

BOOK REVIEW

## Moving away from demagogy

**Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education: Reconsidering multiculturalism**, by Liz Jackson, New York, Routledge, 2014

Freedom of religion is a foundational requirement of democracy. The USA claims to be the great defender of democracy in the world. However, Islamophobia seems to be increasing in the USA. It is this paradox that Dr Liz Jackson, an American scholar, decided to study in *Muslims and Islam in U.S. Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism*. In her book, Jackson reflects on the way US education is presenting Islam to the US population in formal and informal education (schools and media). Jackson supports the argument that US education is promoting a negative image of Islam, while at the same time depriving the US population of the possibility of making its own opinion on the topic. She shows that Muslim people are being alienated in US society with the use of an Islamophobic, demagogical education. Jackson demonstrates that the global political climate has become threatening to Muslim American citizens. She looks at interculturalism as a possible answer to establishing more equitable relationships within American society.

Jackson explains that US multicultural policies related to Muslim culture are mainly assimilating, as they deny the Muslims in the USA the right to have a different culture from that of the European colonizers to North America. This practice is threatening to Muslim people, as it defines them as alien to the land. Liz Jackson observes that these *assimilationist* policies in the USA are promoting a hegemonic and demagogic image of European supremacy based historically in Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism is described as imported from Europe by the first settlers. Jackson explains Social Darwinism as an ideology that 'presumed essential biological and mental differences between ethnic and/or racial groups and saw them as running on parallel tracks on the same field toward development, civilization, and political leadership and domination' (p. 15). This philosophical foundation that Jackson presents here, as the main-stream root in US education, is also, according to Jackson, the base for the multicultural policies that creates disharmonies in the country.

First, I will reflect on Jackson's argument from my sociocultural position. I am a Berber, Indigenous North African descendant, who grew up in France, lives in Canada, and an academic in the field of education, trained at the University of Alberta, McGill University in Canada, and Victoria University in New Zealand. In my academic work, I promote cultural awareness to establish peace and harmony. I reflect on education and I develop pedagogies and curriculums that serve that humanistic purpose. I do not wish to enter the debate on US politics. The polarization of the world proposed by American right-wing radicals and imposed with American foreign politics is not my burden to carry. I base myself in the traditional knowledge of Berber and Indigenous people that I introduce in academia using the different channels that the hermetical institution allows me to use. Thus, Jackson's thoughts on *assimilation versus interculturalism* resonate with my experience of doing cultural research in education. I think that reading Jackson's book dealing with Islam in education is interesting on different levels. It first explains how education is a political mine field; it brings a reflection on the different philosophies that are used to manage diversity in the world; it also shows how economy can be a factor of assimilation; and it proposes solutions to the healing of the American education system.

I understand the critical importance of having a democratic education. However, democracy seems to be a concept that is used and abused today in the USA. As Jackson shows, democracy needs critical thinking in order to survive political demagoguery. Looking at the many places where education happens, in schools or in the media, Jackson has shown that American opinion and literacy might have been taken hostage by a government and/or diverse companies with reductive political outcomes. This hostage situation deprives at the same time the population of real means of information, creating political lobbies empowered by economic means, and nourishing personal agendas. The US education system seems to be suffering from deep structural limits and corruption that not only alienates a part of the population, but also silences voices before they are born, destroys free thinking and as a consequence, freedom of speech and belief.

The concentration of power in the hands of little numbers of entrepreneurs in the field of academic publishing, as Jackson shows, seems to be limiting what the student can learn. It also aims to create a reductive dominant sense of self and identity in America. Following Jackson's thoughts, I understand that the situation seems to have been designed purposefully in order to maintain power in the hands of white main-stream European descendants.

With my second comment, I wish to share what I would consider a limit in Jackson's work. If I read the book as friendly to Islam and Muslims, I consider it more a mainstream American book that contributes in giving a vision of America as a white Christian European country. The critique the author is giving about the American system is definitely interesting, but I find that it specifically doesn't aim at re-establishing balance, but in reality it continues to describe Islam as foreign to the country. The author does not really engage in the topic of Islamophobia, but focuses on the limits of the American system. If American Muslims are present in the book, they appear as tokens for arguments for the promotion of critical thinking and interculturalism in America. I would like to see the author pushing further her intervention in instating Islam as a part of America today: not only enumerating a list of places where Muslims are working and paying taxes, but also showing how Islam is contributing and can contribute further in the development of the US nation. In bringing about consciousness regarding the issues that American education is facing is the aim, in this specific case, I think that the author has only provided us with an ethnocentric and Eurocentric analyses of these issues.

Self-reflexivity surely reinforces the person who reflects. I definitely advocate for American people to come out of the obscurantism in which they are being plunged, and Jackson gives a great contribution for the emancipation of US minds. However, for Muslim people, who know by experience and see demagoguery and manipulation of public opinion, because they know Islam differently than how it is presented in US textbooks, this book is limited in what it can give to Muslims as US citizens. I believe that the book will gain even more strength if it was empowering Muslim people within America and/or giving space for Muslim people to actually participate and contribute clearly to the dialog that concerns them directly. It would even help in reforming the American country as the example of democracy it wishes to be and could actually be.

I would like to conclude with an argument related to culture as seen from an indigenous perspective. I want to appreciate cultures as cultures and not as policies. We understand here that culture transcends political boundaries and challenges the ways people see themselves and the geopolitical location in which they claim to be a part (countries or nations). Culture is the expression of the self from a heritage that survived history, passed on, and actualized in the locations where it is expressed. Culture and religion are two different things. Islam does not have one expression, but a diversity of voices. Talking about 'Islam' as one monolithic cultural block does not make sense. Islam is a religion, not a culture. I take the example of Berber people in Algeria, who are not Arabs and who practice Islam in different ways than Arabs within North African countries, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, etc. Islam in North Africa developed in harmony with the living Berber culture. It is recently that the postcolonial reorganization of the country has generated a growing unbalance in the

sociocultural and religious landscape. I believe that American Islam has its own culture and should be seen and described as such by the author.

I would like to finish this review by sharing about a tradition I witnessed in New Zealand, Aotearoa. My argument is to say that culture, the same way as religion, is being politicized but it is not meant to be political. As such, I believe that talking about a religion or a culture should be done in the proper settings using the proper cultural tools. The Maori *Korero* is a form of debate that allows people to reflect on questions affecting Maori culture and life style. *Korero* is a cultural conversation where personal interest is supposed to be put aside for the benefit of the group. I witnessed *Korero* competitions in Te Urewera, a territory belonging to Tuhoe Iwi (tribe) in Aotearoa. It was during a cultural festival called Ahurei. Ahurei is a competition that takes place across a couple of days. A member of the jury explained to me that the winner of a *Korero* competition should always be the culture. Two groups or candidates compete on a contemporary question. Religion could be one of them.

Maori have different religions, but they still call themselves Maori because they share a culture and a historical heritage that connects them to the land they live on. In USA, the medicine wheel, the symbol of Native American spiritual vision of brotherhood within the creation, could provide us with a great philosophical location for an ecological and ethical grounding of American cultural policy.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2016.1175842>

#### **ARTICLE HISTORY**

First published in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2016, Vol. 48, No. 7, 740–743