

Sick Societies and Islamic Nations

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Since William Graham Sumner first articulated it in 1906, Cultural Relativism has become axiomatic in the social sciences. It has its vocal critics but is widely held in academe along with its kin, moral relativity. Cultural Relativism asserts, “there is no scientific basis for evaluating another society’s practices ... except as the people in that society themselves evaluate these practices” (Edgerton 2). If therefore, a society practices human sacrifice and believes it’s a good thing then it’s a good thing. The next logical step from cultural relativism is to cultural egalitarianism or multiculturalism. The problem is the inherent contradiction in embracing cultural relativism. It is said to combat racism and ethnocentrism by promoting diversity and tolerance. At the same time, by definition, it must declare cultures that are racist and ethnocentric to be just as good as those that are not. If we label a practice cultural then it is taboo to condemn or even criticize it.

In his book Sick Societies Robert Edgerton challenges the notion that there are no valid criteria for evaluating cultures. He attacks the established tenets of relativism and adaptivism offering numerous examples of maladaptive practices. His thesis is that there are indeed sick societies and some are so maladaptive that they destroy themselves. He focuses on non-western “primitive” societies that have been studied in depth by anthropologists while offering some comparisons to modern nation states. After explicating Edgerton’s principles I will attempt to apply them in analyzing the current health of some modern Islamic states.

Edgerton’s book is primarily a response to ethnographers who have insisted that the most deplorable practices are acceptable and indeed functional. Functionalism is the belief that all established practices serve a positive social function. Even belief in witchcraft, torturous initiation rites, and incredibly hostile relations between the sexes all produce social good that outweighs the bad. The fact that a population *survives* for a length of time is “evidence” that their practices serve a purpose. Edgerton takes functionalism to task with numerous and often times graphic illustrations of practices that are clearly detrimental.

For our purposes it is the principles he is illustrating with his detailed accounts that are important. Edgerton argues that certain “traditional beliefs and practices are maladaptive because they endanger people’s health, happiness, or survival” (Edgerton 24). Specifically, maladaptation has occurred when:

1. A population or its culture has failed to survive because of the inadequacy or harmfulness of one or more of its beliefs or institutions. OR

2. Enough members of a population are sufficiently dissatisfied with one or more of their social institutions or cultural beliefs such that the viability of their society is threatened. OR
3. The beliefs and practices maintained so seriously impair the physical or mental health of its members that they cannot adequately meet their own needs or maintain their social and cultural system. (Edgerton 45).

Every society has some maladaptive practices. According to Edgerton, they are common, inevitable, and persistent.

How and why do maladaptive beliefs and practices develop? One reason is that people are not always rational, even in modern “scientific” cultures. People pay \$5.00 per minute to hear Madame Rose tell their fortune. Second we have a tendency to believe that correlation is causation. If someone jumps up and down on one foot and it rains we now have a rain dance. If a woman drinks too much beer and becomes pregnant we now have a fertility rite. Some practices result from the failure to control biological predispositions. In folk societies fighting over women was more common than fighting over territory. Practices such as these are maladaptive from the start. Practices that are beneficial in the short run may become maladaptive, such as depleting the natural resources in an area and culture can create needs that become destructive later on. Finally, practices that worked well in the social or political environment they were established under may have to change in response to a changing world. There is a debate as to the relationship between the human genotype and human culture. According to Edgerton, it is “generally agreed” that they developed at the same time. It is possible that we have biological predispositions that worked well in the environment they developed in. E.g. Cravings for fat, sugar, and salt that ensured our survival in the past may prove our demise in the age of fast food.

Regardless of how they come about, once adopted cultural practices become set in stone. People continue to engage in revolting practices, such as infanticide, for no other reason than that their ancestors did it. Societies rarely discontinue maladaptive practices without strong pressure or competition from an outside group. Failure to change under these circumstances leads to extinction or absorption by another group, the ultimate maladaptation.

