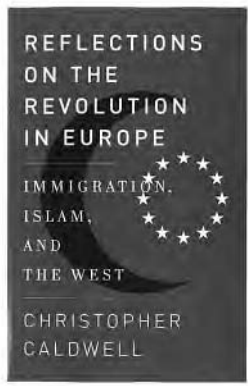


# the moslems are here—be afraid!

by syed ali



*Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West*

By Christopher Caldwell

Doubleday, 2009, 422 pages

Christopher Caldwell's book, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, is the latest in the "Eurabia" genre, which consists largely of scaremongering and polemical screeds about how Muslim immigration is destroying Europe. Unlike other "Eurabia" books, though, Caldwell seems dispassionate and empirically rooted in his treatment of the subject. Given the state of global terrorism and war and the roles that Muslims are playing in international conflicts, the topic demands to be taken seriously, and Caldwell writes what (at first glance) is a serious book. And, as he is an editor at the influential right-wing *Weekly Standard*, a columnist for the *Financial Times*, and a contributor to the *New York Times*, anything Caldwell writes will find a wide audience among the public and important people like policy makers and other journalists. To date, the book has been widely reviewed, for the most part glowingly, even in liberal bastions such as the *Guardian* (UK).

Caldwell is undoubtedly a good, cagey writer. His strength is in being lucid and blunt. He stresses that there are no "granted" or "notwithstanding" in his

book to get in the way of the narrative flow, and this is to his credit—sociologists might be more widely read if we all made our points in clear, concise, and unqualified prose. Our job is to make an argument; let someone else tell us what our shortcomings are. But Caldwell's assertiveness leaves little room for nuance, so the result is more often caricature than clarity.

To make his argument, Caldwell needs to present Muslims as Europe's bogeymen. The first twenty pages of the book are largely devoted to the story of how Muslims have converged on the continent post-World War II and how their birthrates have greatly exceeded those of native whites. (He's not coy about equating "European" with "white"—non-whites cannot, by his accounting, be European.) He draws this story out in fine detail and leaves no doubt in readers' minds as to why we should fear this time bomb. At several points he even uses the case of early 19th century Boston as a parallel (and apparently cautionary) case: "The arrival of the [Catholic] Irish in Boston destroyed the Protestant culture of one of the most important cities in the history of Protestantism. The destruction occurred not only because the Irish arrived but also because New England Yankees chose not to live in an Irish-run city that was increasingly violent and corrupt... Immigration in general, and immigrant Islam in particular, has the potential to spark such flights in Europe." What's bizarre here, and potentially fatal for his overall argument, is that by most standards, Boston is a perfectly acceptable, thriving city. If Boston's past is Europe's future, it seems Rotterdam, Marseilles, Stockholm, and Manchester will be fine.

Caldwell is an adherent of Samuel Huntington's famous "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, in which the most impor-

tant battleground is between Christianity and Islam, two worldviews that, according to Huntington, have always, and always will, clash. To invite Muslims into Christian territory as immigrants is to court disaster; they are unassimilable. Not just some Muslims, but all Muslims. To make his rhetoric tenable, Caldwell's Muslims must form a monolithic whole; they are all equally Muslim, Islam is an inherently violent and radical religion, therefore all Muslims are equally violent and radical. Danger is an ever-present theme in the book, as Caldwell never strays far from discussions of radical imams or Muslim terrorists. And since, for the sake of narrative, being Muslim trumps all other identities, he dismisses any differences of sect, practice, or background. Similarly, Europeans become more like each other—any linguistic, religious, or cultural differences fade into insignificance in the face of the invading hordes. In this way, we read, Muslims *created* Europeans—historically through military conquests, and more recently through immigration, which has caused Europeans to define who they are in response to foreigners. (Then again, elsewhere in the book Caldwell argues that it is the *American* presence post-WWII that created the sense of a culturally singular Europe.)

Caldwell's definitions of Muslims and Europeans, indeed his notions of culture generally, are simplistic. For Caldwell, Muslims have strong culture while Europeans have weak culture. Indeed, that cultural weakness, which has its most obvious expression in Europe's promotion of multiculturalism (allowing foreigners to keep their cultures intact), lets Muslims to not only enter Europe and breed, but also run roughshod over their host countries' culture and politics. Europe is becoming more Muslim, Caldwell asserts, but Muslims aren't being

made—or even asked to become—European. This diversity has taken its toll on native whites, who Caldwell informs us, have begun “to feel contemptible and small, ugly and asexual.”

