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How War Makes (and Unmakes) the Democratic State: Reading *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* In A Populism Age

Aziz Z. Huq*

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Abstract

War makes the state, and war makes the state democratic—or so the conventional wisdom holds. But the wars of the twenty-first century will have a distinct complexion from wars of the century just passed. As war and democracy alike change, their relationship alters. This book chapter examines that relationship through the lens of two recent novels by Mohsin Hamid, The Reluctant Fundamentalist *and* Exit West*. The protagonists of these novels stand in some fashion for the two main vectors by which war is perceived to, and indeed does, work a change to the democratic state—the terrorist and the migrant. The chapter explores how the role these figures play in the modern democratic imaginary, and how Hamid's novels subvert and challenge that role.*

Introduction

War makes the state, and war makes the state democratic. Or at least it did once, at fitful starts, with caveats and limitations, intermittently across the twentieth century. As a consequence, the democratic state entering the third Christian millennium was quite dissimilar to the one that entered the twentieth century. Similarly, the wars of the twenty-first century will have a distinct, different character from wars of the century just passed. As war and democracy alike moult and acquire new plumage, the relationship between war and the democratic state quivers with uncertainty. It is a nexus not yet coagulated in the public imaginary.

That the democratic state is dissimilar from its 1900 ancestor should not surprise. In the United States of 1900, a civil war had abolished one set of de jure racial barriers to citizenship, although a de facto social system had sprung up to partially take their place. In Britain, the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884 had expanded the franchise and mitigated the distorting tug of rotten and pocket boroughs. Across Europe, serf emancipations in Russia and the Habsburg Empire had created vast new classes of "full citizens," with (notionally) "equal rights," albeit not necessarily political ones.[1] But by the end of the twentieth century, no democracy remained "constitutionally segmented" in formal. legal terms.[2] Neither the European nor the American franchise was limited to white males. The illegitimacy of female disenfranchisement, to say nothing of serfdom or race-based slavery, seemed plain to most. Democracy, for centuries a local curiosity of interest to scholars of ancient Athens, had been carried in a series of "waves" to the

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earth's far corners.[3] An obscure State Department official would rise to international principle by casting the coming millennium as an "end of history," an institutional and ideological terminus of democratic hegemony very different from Lenin's Finland Station.[4] A century that began with an emancipatory chit only partially stamped ended with democracy cresting at "a historical high water mark" around the globe.[5]

The stakes of war for democracy, in short, have changed. Where once there was something to be gained, now there is much to be lost. The manner in which that loss occurs is also changing. European and North American democracies are exposed to war has moved as the technological, geopolitical, and ideological terrain has moved.[6] This essay takes aim at the intersection of these historical arcs of democracy and war. How, I want to ask, does the shifting exposure of North American and European democracies to new species of warfare influence the ways in which democracy is embedded, or disinterred—and if so by what means?

The vehicle for this inquiry is a pair of novels by the novelist Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* ("RF") and *Exit West* ("EW").[7] The first book is a picaresque told as a dramatic monologue. It depicts a young Pakistani professional's arc from Lahore to Princeton and New York and back again. His story pivots around the September 11 attacks. These prove an epiphany for Changez, the eponymous narrator, whose first reaction "despicable as it may sound ... was to be remarkably pleased." (RF 72). In their wake, Changez abandons a career in finance to return to Lahore. There, the book finds him in a tea house, unspooling his life history to a chance American acquaintance. The book's central conceit is that Changez, rather playfully, teases the possibility that he is a terrorist of the ordinary sort, even as hints accumulate that his interlocutor is an American agent tasked with dealing with Changez. *Exit West*, the second book tells the story of Nadia and Saeed. Their love first blossoms in an unnamed city first teetering on civil war, a city that becomes by inches a lattice of "fraying seams" and "deadly patches," where every window is a "border was possibly most likely to come. (EW 69-71). Nadia and Saeed flee through a "magic door." First, they seek refuge on the Greek island of Mykonos, then in London, and finally in Marin County. There, the "spoilage" of their relationship happens. They fall out. Nadia falls in love with a woman who is an "expert in food," and who has—in one of novel's many wonderful lines—had "a steady hand and a sure eye and a mouth that did little but did it so very well." (EW 219).