Social inequality is universal. Successful adaptation of a few is often at the expense of many. Adults are valued over children, the political elite dominates the masses, and men dominate women. Edgerton points out that male dominance over women in many folk societies was so extreme it was clearly maladaptive. Women and children often ate scraps, even in societies where the women hunted and the men were idle. Often women were allowed even less food while pregnant. The resultant low birth rates and high infant mortality rates are clearly maladaptive. Wife beating was sanctioned in virtually every folk society and relations between the sexes were anything but friendly. The Gusii engaged in the most extreme and deplorable adversarial sexual behavior it defies logic. Pokot men would often refuse to eat food cooked by their wives because they correctly believed their wives would try to poison them. The importance here is that these women did *not* accept the treatment they received or accept these cultural practices. They used what little power they did have to hurt the men. It’s doubtful the men were very happy either. The question is how long can a society survive with

half its population degraded and enslaved? We will return to that in assessing the health of Islamic states. Edgerton concludes that: practices can be maladaptive for some or all of the population, some societies serve the needs of their members better than others and in large complex societies a tiny elite is best served at the expense of the majority. But in all societies some groups' needs are met better than others (Edgerton 103).

Edgerton goes on to catalogue food taboos, medical practices, the kinds and prevalence of mental illnesses, suicide rates, life expectancies and religious practices of various societies past and present All illustrating that many maladaptive practices exist and that there is no reason to believe they serve any useful function and for the most part probably never did. Ultimately, if a high enough percentage of the population is discontented with the culture the society will implode. The discontented often focus on the wealthy and peasant uprisings result. Revolutions then create new societies such as the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China. These new societies may thrive or fail miserably depending on their own cultural practices. If a society's maladaptations leave it weak to outside influence or attack it will become absorbed by or destroyed by an outside group. Edgerton believes that understanding that some practices are better than others and that some are downright deplorable is the first step in reducing human suffering. He is clear that it does not give anyone the right to impose their values on another culture but it does impose an obligation to teach others.

Let us apply Edgerton's second and third criteria in analyzing some current Islamic societies. One clearly maladaptive behavior that threatens the survival of at least some Islamic cultures is waging war on others who have military strength that far surpasses their own. While no Islamic nation is waging war on a stronger state we have cells of Islamic militants who are doing just that. They are subsets of different cultures. Secondly, there are nation states that are supporting such activities. This is of course why the war on terror is different than past declared wars or conflicts. The concept of Jihad or Holy War is debated from within and outside the Islamic World.

Jihad originally meant a "struggle against an aggressive foreign force or an offense in the name of the faith" (Wright 54). Mohammed practiced what he preached, leading victorious battles throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Within one century Islam had spread (by the sword) from Central Asia through the Middle East, North Africa and to Spain. This was the fastest and most far reaching military victory made solely in the name of religion in the history of the world (Wright 55). Jihad is a central tenet of Islam but is only compulsory in defense of Islam however. As time passed Jihad came to mean "righteous war" and could be waged against other Muslims who disobeyed the Sharia. In contemporary Islam many Muslims make a distinction between greater Jihad and lesser Jihad. Greater Jihad is one's internal struggle with sin; lesser Jihad is the military struggle against an enemy. Some Muslims define jihad as the struggle to become a better Muslim oneself not an effort to convert others to Islam.

In the early years of Islam Jihad was not only adaptive it was highly successful. It served to unify the Arab world religiously, politically and economically. Mohammed envisioned a "House of Islam" with no borders and for a time that was achieved. There is no

longer a monolithic Islam. The Arab world is carved into nation states and Islam has split into the Sunni and Shi'ite sects that are hostile to one another. In today's social, political and economic climate the original concept of Jihad is no longer viable and threatens the stability of the entire world.