Caldwell bolsters his case, marshalling what seems like an impressive array of supporting empirical evidence—demographic data, opinion polls, various surveys, governmental reports, etc. But close inspection reveals a good degree of chicanery—opinions phrased as facts, cherry-picked anecdotes, selective use of sources, and just plain factually incorrect assertions. This is fine for Caldwell, since his status as a public intellectual does not rise or fall on the validity of his research but rather on the boldness of his claims and how well they are received by, and reflect those of, other “serious” journalists.

But it’s his refusal time and again to entertain serious counter-interpretations that I feel is Caldwell’s greatest sin. For instance, he is confident that the 2005 riots in Paris’s North African ghettos weren’t due to “misconduct of the majority society,” and therefore can *only* be understood as the result of a religious agenda on the part of the rioters, *even amongst those who were not religiously observant*. The possibility of structural discrimination, which shuts many Muslims out of housing and occupational opportunities—points he accepts elsewhere—doesn’t enter his calculus for understanding the riots. Nor can it, because that would undermine his thesis that Muslims (all Muslims) in Europe are not integrating, and not because they’re being shunned, but because they deliberately choose “otherness.”

In the midst of all of this, Caldwell does make some insightful points. One is what he calls *dis*-assimilation, wherein seemingly assimilated second-generation Muslim immigrants turn their backs on European culture and reinvent themselves (I have also written about this regarding second-generation South Asian Muslims in the United States). I wish he’d explored this in more depth,

maybe by looking at how various people who dis-assimilate have different experiences. But Caldwell is more interested in using this concept to reinforce his claims that all Muslims are hostile toward Europe; the only variation here is how that hostility gets expressed.

Another area where Caldwell is on the right path regards violence against women by Muslim men. His broad argument is that Islam is responsible, but he buries what is probably a more likely reason: “[W]here families, police, and other social institutions are weak, what results is a sexual reign of terror.” If social institutions are strong, these violent acts—rapes, forced marriages, honor killings, etc.—should decrease. But this would indicate factors at play other than Islam, something Caldwell can’t concede.

Toward the end of the book, he quickly analyzes the state of America’s Muslims. Where some observers see

## Caldwell’s assertiveness leaves little room for nuance. The result is more often caricature than clarity.

assimilation, he disagrees. He approvingly quotes the journalist Genevieve Abdo who writes, “The real story of American Muslims is one of accelerating alienation from the mainstream of US life, with Muslims in this country choosing their Islamic identity over their American one.” But Abdo only talked to people she found in mosques. What about people with an allergy to mosques? According to some scholars, these Muslims—the equivalent of non-church-going Christians—might account for the vast majority of Muslims in the U.S. and in European countries. And even among those who choose their Islamic identity over their American one, there are questions of whether that means they’re all fundamentalists, let alone whether all women who, say, wear the hijab (headscarf) share the same beliefs and attitudes.

Part of the reason there are misconceptions about American Muslims is the tricky (sometimes dubious) way that many people in the press use (and abuse) the term “assimilation.” Caldwell and others mean *cultural* assimilation, or acculturation, to Western norms of behavior. But by assimilation, sociologists generally refer to moving into the “mainstream” in terms of education, occupation, income, and residence; acculturation is just one facet of a larger process. On average, American-born Muslims have high levels of education and income and live in mixed neighborhoods—and they’re mostly acculturated. By these measures, they are generally assimilated.

If Caldwell replaced the term Muslim with Mormon or Irish, we would likely find a similar-sounding story—that they were considered unassimilable and therefore, a threat to the social order. But he is so intent on showing the

uniqueness of the bad behavior of Muslims that Caldwell is blinded to comparisons with other groups that might lead him to conclude that what looks like specifically Muslim behavior could actually be indicative of broader processes and conflicts inherent in immigration, religious differentiation, and assimilation. This is a pity; if Caldwell did dabble more in nuance and comparison, matters that are particular to Muslims might be illuminated. Instead, what stands out is Caldwell’s ideology.

**Syed Ali** is in the sociology/anthropology department at Long Island University in Brooklyn, NY. He is the author of *Dubai: Gilded Cage*.