebanon. Additionally, Joshua Mitchell was born in Egypt and spent a part of his childhood in Yemen and Kuwait. This explains the passion and the empathy the author exhibits with regard to the traditions and the crises of the Middle East. In chapter one, Mitchell depicts his return to the Middle East to teach political philosophy at Georgetown University's campus in Qatar. In the epilogue, he offers bits of his journey to Kurdistan as a Chancellor at the American University of Iraq and other visits in the area. These personal snapshots are always accompanied with insights on comparative politics and political philosophy. The author's views of society, economy, and religion, in the American and Arab contexts, extends from chapter 2 to chapter 4. Indeed, the three chapters form the bulk of the work. The author relies on Tocqueville, on whom he is a leading authority, to analyze the transformations of the American society compared to those of the Qatari one (although he willingly refers to the Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim societies as well). His comparisons are concise and powerful. Here, Tocqueville is more than an alibi or pretext. The author takes genuine pleasure in expounding on Tocqueville, but dexterously makes the link with the current American and Arab settings. On society, Mitchell maintains that the main feature of the American

man is loneliness (*homo solus* as he calls it). In contrast, his Qatari students think of themselves as members of their tribes where they have distinct roles rather than individuals or citizens. In chapter 3, the author defends capitalism. In a democratic age, he believes that capitalism is the only economy that allows prosperity. He concedes that capitalism has its caveats such as competition, debt, and failure. Conversely, he claims that Qatar and the Middle East have an “aristocratic economy,” which is based on obligation and loyalty. Obligation and loyalty, one should object, are reserved to the members of the tribes that form “the people of Qatar,” for they do not include the immigrants from Asia and Africa who labor in Qatar. The Qatari economy should be labelled best as a *rentier* economy rather than an aristocratic economy. In his chapter on religion, Mitchell turns even more controversial, endorsing conservative Christian ideas. For example, he regrets that his American students do not consider suffering as a testimony to God’s glory. Mitchell also maintains that Islam can only survive the democratic age if it becomes spiritual. It should leave behind its orthodoxy and religious system.

The main thesis of the book is that democracy, as Tocqueville understands it, radically changes the individual, society, economy, and religion. These changes might be painful, especially for the individual who inevitably should face loneliness, hence, the tragedy of the individualist and materialist modern societies. Mitchell is not quite pleased with the radical secularization and lack of solidarity in the current American society. The author admires certain traditional traits of Middle Eastern societies, such as religiosity and hierarchy. Certainly, the argument from evolution is plausible, but Mitchell fails to show any deep knowledge of the social and historical structures of Qatar and other Arab countries.

Therefore, he cannot produce any evidence that these countries necessarily follow the same sequence of social transformation observable in American society.

Mitchell employs three methods to convey his views. Unsurprisingly, narration dominates the autobiographical section. Written in a gracious style, this section grabs your attention and leads the reader into the analytical chapters. The latter are crafted differently. First, the author loosely uses sociology to probe the ways his students react to the political and social debates. Second, he frames the discussions of society, economy, and religion in political philosophy (Plato, Augustine, Rousseau, Marx...).

A major shortcoming of the book is the *naïveté* and idealism (without Isolationism) with which it deals with the American internal and external policies. For instance, Mitchell states on page 185 that “it is democratic governance abroad, however, that had captivated the imagination of American foreign policy makers.” Whatever Tocqueville’s America might be, it is not to be identified with the USA as a superpower in the 20th and the 21st centuries. In fact, most of the author’s remarks outside political philosophy could be perceived as either biased or superficial. This is clear in his chapter on religion in which he turns into a theologian who defends the Christian theodicy, the fall of man, and incarnation. The author should have spared the reader his religious views. Instead, he could have focused on whether religions can cope with modernity and democracy or not. Furthermore, the extent to which his conclusions about Arabia (the Gulf countries) could be generalizable to other Muslim societies is largely debatable. In fact, most Muslim societies differ in their economies, political systems, and accommodation of Islam from the

monarchies of Arabia. Therefore, Tocqueville should be read another way in these societies.

Despite these weaknesses, I recommend the book to scholars and students of political science, philosophy, religious studies (including Islamic studies), history, sociology, and anthropology. They will gain the benefit of crossing the line between the West and the

Middle East and engaging both audiences with the same academic tools. As for the general reader, the book can be very useful as well. She or he would enjoy the insights, free from academic jargon, into Middle Eastern society. It is very rare today to read a book that is well thought out and easy to read at the same time. Mitchell's book largely delivers on both sides.

Rethinking Security in the Age of Migration Trust and Emancipation in Europe

By Ali Bilgiç

Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013, 210 pages, \$140.00, ISBN 9780415694193.

Reviewed by Canan Ezel Tabur

IN RECENT YEARS, limited legal channels for migrants seeking protection in Europe, predominantly originating from Africa, has been a compelling problem in view of the exceedingly tragic incidents along the Southern sea borders of the EU. Likewise, the perceived security threat in the EU vis-à-vis irregular migration has been gradually problematized. *Rethinking Security in the Age of Migration: Trust and Emancipation in Europe* tackles the European security dilemma pertaining to irregular migrants pursuing protection in Europe while being perceived as a threat to security. Bilgiç specifically looks at the case of irregular migrants coming from Sub-Saharan Africa, who are identified as irregular migrants yet in need of protection. The book contributes to the extant literature on the subject matter by essentially examining 'emancipatory security theory' and the principle of 'trust-building' between receiving communities and irregular migrants. As such, this



book is a valuable input to the recent series assembled by Routledge on the global politics of migration, using emancipation theory in the quest for practices that transform perceptions and make both irregular migrants and receiving communities feel 'secure.'

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part deals with the perspective of EU citizens on irregular migration and how the topic is framed as a security issue. This part also depicts specific insecurities faced by irregular migrants. In the second part, the author validly argues that "language" is one of the dimensions of emancipation that should be tackled. Therefore, he claims that it is needed to challenge the existing "conceptual tools provided by traditional approaches to involuntary migration" (p. 37). Instead of referring to them as irregular migrants, Bilgiç proposes the term 'protection seeker' for migrants in need of political and economic