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The Black Revolution

A Review of *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* by Mark LeVine. New York: Three Rivers Press, pp. 320, ISBN-13: 9780307353399, £ 9.99

By Pepijn van Houwelingen

Ominous sounding names like *Slayer*, *Morbid Angel*, *Cannibal Corpse*, *Hate Eternal*, *Suffocation* and *Dying Fetus* are, generally speaking, unlikely to evoke much but a strange sense of bewilderment amongst scholars of political science, history and the Middle East. These monikers belong to some of the world's most famous extreme metal bands – a style of music known for its distorted guitars, headbanging, minacious lyrical themes, black t-shirts and an overall disinterest in mainstream popularity. It is because of this that Mark LeVine's investigation of the political potential of the underground music scene in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) might strike some as a rather exotic venture into a counter- or subculture that does not stand much of a chance of survival in a region typically seen as conservative and authoritarian. In addition, most heavy metal fans would regard the concept of Islamic metal with a degree of scepticism or surprise, for despite the successes of a limited number of Middle Eastern bands – as well as the popular appeal of the documentary *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* – the region is still largely absent from the lexicon of extreme music.

Boldly challenging such preconceptions, *Heavy Metal Islam* puts forward the thesis that, at least in the MENA, non-mainstream music is essentially political, and that it provides a promising model for popular resistance. Asserting the political and cultural potential of Middle Eastern metal, and passionately pleading that there is much more to the topic than its most obvious manifestation, angry or confused kids with strange t-shirts, LeVine stresses that “Muslim history is full of characters and movements that seemed far out of the mainstream in their day, but that nevertheless helped bring about far-reaching changes in their societies” (p. 2). He proceeds by arguing that metal musicians and fans may be politically more ‘radical’ than recognised subversive forces such as Hamas and Hezbollah; the latter have failed to present a truly original way out of existing frameworks for dealing with the region's problems, something which the much more peripheral adherents of countercultural metal music might be able to do. Accordingly, the author states, metal artists and fans across the MENA have been devoted to “creating an alternative system that builds up an open and democratic culture from the ground up, against the interests of both the political, economic, and religious elites of their countries and, many believe, of the United States and other global powers as well” (p. 19). The bulk of *Heavy Metal Islam* consists

of an inquiry into this thesis through investigations of extreme and alternative music in Morocco, Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, and Pakistan, using a methodology based on extensive (mostly informal) interviews as well as the author's personal (musical) experience in the region.

Looking at the position and function of heavy metal in the West, it seems largely accurate to say that, in effect, the genre promises those who feel estranged from society a way out; it glorifies rebellion, otherness and individual pride; it gives a sense of belonging to those who don't belong; it vents frustrations which might otherwise be inexpressible. In this sense, metal music certainly has much to offer to young Muslims who feel unhappy about conservative and restrictive forces in their countries and societies. Yet at the same time, metal is clearly a Western product, brought to the MENA via European and American travellers as well as the internet. Thus, *Heavy Metal Islam* is more than 'simply' an account of a particular form of resistance against regressive domestic political forces; it portrays the multifariousness of globalisation as well as its positive potential in a region that has predominantly experienced its various downsides – exploitation, oppressive puppet regimes and phoney wars, to name some abstract yet familiar examples. In this vein, LeVine convincingly establishes heavy metal's potential to channel resentment and resistance to such forces. Anti-mainstream music is conceptualised as a product of globalisation that harbours certain tools to resist local and global injustice. Yet, to paraphrase Hegel, history passes its supreme verdict over deeds, not promise, and there is a subterranean sense of tragedy and unrealised potential present in LeVine's work. One example is the case of Egypt, where censorship, mass arrests and ridicule have largely depoliticised 'metaliens' and discouraged them from standing out too much. Instead, LeVine writes, "they would rather hold on to the slowly increasing freedom they have to play their music" (p. 63).

A more positive and inspiring case of 'metal activism' is that of Morocco, where metal fans, human rights and youth groups have combined forces on various occasions. This enabled them to openly take mildly defiant stances with regards to some of the regime's policies. Morocco provides an interesting case study of how the various forms and levels of 'globalisation' (a term now becoming so broad that it runs the risk of signifying everything, and nothing) have shaped contemporary political realities in the MENA. Accordingly, the author posits that "if the United States and the other Western powers set the macro-level conditions for the globalized economy, today their Arab allies are acting in concert to solidify and even strengthen the system's power in the MENA" (p. 38). The hypercapitalism of countries such as Dubai provides the clearest example of what may be called Arab neoliberalism, and its cultural component is symbolised by pan-Arab television channels like *Rotana* (which is 'the Arabic MTV'). It is in this context that Moroccan heavy metal has managed to have some politically significant presence. Where, as LeVine rightly points out, the soulless products of cultural globalisation are "a sure recipe for social anomie" (p. 37),

the Moroccan metal scene has “acted as a counterpoint to the domination of the production and distribution of popular music by a few Arab media conglomerates” (p. 39). In this spirit, metalfans and others organised *L’Boulevard* music festival in Fez. It served as an outlet for resisting mainstream, globalised culture, whose generic maelstrom of apathy inspires to little but consumerist superficiality (quite similar to popular music in the West – notwithstanding the posturing of Bono and other self-righteous epigones of ‘dissent’).

