
J. Michael Tilley  
*University of Kentucky*  
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.14.18
J. Michael Tilley

Book Review

Susan Buck-Morss, Thinking Past Terrorism: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left
New York: Verso, 2003

Thinking Past Terror arises out of the post-9/11 literature which analyzes the relationship between Islam and the West. Buck-Morss attempts to critically engage Islamism as a political discourse by examining the common themes and critiques of Western culture found within both critical theory (see Horkheimer, Adorno, and Benjamin) and Islamism. She does this for two stated reasons: first, by developing a common ground of critique between more traditional critical theorists and Islamism, Buck-Morss hopes to lay the groundwork for developing a 'global left' by opening up a global public discourse about economic equality and social justice. Only through this type of interaction is it possible to build the solidarity necessary to confront the lack of economic and social justice on an international level. The second reason for her critical approach toward Islamism is to promote an internal critical attitude within Islamism itself, which promotes the reflexivity needed in order for Islamists to critically examine their own tradition for social and political inadequacies. This cannot be done by imposing Western standards of rationality and democracy. Rather, it is only by taking the position of your interlocutor and developing resources for political engagement out of the other's traditions and belief structure that it is possible to adequately address Islamism. This task is extremely important in our current political environment, and much more needs to be done to facilitate this type of interaction.

Unfortunately, only three of the five chapters directly relate to the purpose of the book. Despite Buck-Morss's call for developing a unifying narrative for critical theory and Islamism, she does very little in the way of actually accomplishing this task. She focuses much more on developing the concepts and approaches of the critical theorists rather than actually interacting with Islamism. When an Islamist's theories are discussed, it is often not in their own terms but in how these theories relate to critical theory. For example, in her discussion of Sayyid Qutb, one of the most influential proponents of Islamism, she briefly mentions some aspects of his critique of Western culture insofar as it was similar to Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment (1976), but primarily focuses on more biographical details. This is unfortunate since a careful elucidation of his relatively early work, Social Justice in Islam (2000), or even his later, more radical work, Milestones (1980), reveals a deep commitment to social justice and to principles of popular sovereignty. Both of these commitments are essential if one is to promote internal critique and democratic polity in an Islamic context. This material, however, is left largely untapped.

The interview with the author, which is the final chapter of the book, also fails to address the central issue of the relationship between Islamism and the West, though it does give a good orientation to Buck-Morss's methodology by making it clear that she is primarily interested in constructing a historical narrative capable of fostering a global leftist movement. Constructing this historical narrative involves what critical theorists call "immanent critique" and what Arab theorists call "double critique"—that is to say, it involves elucidating and evaluating the gap between one's political ideals and concrete political practices. For the Arab theorists, this means criticizing not only Western concepts and approaches, but also critiquing one's own society and tradition.

Buck-Morss's failure to systematically engage Islamism and her repetition of old clichés about the relationship between imperialism (both military and economic) and terrorism reveals a predisposition on her part to interpret Islamism within her current political ideology. This is problematic given the way in which Islamists are critical of even some of the more 'Islamic' states, and it fails to recognize the importance of engaging Islamists on their own terms rather than imposing a foreign rubric on their political actions.

Still, this book does provide a good orientation if one were to actually interact with Islamism. It is a good introduction to the issues and problems confronting any attempt to deal with Islamism and it is to be recommended for that reason, but much more is required if genuine dialogue is to actually take place. We must move beyond comparisons and analogies with Western correlates and actually take the perspective of the other. This is essential if real progress is to be
made in not only understanding the allure and promise of Islamism, but also in linking Islamist discourse about economic and social justice with the broader social and political movements in the West.

Works Cited

Sarah E. Tackett
Book Review
Dorthee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*  
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001

Dorthee Soelle begins her interrogation of modern culture with the following question from the poet/mystic Rumi, “Why, when God’s world is so big, did you fall asleep in a prison of all places?” (p.1). Not only are we confined, we are asleep, and Soelle is attempting to stir us to consciousness, to draw our attention to the ‘light’ found within mysticism.

Questioning the blind rush of capitalism, she identifies the constraints of our prison as endless consumerism and the commodification of identity. We are what we buy and success is only measured by the objects we possess. Soelle criticizes the vacant apathy caused by such externalization and advocates a turn inward in response to the crisis of spiritual deprivation, ‘the silent cry.’

Soelle offers a number of narratives from childhood amazement to moments of connection with the natural world, arguing that mystical experience is not limited to the guru perched on top of the mountain, rather it is inherent to us all. Reminding us that “we are all mystics,” she retrieves mysticism from the nebula of the supernatural and defines it within the tangible world of experience (p.9).

The book itself takes the form of a journey, moving from the personal recognition of mysticism to the outward praxis of mysticism as resistance. In Part I, Soelle democratizes mysticism, acknowledging it as an experience that we all share. This section concerns ecstasy, methodology, articulation and the road to achieving such individual union with God. Part II defines the “places of mystical experience.” Soelle explains certain conditions that appeal to mystical experience, such as immersion in the natural world, eroticism, the emotional states of intense joy or suffering, and the connection of community. Finally, Part III opens the discussion outward, debating the practice of mysticism as social resistance. She compares globalization with individualization, ego with ego-lessness, possession with possession-