I focus on these novels not because of their quality—although *East West* is very fine and very moving—but because their protagonists stand *in some fashion* for the two vectors by which war is perceived to, and indeed does, work a change to the democratic state. These are the terrorist and the migrant. While the terrorist is a newly central (if not new) *form* of weaponizing human capital for war, the migrant is the negative spillover—literally—from what many Americans and Europeans would like to think of as other people's war. In their different ways, both project the brute fact of war from distal arenas into proximate boulevards, promenades, and street corners. Both are localizing agents of far conflicts that would otherwise be submerged under the anesthesia of remoteness. Both are what critic Adam Kirsch calls "global novels": narratives that see "humanity on the level of the species," such that "problems and prospects can only be dealt with on the

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scale of the whole planet, and such that "even the most constrained of lives are affected by worldwide movements."[8]

Let me be clear up front: Despite the fulminations of President Trump, the terrorist and the migrant are not logically identical, or even substantially overlapping, categories. There is much to said about the culpably inaccurate, malignant, and self-serving rhetoric that flattens those two categories into one, but I won't address it here. Rather, I am more interested here in the how these categories—and their elision—work subtle harms to democracy's domain. For while war once elbowed open democracy's doors, now it bids fair to unravel its dispositional and institutional premises. How and why, is a matter that the novelist, rather than the political scientist, turns out to be rather well placed to explain.

I. War Makes the State

From the late seventeenth century onward, the tempo of European state-building—their budgets, their debts, and their bureaucratic capacity—rose and fell to a "rhythm of war." War, in Charles Tilly's words, "wove the European network of national states, and preparations for war created the internal structures of the states within it."[9] The wars of this period required gold and blood. The state extended tendrils to extract the first, fashioned censuses to map the second. It built bureaucracies to manage them both. In the United States, the same rhythm played, although it was not until the first half of the twentieth century that federal budgets and bureaucratic capacities really swelled, propelled by the Second World War, when "warfare replaced welfare as the central purpose of the national state."[10]

In the twentieth century, moreover, the demands of mass mobilization made the state not only large but also increasingly open and participatory. The world wars each inflicted a sharp shock to existing wealth, destroying property literally through violence and death and indirectly through inflation, expropriation, and the contraction in global trade. Wealth gaps shrank as the wealthier elderly slice of the population saw their prospective behests dissolve, while poorer, younger portions of the population suffered less and had more time to catch up.[11] War, in this fashion, proved a "great leveller"[12] that cleansed the social field of calcified hierarchies. It left open a space for the freer play of democratic politics.

In the era of standing armies, war prodded states toward an ever-widening gyre of suffrage. During war, suffrage expanded in Denmark (1849), Germany (1871), Norway (1898), Finland (1906), Austria (1907), and in the context of the First World War, in Italy, Canada, Belgium, and Britain.[13] Conscription and franchise expansion more generally go hand-in-hand, albeit only in times of outright conflict.[14] In the United States, world wars elicited the first national draft, mass income taxation, and structural deficits. And in late 1944, as American troops withered under German artillery and frostbite in the wintry fields and copses of the Ardennes, war elicited racial integration. There, General Dwight Eisenhower ordered 4,500 African-American troops into front-line roles alongside white soldiers.[15] It was a thing done for the first time that cannot be undone.

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First turning the tide against the Wehrmacht, those black servicemen would return to take prominent roles in the Civil Rights Movement at a moment in which, fortuitously, Cold War imperatives were rendering Jim Crow's exclusion an international liability.[16]

War's inflationary effect on democracy, that is, was not a mechanistic one. As a general matter, war influenced democracy because of the pressures it imposed on the state. But war also fashioned new democratic subjects, unwilling to accept a subordinate rank and capable to exploiting strategic fractures in exclusionary political coalitions. Sever the link between the democratic public and war, moreover, and these dynamics wane—as Richard Nixon demonstrated when he ended the draft in 1970, and thereby defused the lion's share of resistance to the Vietnam War.[17]

A caution is warranted here: Wars can also induce policies that narrow democratic choice by quarantining ethnic or politic minorities, or alternatively by facilitating the marginalization certain political factions. Although such policies often have considerable, even majority public support—recall, for example, that then-California Governor Earl Warren was a vocal public supporter of the Japanese internment—they materially damage the ongoing operation of democratic institutions. A polity that carves off minorities, or that treats well-reasoned policy positions as sedition, in war time can remain democratic, but has of necessity experienced a deterioration in its quality. Such contractive dynamics, however, are perfectly compatible with the longer-term expansions of democratic horizons described above.