As an inevitable consequence of the foundational background of *L’Boulevard*, it was an explicitly political event: entrance to the festival was free, allowing people from all social classes and backgrounds to attend, and the festival grounds were surrounded by the tents of Moroccan grassroots NGOs. This was clearly a success for those working for more freedom and a more active civil society in Morocco, yet its very success ultimately proved dangerous to its radical core. LeVine describes how the later editions of the Boulevard festival were organised under the patronage of the Moroccan Ministry of Culture, and sponsored by Nokia, which might in a way be good for the music, but it was certainly detrimental to the grassroots character of the event. In this sense, the Moroccan metal scene’s struggle for freedom and recognition represents a paradox inherent to the struggles of movements that seek to gain access to certain rights: limited success typically leads to admission to the recognised order, which ultimately neutralises antagonisms and reinforces, rather than challenges, the status quo. In other words, when heavy metal fans are denounced as devil-worshippers and the style is seen as immoral and dangerous, it is situated in the realm of ‘the political’ (LeVine himself does not use this term). Conversely, when a metal festival is sponsored by the world’s biggest mobile phone company, and thereby brought into the mainstream, it loses much of its potential to challenge the establishment (here LeVine uses Marcuse’s concept of ‘repressive tolerance,’ which also enables partial explanation of why metal in the West is nowadays seldom truly political).

Much of LeVine’s fieldwork seems to confirm a ‘tragic’ view of the political salience of heavy metal and other forms of underground music. He concludes that “metalheads, and musicians more broadly, have little chance of overcoming the repressive tolerance that passes for ‘liberalization’ and ‘democratization’ in the MENA on their own” (p. 254). It would be quite unrealistic, indeed, to expect musicians to take on the burden of social and political reform all alone, particularly when there are so many active local, regional and global forces with such a range of diverging interests. Nonetheless, if anything, *Heavy Metal Islam* is an enthusiastic and powerful account of an often overlooked aspect of globalisation and the avenues for resistance which it creates. The book offers insights into wider issues of identity, political repression and globalisation through a rich narrative focused on a seemingly marginal group of young Muslims. Yet they, too, are representative of the modern MENA, and their ‘cultural

terrorism' and refusal to capitulate in the face of political suspicion, cultural isolation and social scorn might serve as a heartening model for working towards the overcoming of fear, hatred and violence in the region. Let us therefore hope, with Mark LeVine, that it will be the scruffy kids with the black t-shirts that will have the last laugh.

The Paradox of Human Rights

A Review of *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* by Costas Douzinas. Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007, pp. 336, ISBN: 978-0-415-42759-3, Pbk £27.99

By Yasmine van Wilt

Costas Douzinas' *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* should be in the library of every human rights scholar and political activist. A pointed examination of whether there "is an intrinsic relationship between human rights and the recent wars carried out in their name" (p. 100), this book examines the antithetical relationships between cosmopolitanism, benevolence and the ethical uses of power. Separated into two main sections comprised of fourteen essays, the book firstly dissects the history of human rights, and secondly examines the philosophy of 'cosmopolitan law'. Continuing Derrida's landmark work on cosmopolitanism and Foucault's philosophical dissections on power and state, Douzinas forges his own critical assertions of the role of state power in human rights litigation. His findings, most particularly his examination of US and UK bio-political power, raise serious questions about the position of the corporation in neo-colonialism. Indeed, his dissection of the 2006 UK identity card raises more questions than it answers (in keeping with Douzinas' persistent claim that "human rights have only paradoxes to offer"; p. 33), revealing the invisible and deeply ingrained links between the policing body and bio-political power.

Douzinas compellingly argues that human rights have become the lingua franca of the neo-imperial state: indeed, as he illustrates, non-profit organisations, multi-national conglomerates, and individual states perpetuate a kind of propaganda-sensationalism in which, paradoxically, pseudo-benevolent acts of war and peace alike are waged in the name of human rights. Human rights become not simply a tool to protect the *homo sacer*, the *persona non grata*, and delineate the most basic rights of the human, but have become "the tools of the new society" and the justification for "military humanism" (p. 208). Furthermore, he cites the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib and Guantamo Bay as examples of US re-interpretation (and blatant