The concept of Jihad is so vague it can be used to justify any war. The militant Islamic group Hizbu'llah defines Jihad as "any act which exerts effort in God's cause" (Saad-Ghorayeb 122). God's cause refers to the cause of mankind, specifically "the cause of the people, the cause of the oppressed, the cause of pride, honour, and glory, the cause of the defense of the land, the cause of the defense of the sacred, and of the values of humanity" (Ibid. 122). This makes *any* act of aggression on their part a defensive Jihad. Israel can be targeted for its mere existence; the U.S. can be targeted for its support of Israel and its presence in Saudi Arabia, individuals can be targeted for failing to obey Sharia. Hiz'bullah is a Shi'ite group and the Shi'ites have not had an Imam for over a century. This is important because only an Imam can wage an offensive Jihad. It explains why defensive has been interpreted in such a broad manner.

Iran wages Jihad against its Muslim neighbor, Iraq. Iraqi Muslims are Sunni and to Shi'ites not true believers. Saddam Hussein is a secular Muslim, nevertheless he insights his people to wage Jihad against the evil U.S. And of course Osama Bin Laden attempts to insight all Muslims everywhere to Jihad against the West and specifically to kill Americans. His vision, it seems is at least true to Mohammed's in the sense of having one unified Muslim world.

Jihad as conceived by these "leaders" is a practice that was initially successful but became maladaptive over time. Edgerton's thesis is that cultures can change in response to strong selective pressure from outside cultures or extreme changes in environment. Islam is in tension over these issues right now. The fundamentalists represent the past. They hang to the original conception of Jihad in spite of their military weakness in relation to the West. Those who claim that militants are distorting Islam for their own purposes wish to retain their religion and culture without imposing it on the rest of the world. They have changed their conception of Jihad to reflect the internal struggle. There is no doubt that the fundamentalists do reflect Mohammed's conception of Jihad but if they persist they will be destroyed.

Martyrdom is related to Jihad. The belief that those killed while advancing the cause of Allah will be greatly rewarded in heaven is pervasive. Hizbu'llah is particularly adept at taking advantage of this belief. Palestinian suicide bombers are often children and teenagers. Until recently it was only sons who sacrificed themselves but recently in some perverse form of feminism female suicide bombers have come into being. In many cases the families encourage their children to use themselves as weapons. Terrorist organizations and/or supportive Arab governments then financially compensate the families. Palestinians are seen as living in dire circumstances with no hope for a better future. Their martyrdom is an attempt to gain world support against Israel. While these attacks draw criticism from some quarters, there is no doubt that they garner support from others. But what about young, educated, middle class Saudi Arabian men? They sacrifice lives of relative comfort if not promise.

In all cultures, the willingness to die for the cause or sacrifice oneself for the good of others has been considered heroic. It is necessary for the success of any group that some would give their lives defending it. The greater the cause, the greater honor it is to die for it. American presidents praise our war dead for sacrificing their lives in the name of freedom and democracy. They never say, “Your son did not die in vain, thanks to him the price of crude is stable.” While all soldiers risk death, Martyrs seek it. Does martyrdom serve an adaptive purpose? Yes, under certain circumstances it does. If a people are being persecuted, Martyrs can be an inspiration to the others in the group to persist in their resistance. Voluntarily going to one’s death is the consummate sign of faith. If enough people are willing to die for a cause it *could* be a successful practice. In the case of the suicide hijackers, there is no chance of their “cause” ever succeeding. They truly died in vain. As for the Palestinians it seems that their repulsive practice of sacrificing their children is doing more harm than good. Israel’s retaliations cause many more deaths of Palestinians but if the political goals of the Palestinians are ultimately obtained it would have to be viewed as a success under Edgerton’s model. Children have always been sacrificed for the good of the adults in society. This begs the question of whether such a society is worth saving.