II. The Opening Divide Between War and Democracy

It would be too glib to say that the nature of war changed wholly in twenty-first century. For one thing, the frequency of great power conflict varied sharply from the first to the second half of the twentieth century.[18] It is too early to say whether the twenty first century will be more like the first or the second half of its predecessor. This is especially so at a moment when their remains a substantial chance that the United States and China could come into conflict.[19] The future, like the past, is another country—but that doesn't mean they do things differently there.

Nevertheless, there is some reason to think that the causal pathways between war and democratic expansion observed up to the end of the second millennium will not operate to the same effect, or to the same extent, in this new era. As a result of this withering of war's traditional causal effects on the democratic state, new and different paths may emerge. These paths, however, are less direct than the ones I have already flagged. They need more imagination to chart, as Hamid's work shows.

Three facts about the interaction of war with the democratic polities of North America and Europe merit our attention. The first is a contingent one: For these polities, the twenty-first century has not been characterized by extensive, open conflict of the kind that afflicted the United States during the Civil War, and that scarified Europe during the Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic conflicts, and the two World Wars. Not so elsewhere. There is a piercing moment in *Exit West* in which Saeed's father thinks he sees young

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boys playing soccer, but on looking closer realizes they are teenagers, and "they were not playing with a ball but with the severed head of a goat, and he thought, barbarians, but then it dawned on him that this was the head not of a goat but of a human being, with hair and a beard." (EW 87). In Raqaa, in Kabul, or in Mosul, so it goes—and if it didn't, this moment would lack the bleary charge of horror it holds—but not in Rotterdam, Cleveland, or Marseilles.

It is telling that the closest in physical terms most Europeans or Americans come to this stripping away of 'civilized' trappings are the refugee camps of the Greek coast (depicted later in *Exit West*), the "jungle" at Calais, or even the slave auctions of Tripoli.[20] The first two are facilities created in direct response to the flow of migrants stimulated by civil wars across the Levant that are in good measure proxy fights between the super powers[21] (as well as climate change and misgovernment). The third is an indirect consequence of those policies; it is also a result of payments to Libyan militias by the Italian government for sequestering Sub-Saharan migrants south of the Mediterranean, notionally out of sight and out of the legal jurisdiction of any European democracy.[22] It is not that the violence of war has been eliminated. It is rather that the violence has been spatially contained (at times through violence that is not all that different from the violence of civil wars from which some migrants have fled[23]). The purpose of migrant regulation, that is, is to canton the world into zones of violence (whether caused by civil war, endemic corruption, or environmental collapse) and oases where those phenomena are kept from view. If it appears within the social imaginary today, war is as often as not packaged as an adolescent fantasy of post-apocalyptic violence—not something that other people must and do endure.

The second factor disrupting the relationship between war and democracy is the growing substitution of personnel by robots and automated weapons system. Just as in the workplace, human labor is increasingly displaced by some combinations of robotic hardware and artificial intelligence software, so too on the battlefield. This has two effects. On the one hand, conscription is no longer a predicate to effective military strength. Hence, Chinese premier Xi Jinping slashed in 2017 the number of active armed personnel from just more than four million to a shade above two million, even as he has aggressively invested in military hardware.[24] Similarly, since ending the draft in 1970, the United States has invested a growing share of military expenditures in technology relative to personnel.[25] States no longer have any incentive to make representative concessions to their people because of their need for manpower under arms.

