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CLAIMING BELONGING: MUSLIM AMERICAN ADVOCACY IN AN ERA OF ISLAMOPHOBIA, BY EMILY CURY

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Who speaks for Muslims in the United States? And who advocates for their interests at home and abroad? These are the question political scientist Emily Cury addresses in her book, *Claiming Belonging, Muslim American Advocacy in an Era of Islamophobia*. The book offers an engaging overview of the advocacy and lobbying strategies of some of the major Muslim American organizations such as the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC). It “looks at how Muslim American organizations engage in framing and articulating a Muslim American collective identity through their policy and claims-making strategies” (p. 11).

Cury starts with a paradox: a context marked by enduring Islamophobia since 2001 has offered an unexpected structural political opportunity for Muslims to become more visible and more assertive. Her book demonstrates how, despite the context of persistent anti-Muslim bias that has informed U.S. politics since the early 2000s, Muslim organizations have productively used traditional interest groups tactics to give shape to a “distinctly liberal, inclusive, and civically engaged Muslim American political identity” (p. 150). While the book offers a compelling description and argumentation in support of that claim, the question of the type of religio-political interventions that are excluded by the focus on building an acceptable brand of liberal American Islam compatible with the American myth of civil religion remains open.

The author eloquently captures how Islamophobic policy and legislation has impacted Muslims' daily lives from 9/11 to the "Muslim Ban" in the re-telling of the tragedy that affected the Swiley family in December 2018 at the beginning of chapter 5, "Domestic Advocacy." Because of Trump's travel ban, Shaima Swiley was prevented to enter the United States to join her dying two-year-old son, Abdullah, who suffered from a degenerative brain condition. Emily Cury situates her investigation in her own trajectory as "an immigrant woman with roots in the Middle East, who is often assumed to be Muslim, and asked to explain a plethora of things associated with Muslims and Islam" (p. 8).

Cury's inquiry into how Muslim American organizations have succeeded in using law and the existing tradition of civil rights activism used by other minorities to assert themselves and give shape to a collective identity represents an essential contribution of this book. It speaks to the originality of the situation of American Muslims and of the U.S. political context, especially when compared with the collective trajectories of Muslims in Europe. Social scientific studies of Islam in Western Europe converge to show how the combined factors of the rise of the far right, and the affirmation of a French style strong secularist discourse in the public sphere significantly inhibit the emergence of civically and politically engaged Muslim communities. Most recently, sociologist Farida Belkacem has shown how the French public space leaves little to no space to the emergence of what she calls "vocal Muslims" (Belkacem 2022). Cury's book's account of the strategy of Muslim American organizations also speaks to existing scholarship on American Islam's relationship to law, notably the foundational work of Denise Spellberg, Spencer Dew's study of the Aliites's ambivalent relationship to U.S. law, Sahar Aziz's investigation into how legislation around radicalization racializes Muslims, and my own inquiry into legal controversies around Sharia and foreign law (Aziz 2021; Dew 2019; Marzouki 2017; Spellberg 2014). Given the rich resonances of Cury's book with existing scholarship on European and American Islam, a more developed engagement with that trend of scholarship may have rendered the book's contribution even stronger.

Another major contribution of Cury's book is that it analyzes the multiple forms of tension that characterize Muslim American advocacy. A key site of tension is that

between the logic of membership and the logic of influence. Muslim organizations, Cury argues, are torn between their need to respond to their constituents' preferences and their desire to become a part of the policy establishment. The tension between maximalism and absorption, scholars have argued, conditions the strategy of most social movements and political organizations (Edelman 2013; Gamson 1990). Yet Cury's book convincingly shows how the post 9/11 context has made this dilemma particularly acute for Muslim American organizations. The book also analyzes a series of other paradoxes and tensions. It shows how Muslim American organizations engage in advocacy around foreign policy to normalize their role as policy insiders, and yet their very participation in foreign policy debates ends up fueling the perceptions of American Muslims as outsiders. Important divisions about strategy and preferences may also tear apart prominent Muslim scholars and activists. Cury documents the polemic that divided them in 2013 when "the Jerusalem-based Shalom Hartman Institute launched the Muslim Leadership Initiative (MLI), inviting "Muslims in North America" to better understand Israel and Judaism (p. 143).

Cury's book is focused on demonstrating that the trajectory of Muslim minorities in the United States follows the same "integration" path as that of other minorities before them, such as Irish, Catholics, Jews, and refrains from interrogating the blind spots of this integrationist narrative. Cury mentions in the introduction how some Muslim voices, notably from the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative, criticize the process of whitewashing that the effort to belong in the policy establishment induces for major Muslim organizations. "Why aren't we working with more Black, Latinx, or Native organizations?," asks Namira Islam, a lawyer and co-founder of the Collaborative (p. 9). However, the rest of the book does not elaborate on how Muslim organizations' effort to integrate in the narrative of civil religion and U.S. multiculturalism actually excludes other modalities of public participations by making them invisible or illegitimate. That being said, Cury's book is an essential contribution to the field of American Islam, and allows for a better understanding of the complex strategy and dilemmas of Muslim American advocacy in the face of enduring Islamophobia.

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