As regards assessing the health of Islamic communities, Jihad and martyrdom are mere symptoms. The culture they are waging war to save is as “sick” as any in Edgerton’s book. Edgerton emphasized the dysfunctional cultures in which men so dominated women that the reproductive success of the culture was threatened. He also argued that fostering cooperation, affection and shared interests would have enhanced social stability and individual satisfaction (Edgerton 86). While women in Islamic societies are not made to eat crumbs they are denied even basic human rights as defined by the United Nations. Reza Ashfari, in her book *Human Rights In Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism* correctly asserts that cultural relativism is most stridently defended when “human rights challenge patriarchal patterns of authority-subordination” (3). The enforcement of hijab, female genital mutilation, unilateral divorce and child custody laws and other repressive and harmful practices are “cultural”. The Holocaust, slavery, and ethnic cleansing are never referred to as cultural but the torture of women is. Ashfari is critical of Western academe, the United Nations, and even Amnesty International for ignoring or downplaying the plight of Iranian women under the Islamic Republic.

Under the Shah’s aggressive modernization plan for Iran, women had more personal freedom, rights within the family and educational opportunities than ever before. After the Islamic revolution reactionary laws were passed taking those freedoms away. For example the hijab (proper head covering) became compulsory once again, unilateral divorce) and child custody (by the husband) were restored, male relatives right to “protect” women’s chastity, honor killings of unfaithful wives were sanctioned, nine-year old girls could be married, a female’s worth in blood money was ½ that of a man’s, and her testimony in court, if allowed at all, was also worth ½ that of a man’s.

Iranian women, however, cherished the limited freedom they had gained under the Shah. Secular and Islamist women alike fought back, albeit in very different ways. Islamist women accepted the religious system and sought to work within it. These fundamentalists claimed that the Sharia had been misinterpreted and that restrictions on women were

perversions of “true Islam”. They voluntarily accepted the hijab but reinvented its meaning. What had always been associated with men’s weakness and inability to control their sexual desires was transformed into a symbol of dignity, chastity, and modesty for women. **This** is cultural authenticity. These Islamic “feminists” focused on improving women’s socio-economic status while accepting the moral restrictions.

Secular women were unable to participate in the debate; they were barred from public positions and were forbidden to publish. Many refused to where the hijab and were fired from their jobs because of it. Between 1980 and 1985 forty thousand female teachers were fired by the government for refusing to obey the dress code (Ashfari 252). Women were beaten and imprisoned for bad hijab yet this was virtually ignored by human rights organizations. One reason is that the voices of these secular women were not heard in the West. Only Islamist women were represented in government and they were celebrated by Western academe. Consequently, the West did not see hijab as repressive. U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression Abid Hussain was one who did acknowledge that imposition of hijab was a violation of women’s right to freedom of opinion and expression (Ashfari 257).

During the first ten years of the Islamic Republic family law was revised several times. This reflected the internal struggle between the new regime and women who had their hopes raised during 50 years of secularization. As with Jihad, those who wished to retain the theocracy, chose to reinterpret Islam in a modern way. Each time a “liberal” law was passed they quickly revised Islam to make it compatible with the new secular law. This was transparent to hardliners, “the makeup behind the veil had become too glaring” (Ashfari 258). Others strove for more radical modernization and openly defied the repressive regime at their own peril. One woman, Dr. Doma Harabi, removed her headscarf in a crowded square in Tehran, shouted “Death to Tyranny” and immolated herself. The trauma that secular women experienced at being forced to wear the hijab made even a weak relativist position indefensible. Jack Donnelly, in an attempt to defend the universality of human rights called for a weak relativist position that allowed for the imposition of a dress code to protect public morality and decency, “such as the Muslim requirement that women wear veils in public” (Ashfari 264). Using Donnelly’s own criteria of an internal and an external judgment of the practice, Ashfari argues that the hijab lacks the required consensus in Iran (Ashfari 264).