The shift from human to technological capital reinforces the distal character of war. As militaries decrease their reliance on raw human capital, they investments in an increasing array of technologies that deliver violence remotely. This possibility is exemplified by the mobile, human guided, but unmanned aerial vessel, or drone. The latter, as is well known, has been aggressively deployed in Changez's Pakistan, as well as Somalia and Yemen, with a considerable human toll.[26] If the ensuing separation between the aggressor nation and the battlefield obviates anxieties in the former, its consequences in the distant theaters of conflicts are rather different. When Changez explains to his American interlocutor his alarm that "the lives of us who lived in lands in which such

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killers [i.e., al Qaeda] also lived has no meaning except collateral damage," (RF 178), he could be describing the strong moral objections many feel to such tools of war. He is also expressing a discomfort at the notion of a war fought remotely, in which one side exposes none of its own people to risk while relying on technology that kills significant numbers of civilians.

The third factor disrupting the relationship between war and democracy is the increasing ease with which military scale violence can be privatized, transported across the traditional boundaries between battlefields and non-conflict zones, and exploited to create a public impression of pervasive insecurity and violence. The key change here, in my view, is again technological. Terrorism—the private use of violence against civilian targets as a means of achieving a political end—is nothing new, with examples from ancient Judea and Tsarist Russia providing the standard historical example. But with a handful of exceptions, the terrorist was as much a threat to himself or herself as they were a threat to mothers. The most acute literary portrayals of terrorism at the turn of the twentieth century, Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* and Dostoyevsky's *Demons*, are not focused on the civilian toll of terrorism. Rather, Conrad and Dostoyevsky were focused on the moral and psychological consequences of terrorism for those who turn to violence. In contrast, Hamid's novels are concerned with the effect of violence to the spectator—how the spectacle of 9/11 influences Changez, or how the Saeed responds when "a stray heavy-caliber round passing through the windshield of [his mother's] car and taking with it a quarter of Saeed's mother's head" while she searches for a misplaced earring (EW 74-75).

Bullets, though, are not the most important vector of death today. Contemporary technology has lowered the cost of killing civilians outside a war zone, and will continue to do so as long as new military and civilian technologies are being innovated.[27] This is not only, or even primarily, a function of military technologies. Conrad's Professor had painstakingly built in *The Secret Agent* an elaborate apparatus to carry under his overcoat that would enable him to kill those standing directly by him. Today, as much damage can be wrought through a pressure cooker filled with bolts, a mixture of readily available chemicals, or a strategically placed piece of malware. Elaborate McGuffins, like the Professor's, are redundant.

Even within living memory, a shift from technological to human capital has taken place as terrorists have innovated with extant technologies. At one point, the terrorist weapon of choice was the car bomb loaded with explosives and rigged to inflict dozens of casualties.[28] In February 2017, a lone terrorist drove a truck two miles down the Nice Promenade and en route killed 84 people.[29] As the ease of obtaining access to such vehicles has increased, the cost of planning and executing mass casualty attacks has collapsed. It is not too much to say that every household contains hecatombs waiting to happen. Once more, the demonstration effect of something done for the first time cannot be unwound. Once an innovation has been weaponized, it cannot be wholly domesticated once more.[30] Just as there is no chance that U Haul will be proscribed simply to prevent attacks like the one in Nice, so there is no chance that commercial air travel will come to

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an end merely because terrorist have realized the potential to use jet planes to create the kind of spectacular destruction best exemplified by September 11.

It is not too late for great powers conflict to return and dominate the twenty first century, and perhaps lead to a switch in the quality of armed conflict observed. But until then, the experience of war for European and American democracies will be quite different from their experience a century ago. Fewer sons and daughters will be asked to travel to distant lands, to die in distant lands. If they are to 'fight' in those lands, it will increasingly be remotely, through machine eyes and by flexing laser-guided force from afar. The civil wars whereby the great powers of today flex their muscles will be the most significant theaters of conflict—if they do influence democracy—will do so in new ways. And there is no guarantee that the resulting interactions will leave democratic cultures robust or unscathed.

III. New Vectors from War to Democracy

The Reluctant Fundamentalist and *Exit West* form a diptych in which the figures of the terrorist and the migrant—two new vectors of war's influence on the democratic state—are rendered in vivid detail. On one reading, the books illustrate ways in which contemporary war is thought to shape democratic practice. At the same time, both books offer critiques of the "social imaginaries" in which the terrorist and migrant are thought to play overbearing roles. Read carefully, they also offer a critique and a way in which the gaps and contradictions in that social imaginary can be grasped.

As Charles Taylor employs the term, a "social imaginary" comprises "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and imagines that underlie these expectations."[31] Taylor's concept usefully highlights the normatively freighted expectations of reciprocity, status, or belongings that color a person's interactions with others. For my purposes, it is especially useful that a person's social imaginary can extend "internationally and in history."[32] In keeping its "global" complexion, Hamid's work illuminates this. It also provides an ironic ground from which criticism and reconstruction can begin.[33] I begin in this section, by treating the two novels as illustrations of the modern social imaginary of war, a social imaginary that raises questions for democratic practice.

Both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* seem at first blush to illustrate the what some, especially on the populist right, describe as an existential threat to "Western" democracy.[34] On this account, European and American democracies are in peril of being displaced by an alien and hostile culture, one most often identified as Islam, but which takes Islam not just as a religion but also as a racialized marker of unbridgeable cultural distinctiveness. The threat of Islam is bound up in two figures. The first is the terrorist, who presents a vivid demonstration of Islam's irremediable hostility to decent, civilized living and a shortcut explanation of why coexistence, that limp liberal catch-phrase is impossible. The second is the migrant, who is a viral agent of an emaciating pathology that will eat away an extant national culture and identity in

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increments. As in Michel Houllebecq's lurid novel *Submission*,[35] one wakes one day and finds that the Muslims, having bred like flies, have taken over the country. Although I have set forth them in an especially strong form for expositional purposes, it is important to recognize that variations on these ideas are widespread. A 2008 cross-European survey, for example, found that between one- and two-thirds of respondents in seven of eight nations perceived "too many Muslims" in their country and more than half characterized Muslims to be "too demanding."[36] The electoral victories of populist candidates in Hungary, Poland, Austria, and the United States have all been partially based on their invocation of a Muslim threat, and a concomitant promise to take all necessary action to nullify it.[37]

War in the traditional sense is not foregrounded in the populist social imaginary. Nevertheless, its account of social relations frames Western democracies as imperiled by war in several ways. To begin with, terrorism is commonly understood as a new form of asymmetrical warfare distinctively associated with foreign actors. In the United States, this generates disparate responses to substantively similar acts of mass violence depending on whether their perpetrators are deemed foreign, or in some sense one of 'us.' Further, while populist arguments from demography predated the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015, such concerns seem to have intensified and played larger roles in election campaigns in France, Germany and the United States since then.[38] The terrorist and the migrant, the key figures in this social imaginary, are best understood as consequences of different wars. Both are then conscripted into a larger, paranoid eschatology of civilization conflict. War, in short, is cast as the ultimate source of threat to civilizational order, and then as the necessary response to that threat.

At first blush, Hamid's books seem to capture key elements of this narrative. Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, well, might be a fundamentalist. He laughs upon hearing of the 9/11 attacks. He cultivates a beard as "a form of protest, a symbol of my identity," despite the discomfort it elicits among his coworkers, and he is "for multiple reasons ... deeply angry." (RF 130). The invasion of Afghanistan "caused [him] to tremble with fury." (RF 100). He sees "[a]ffronts ... everywhere," and declares that "American had to be stopped in the interest not only of the rest of the humanity, but also in your own." (RF 167-168). When he returns to Pakistan to take up teaching in a Lahore university, he is "filled with rage" when one of his students is arrested and disappeared, accused of a plot to murder an American aid worker (RF 182). When he cautions at the end of his narrative that "you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists," many readers will take the caveat at less than face value (RF 183). Indeed, I suspect that this is how some readers understood Hamid's book: As an effort to set forth in chillingly plausible detail a process that national security experts label "radicalization."[39]

Exit West fits uneasily into the populist right imaginary, since Saeed and Nadia are ultimately both sympathetic portraits of migrants. Nevertheless, consider the central conceit of "doors that could take you anywhere, often to places far away." (EW 72). At first, this might seem a notion best relegated to the garbage dump of magical realism. But Hamid linguistically entangles the idea of the door with the more familiar technology of