It is difficult to ascertain the level of acceptance or resistance of Iranian women to the laws of the Islamic Republic. One telling sign was observed by Geraldine Brooks, a journalist who covered the Iranian Women’s Conference. Every public place she went had a decal showing the silhouette of a woman’s covered head. Some said, “Hijab is mandatory”, others said “bad hijab is prostitution” and others “Lack of hijab means lack of man’s manhood” (Ashfari 263). This would be analogous to *every* public establishment in the U.S. having a sign that reads “no shirt, no shoes, no service”. The necessity of the signs indicates a high level of resistance.

Iran is the paradigm case of an Islamic Republic but Saudi Arabia is equally abusive to women. I first learned of female genital mutilation in 1994 while reading [Princess: A True Story Of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia](#). I was outraged that such a gruesome and painful practice that poses a clear danger to a woman’s physical and psychological health was

being practiced in the late 20th century. I was also shocked that I had never heard of it before. It has been publicized in recent years but at that time was relatively unknown in the U.S. This book is not a scholarly work but an anthology of personal stories written in secret by a female royal family member in collaboration with a Western journalist. It is anecdotal evidence yet the stories ring true: Honor killings carried out by stoning and drowning, a woman who had committed the sin of pre-marital sex in the U.S. lured back to Saudi Arabia and put into solitary confinement for the rest of her life, a victim of gang rape being put to death immediately after delivering the baby conceived in the attack. Amnesty International recently reported that Mutawa'een in Saudi Arabia *allegedly* prevented 14 girls from escaping their burning school because they were not wearing headscarves and there were no male relatives to receive them. It is also reported that these religious police prevented male rescuers from entering the school. Reports such as these, sadly, lend credence to Princess.

With female literacy rates in Saudi Arabia and Iran at 50.2 % and 65.8% respectively, women in those two countries are far better educated than in many other Islamic nations. In Pakistan enrolment rates for school age girls is very low and the female literacy rate is 24%. In Afghanistan girls were not educated at all under the Taliban and the female literacy rate is only 15%. It is 26% in Yemen and 39% in Egypt (World Factbook). In all of these states female literacy rates fall far short of men's.

The relations between the sexes in Islamic nations meet Edgerton's second and third criteria for maladaptive practices. Men have dominated women to some degree in most societies. This could have been adaptive in a time when survival depended on brute strength. Most societies have been patrilineal and control of female sexuality would ensure the accuracy of bloodlines. However, in the case of Islamic culture the extreme amount of control men exercise over women seems more related to the demand for sexual purity in men and the resultant frustration. The Koran clearly sanctions the subjugation of women, however the brutal treatment described above reflects not inequality but a complete dehumanization of women. What functional, let alone moral, purpose could this serve? Until Sharia is replaced with secular law the status of women can improve only marginally. At any rate it is clear that the women involved are agitating for change.

Of course women are not the only ones denied power and mistreated in Islamic societies. In all Islamic countries political and economic power are in the hands of a tiny elite. Legal systems based on Sharia necessarily deny freedom of religion, press, speech, expression and association. There is no suffrage in Saudi Arabia and no mechanism for change of government. The Saudi Government routinely engages in torture of its own citizens and public criticism of the royal family is not tolerated. The 1999 Amnesty International report on human rights abuses in Iran reports that torture, extra judicial executions, and stonings are common. It is no different in Yemen where the government is considering a law that would allow police to open fire on any "dubious" gathering of more than five people, In 2000 the government suspended international and mobile phone use and pagers for 4 days (Human Rights Watch), in Syria mobile phones and access to the Internet remain illegal (Kuran).