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the mobile phone, which "sniffed out, as if by magic, a world that was all around," and that could take one "to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be" (EW 39). The idea of a magic door is also not is so far from our own daily experience of technology that not so long ago would have been indistinguishable from magic.[1] This (non)-metaphor of a magic door captures a central fear in the populist right mythology: the fear of an uncontrollable tide of migrants, driven by war (among other things), which will in the end swamp their civilization. Indeed, the book plays out the next logical step in that populist narrative: When the pair land in London after leaving Mykonos, they land in a city becoming a war zone. There is a "tightening cordon" around the city, "great holding camps" and a zone of "soldiers and armoured vehicles, and above ... drones and helicopters" (EW 137). This is the unraveling of democracy fearfully thought to accompany migration, especially migration of the unwashed Muslim poor.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist and *Exit West* in this fashion provide snapshots of a particular social imaginary on the populist right wherein the twin figures of the terrorist and the migrant pose distinctive threats to European and American democracy—although for reasons I will explore in a moment, this is a dramatically incomplete reading of the books. In this fashion, they describe a new, increasingly prevalent understanding of the relationship between war and democracy.

IV. Threats to Democracy, Real and Imagined: Rereading *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *East West* in a Populist Age

The populist right's account of demographic and security threat is a myth. Claims that Muslims might become a majority in any European nation, or might have the political strength to impose religious law, are fantastical.[40] Neither migrants nor Muslims—two overlapping but not identical categories—have either the demographic heft or the desire to seize political power. To the contrary, Muslims in Europe (but increasingly in the United States) are objects of labor market and official discrimination that limits social mobility and increases stratification. As Andreas Wimmer and Thomas Soehl have demonstrated, resistance to acculturation among European migrants is a consequence of—not a cause of—these impediments to education and employment.[41] Indeed, non-practicing Muslims in Europe and the United States tend to be more tolerant than conationals or Muslims in Muslim-majority countries.[42] If tolerant, democratic political cultures have a future, there is every reason to expect that those most demonized by the populist right will be a vanguard in its cause.

That does not mean, however, that the perseverance of democratic norms can be taken for granted. As I have argued at length in other work,[43] neither terrorism nor distant civil war poses a direct threat to democratic practice. Rather, it is a social imaginary in which twinned cultural and security threats—the shadow of the migrant and the

[1] In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez has an interview with a financial analysis firm in which he is asked to value an imagined teleportation device. (RF 12). Again, Hamid is poking at the ways in which technology frays the boundary of the real and the imagined.

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terrorist—animate the electoral rise of anti-system, populist parties to political power. By conjuring an eschatological present and promising a redeeming relapse to an imagined, purer past, the populist secures political power. She then entrenches herself by eliminating institutional and interbranch checks, centralizing authority, and capturing or poisoning the media environment. The net result is what Tom Ginsburg and I call democratic erosion: Not an end to elections, or any other formal trapping of a democracy, but rather a shallow facsimile of democracy without its competitive, divisive substance. That is, it is not *war* per se that threatens democracy, as distinct from the social imaginary of the terrorist and the migrant that motivates the most important shadow on democracy's future.[44]

Against that threat, I think it is possible to read *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West* as acts of resistance and ironic subversion. Superficially decanting the perfervid fantasies of the populist right, both books instead complicate and contradict them. Hamid finds commonality where others see difference; he locates ambiguity and pluralism where others see a fixed and determinate culture. At the same time, I think it is possible to lean on the books' ideas to yield new and awkward questions not only for the populist imaginary, but for a previously ascendant liberal, democratic imaginary. Hamid, that is, should be read not just as a critic of the populist right but also as a self-critical contributor to the project of liberal democracy.

Consider once more the so-called fundamentalist Changez. The views that Changez expresses U.S. foreign policy would not be out of place in the *Guardian* or even the *New York Times*. When it comes to the foreign aid worker assassinated in Pakistan, Changez expresses only sorrow for the death of an "angel of compassion" (RF 181). His narrative is barren of genuflections to God or religious figures of speech (which, as Hamid surely knows, often pepper the speech of Anglophone Pakistanis). He does not call himself a "fundamentalist" of any sort. To the contrary, the term is used most prominently in the novel in the slogan of Underwood Samson, the financial analysts for whom Changez works" "Focus on the Fundamentals." (RF 98). (And I would also flag the fact that Changez downs whiskey intermittently through the novel, but anyone who has spent time with devout Muslims in South Asia will know that's no disqualifying trait). If there is a declaration of allegiance, it comes when Changez celebrates the "open-minded" and "cosmopolitan" character of New York, where "no one seemed to take much notice of me at all, save for a gay gentleman who politely offered me an invitational smile." (RW 48).

To be sure, I think the reason that it is easy, even natural, to read Changez as the terrorist of the populist social imaginary, an "inveterate liar" and a immediate threat, is that he is constantly reassuring his interlocutory, burly and American, that he is nothing of the sort (RF 5, 47, 108, 122, 183). Some reviewers read the surfeit of protests as excessive, a proof of culpable intent.[45] I disagree. Early in his narration, Changez mentions the suspicion of his coworkers and the "typically American undercurrent of suspicion" coursing behind the banter of his would-be girlfriend's dad (RF 46, 55). He also tells of the sense of feeling "uncomfortable in my own face" after a particularly intrusive search by airport security (RF 74). It is a serious mistake to gloss Changez's

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repeated, slightly jokey reassurances that he does not present a threat without accounting for the fact that, at least in America, he was constantly being treated as if he were a threat and constantly had to reassure others that he wasn't. A constant, bantering performance of innocence, in my experience, is the price of toiling among the suspect classes.

The changes of Changez indeed illustrate, in my view, a rather different trajectory: The path of a person who comes to take seriously the democratic commitment to treating others as being of equal worth. When Changez anguishes over civilian deaths in Pakistan and Afghanistan, he is in some sense grappling with what is called democracy's boundary problem[46]—the difficulty in democratic theory of identifying a prepolitical definition of the polis in a "cosmopolitan" world where financial, material, and human flows necessarily slice across borders, entangling individuals and families in complicated and cross-cutting fidelities. Changez is observing the manner in which the understanding of democracy's bounds can collapse especially in moments of perceived crisis, into a kind of "ethnic nationalism."[47] Against the populist embrace of that culpable and cruelty inducing elision, he is searching for a criterion of democratic membership that doesn't, by reflexive stipulation, isolate him on the outside.

The story of Saeed and Nadia undermines the social imaginary of the populist right in a different way. Whereas *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* fails the Bechdel test, in *East West*, not only is Nadia ultimately the stronger and more charismatic character, her most important relationships are ultimately with women. Asked by Saeed early on why she wears an abeya, she smiles and tells him, "So men don't fuck with me." (EW 17). Nadia's most powerful sexual feelings emerge not for Saeed, but for a woman volunteer she meets on Mykonos and then for the taciturn chef she meets in Marin, who reminds Nadia of a cowboy, and "who made love, when they made love, with a steady hand and a sure eye and a mouth that did little but did it so very well." (EW 219). We are far from the stupidly condescending stereotype of the meek and battered Muslim woman who needs to be saved.[48] In a somewhat similar vein, Saeed remains more religious than Nadia, though the novel, but hews to a pietistic and quietist version of Islam found in South Asian hinterlands. Confronted by a group of militants in London, he sees their appeal, but on recognizing that resonance feels "something rancid in himself, like he was rotting from within." (EW 156). Indeed, the arcs of Saeed and Nadia alike are sub silencio arguments against the facile and reductive cutouts of migrants that populate the fantasies of the populist right.

Exit West is not merely a devastating attack on the idea of a monolithic "Muslim" culture propelled by war through the viral agent of migration to pollute the pristine West. It is also an incisive critique of the idea that there is one such culture to be shielded and fostered. One strand of this is the Gandhian notion that a measure of civilized equanimity on the West's part toward others would be a good idea worth trying.[49] In Hamid's hands, Europe is a place of concentration camps, hunger, and causal cruelty "under the drone-crossed sky and in the invisible network surveillance that radiated out from their phones" (EW 188). If there is a Millian story of liberal self-fashioning in *East West*, it is to be found in the way that Nadia and Saeed make and remake themselves in the teeth of civil

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war, detention, and contempt. It is the notational Muslims here, as the social science has suggested, who are the truly faithful liberals here.