There are three types of responses by people living under these regimes, which response carries the day will decide the fate of each of these nations. There is the militant

Islamist response. These conservatives despise the West and advocate a return to “pure” Islam, by force if necessary. This group blames the West for all the problems in the Islamic world: poverty, immorality, materialism are all results of the colonialism of the past and economic domination of the West at present. They are provided with ample support for this thesis from Western academics that use their “culturally constructed” right of free speech to blame the United States for all the human suffering in the world. The Saudi Arabian and Egyptian governments do receive a great deal of support from the U.S. because we value stability over freedom and are very afraid that the Iranian Revolution could become a prototype in the Arab world. The fundamentalists’ claims become a self-fulfilling prophecy because we do keep corrupt secular leaders who are friendly to our interests in power because of the threat from extremists. These fanatics are able to recruit young educated men to their cause because the political regimes in power have failed miserably in the economic and political realms. It is not the poor masses that join in suicide hijackings but educated young men frustrated by their lack of political power and torn between the pleasures of the West and the asceticism of Islam. The fundamentalists eschew our Western materialism because they know that they cannot have Sharia *and* worldly success.

A second response is Islamist Revisionism. These are the intellectuals and scholars who seek to redefine Islam to make it more compatible with the modern world. They espouse Jihad as an internal struggle and the veil as a liberating force in women’s lives. They seek to return to “true” Islam and claim that the repressive features in Islamic life are culturally constructed. They decry fundamentalism and secularism. This kind of revisionism in response to the changing world scene could be an adaptive practice under Edgerton’s model. The Arab world does not have to be just like the West to succeed and Islamist Revisionism could be the first baby step toward progress.

The secular response favors complete liberalization and modernization along with abolition of the Sharia. These people pay a very high price when they dare express these views or worse try to live them. They are the secular martyrs, political prisoners, and expatriates. I believe they are correct. Unless the Arab world embraces civil society, democracy and capitalism they will never solve their problems of continual political, violence and poverty.

Since September 11th, we in the United States have been told repeatedly that colonialism and American foreign policy, past and present contributes immeasurably to the rise of militant Islam and terrorism. Essentially the United States is to blame for poverty and violence across the world. I have already acknowledged that the U.S. supports repressive dictatorships to protect our interests in the world. But, it is our fear of the “culture” of the masses ruled by the regimes that drives this policy. It has been demonstrated that the beliefs and practices of Muslims are largely to blame for the plight of the Muslim world.

Let’s return to Edgerton’s definition of maladaptation.

1. A population or its culture has failed to survive because of the inadequacy or harmfulness of one or more of its beliefs or institutions. OR

2. Enough members of a population are sufficiently dissatisfied with one or more of their social institutions or cultural beliefs such that the viability of their society is threatened. OR
3. The beliefs and practices maintained so seriously impair the physical or mental health of its members that they cannot adequately meet their own needs or maintain their social and cultural system. (Edgerton 45).

The Islamic practices of Jihad, the extreme repression of women, denial of even the most basic human rights to all people are all maladaptive or “sick”. This is not a culturally imperialistic evaluation of Islam. It is clear from the behavior of those within the culture that it is *not* acceptable to high percentages of them. Cultural “authenticity” does not exist where a government must continually and violently suppress its own people. Not only is the United States not responsible for this, there is very little we can do to change it. No matter what policies we follow we are damned. If we support insurrections against despotic governments we are violating the sovereignty of other nation states. Cultural Relativists say it is wrong (an absolute wrong?) to impose our conception of human rights on Islamic nations. This conveniently relieves us of any responsibility to our fellow human beings no matter how great their suffering. Not quite, many of these same people insist that we must pour money into these countries to alleviate the poverty that “we” have created. This money would have to go through international relief organizations as funneling through the governments is not only ineffective but would be seen as supporting despotic regimes once again. Money attached to real reform in the areas of human rights, economics and politics seems much more promising, we need a Marshall Plan for the Middle East. Using force to protect our homeland and our interests abroad is not a complete solution but it is all we can do until a change occurs from within the Muslim world.

Ultimately it is up to Muslims world wide to determine their fate in the modern world. If they secularize and modernize they will prosper. This could be considered an absorption by another culture under Edgerton’s model but the alternative of holding tenaciously to Islamic fundamentalism will certainly lead to their extinction.

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