The other strand of the argument concerns the idea that there is a Western culture to be protected from the migrant tide. Late, in the book, Hamid breaks away from Nadia and Saeed to tell a brief story about an "old woman" who had lived in the same house near Palo Alto all her life, near a "local university that had gone from being a local secret to among the world's most famous." (EW 207-08). In an interview given in Berlin in 2017, Hamid elaborated a similar idea:

> If you were born in Berlin 80 years ago and lived in the same house today, you were born in a Berlin where Adolf Hitler was the Führur. When you were 2 years old, you witnessed the Second World War. Your city was virtually destroyed. Sometime in your 50s, the Berlin Wall fell and East and West were reunified. Today, perhaps, you have many Turkish-speaking neighbors. And you have not moved houses, but have migrated profoundly.[50]

It is in this sense that we are all "migrants through time" (EW 209). And it is in this sense that the populist claims to a unitary and unchanging culture is a fallacious one. Hamid, thus, has articulated what Samuel Scheffler has called Heraclitean pluralism, an understanding that "culture and cultures are always in flux, and that individuals normally relate to cultures through the acknowledgement of multiple affiliations and activities."[51] A vivid example from my own childhood is a building on the corner of Brick Lane in Spitalfields, London. Once La Neuve Eglise of French Huguenots fleeing Louis XIV's Edict of Fontainbleu, a last more gasp in the European wars of religion; later the Machzike Hadath, a synagogue for Ashkenazi Jews recoiling from violence and pogroms; and in my day the Brick Lane Jamme Masjid, a mosque serving the Bangladeshi Muslim community of London, some of whom had fled from Partition or the collapse of Pakistan. A building for migrants itself evinces the migration of a place over time as tides of human migrants lap and retreat.

Not all see, or want to see, our bastard, sedimented histories. The populist social imaginary, though its conjuring of the terrorist and the migrant, sets its teeth against Heraclitean pluralism, often as a means of vaulting to and consolidating power against the prospect of future democratic rotation. Thus is not without irony: Although the populist imaginary purports to be loyal the liberal tradition,[52] it works in practice as a denial of the fundamental act of political choice—participation in a meaningfully competitive election—that is at the heart of democratic life. Moreover, in a conjoined act of denial, it rejects the Millian openness to self-definition and self-renewal *not only for migrants but also for cocitizens*. Conjuring the phantasms of distant wars brought close, it seeks to collapse the uncertain horizon of the future into a muddy nostalgia for an imagined past. In a dynamic context where economic, technological, and environmental pressures are constant, to call for maintaining the status quo is to demand substantial investment in the effort of cultural preservation. The seemingly Burkean project of

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populist cultural preservation, in short, is only notionally nostalgic; in substance, it is active and transformative in its authoritarian and totalizing aims.

Nor is it clear that more familiar liberal commitments to democracy fully evade the critique immanent in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Exit West*. Both books sharply pose the question of how liberal democracy establish terms of belonging—terms that concomitantly operate as terms of exclusion condemning many to poorly governed regions of the world in which economic opportunity is scant and repression rampant. Implicit in both books is the question whether liberal democracies can avoid creating a psychological demand among voters for physical security that can only be assuaged through exclusionary policies.[53]

Conclusion

The longstanding positive relationship between war and democracy no longer holds. What takes its place in the twenty-first century remains to be seen. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *East West* each present both articulate an increasingly prevalent view of the war-catalyzed threats of the terrorist and the migrant. They also articulate a devastating critique of that social imaginary. The imaginary they offer instead is one in which the avatars of the Millian liberal tradition, which populists purport to prize, are Muslim migrants, flung hither and thither by war across borders, through traditions, and into the heart of our increasingly fraught and fragile concept of, and commitment to, democracy.

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