

BOOK REVIEWS

THE MISEDUCATION OF THE WEST: HOW SCHOOLS AND THE MEDIA DISTORT OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISLAMIC WORLD

JOE L. KINCHELOE & SHIRLEY R. STEINBERG, EDS.
PRAEGER, 2004
\$49.95, 216 pages

Reviewed by Christopher Bott

The Miseducation of the West: How Schools and the Media Distort Our Understanding of the Islamic World is a compilation of essays that consider how the Western media and educational systems influence the Western perspective of the Islamic world. The authors contend that the Bush White House, conservative organizations, the Western media, and schools have collectively fumbled in accurately teaching the Western world about the true meaning of the events of September 11, 2001, and of contemporary Islam. The authors also state that the errors committed in the teaching of Islam and terrorism have much to do with how Westerners view themselves. Kincheloe, one of the editors, explains this point in the introduction:

In the Western tradition of writing about, researching, and representing Islam, Europeans have consistently positioned Muslims as the irrational, fanatic, sexually enticing, and despotic others. This portrayal, as many scholars have argued, has been as much about Western anxieties, fears, and self-doubts as about Islam. (p. 1)

The book also touches upon Muslim perceptions of the West in terms of foreign policy, business practices, and the presence of the American military in the Middle East. This book review will consider three of the major arguments presented by the authors and provide commentary on the effectiveness of the case being made.

A recurring argument throughout the book is that the Bush administration has been irresponsible in articulating America's stance after September 11, 2001, and has used poor judgment in shaping our relations in the Middle East. Kellner claims that Bush's speech to Congress the week following September 11 declared that the Muslim world is aggressive and wicked,

while constituting America as good and pure. Kellner interprets much of the post-September 11 information from the White House and the conservative right to be polarizing and distorted. Kellner writes, "Note that all of the dominant right-wing and Bush administration discourses are fundamentally Manichaeian, posting a binary opposition between good and evil, us and them, civilization and barbarism" (p. 28).

Kellner concludes that terrorists, particularly al-Qaida, are enemies of the Western world that should be dealt with accordingly. The information that has been provided to the general public, however, is inaccurate and culturally biased. Kellner feels that terrorism is a global problem that requires action by institutions, not unilateral military action. This argument has merit, but Kellner's writing is politically charged and at times, sarcastic. If the reader can cut through the minefield of accusations and unsubstantiated claims against the Bush administration, he or she may find the main idea of the essay to be thought provoking.

Skalli presents miseducation in the area of Muslim feminism. Skalli claims that the current position of women in the Arab-Muslim world is an unfortunate result of the European colonial era. The author feels that Arab women are in a virtual tug of war between Muslims and Euro-Americans. Skalli explains, "Any progressive changes in women's lives are perceived as acts of allegiance to the West and a threat to the religious and cultural identity of the whole Muslim community" (p. 57). The author claims that European colonists identified veiling and seclusion as the emblem of cultural backwardness and women's oppression. Colonial invaders made efforts to end the practices, which led to conflict and disagreement.

Skalli argues that the miseducation during the colonial era, postcolonial era, and even today, is the failure of the West to investigate cultural norms beyond face value. Skalli explains,

During the 1909-1912 war against the Spanish occupation of Northern Morocco, a Spanish journalist reporting on the events of the day wrote, "How can this miserable people move forward or become civilized when women's only functions are to give babies?" The same journalist would change his mind only two days after making such a statement. He realized that during the observed military operations it was the women who took care of all the support services at the rear. They assisted the injured, carried them away from the field. Years later, he would record in a book that the defeat that has come upon us today...is the result of the decisive role played by Moroccan women. (p. 47)

Skalli makes an excellent argument and provides interesting historical truths to support these claims.

In a discussion regarding the Middle East and Western foreign policy,

we would be remiss to omit a discussion of Israel. Gordon, a former Israeli paratrooper and contributor to this book, makes a claim that double standards, favoritism, and unconditional support characterize the relationship between the United States and Israel during the past 35 years. Gordon is highly critical of Ariel Sharon and his handling of the Arab-Jewish conflict. However, Gordon's essay focuses on the role of the United States in this conflict.

In assessing America's role in this conflict, Gordon organizes the essay into three major points. First, Gordon claims that the United States and Israel have effectively demonized Arafat as the world's number two terrorist in the wake of September 11. Gordon feels that the media are being distracted as Sharon perpetuates the killing. Second, Sharon has consistently and purposefully derailed the peace process in recent years. Gordon feels that progress was made at the Oslo Peace Process and a new Palestinian state was looking like a reality until Sharon became more aggressive in his tactics in 2003. Sharon reoccupied major parts of the West Bank and Gaza, undermined Arafat, and rejected the idea of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders. Gordon's final claim is that the U.S. media and politicians defend the tactics of Israel while strongly attacking the Palestinian violence. Gordon claims that U.S. support for Israel has caused animosity throughout the Muslim world towards America. "Given this favoritism and the unconditional support that characterizes the United States' relationship with Israel, it is not surprising at all that many Arab leaders and people are angry at the United States" (p. 114). The author claims that the miseducation in this instance is in the inaccurate and unfair support of one side in complex issues that do not have easy answers. Much like Kellner, Gordon makes excellent points, but clouds the main message with side commentary on the evils of the United States. This is evident in Gordon's description of media focus:

It shifts the focus away from the state terror that Israel has been conducting in the occupied territories, much like the demonizing of bin Laden was aimed in part at taking attention away from U.S. attacks against civilians in Afghanistan. (p. 114)

The author simply ends a paragraph at this point and begins on a new point without providing any factual information to substantiate this egregious claim.

This reviewer agrees that the Western media and educational institutions do not accurately depict a realistic Islamic world. *The Miseducation of the West: How Schools and the Media Distort Our Understanding of the Islamic World* provides thought-provoking ideas and presses the reader to reconsider issues that have already been processed. However, this book should not act as a guide for all educators and members of the media as a tool of enlighten-

ment. Many of the arguments are distracted by subjective and opinionated commentaries that confuse the issues. Many of the essays in the book are politically one-sided and unfair in their assessments of the Western governments and media outlets.

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SOMEBODIES AND NOBODIES: OVERCOMING THE ABUSE OF RANK

ROBERT W. FULLER
NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS, 2004
\$16.95, 208 PAGES

Reviewed by Michael Brennan

In *Somebodies and Nobodies: Overcoming the Abuse of Rank*, Fuller attempts to “shine a spotlight on rank-based abuse, to learn to recognize its various faces, assess its costs, and conceive a world without it” (p. 11). In addition to personal anecdotes, Fuller shares examples from numerous visitors to the website, www.breakingranks.net, to illustrate the existence of “rank-based inequity” (p. xix). The heart of Fuller’s book rests on two principles:

(1) Indignity and humiliation feel pretty much the same to a nobody, a black, a woman, or a student, and (2) no matter the excuse for abuse, it persists only in the presence of an underlying difference of rank signifying power. (p. 2)

A critical component of the author’s argument is that those who hold positions of power are the somebodies of the world and the weaker members are the nobodies. The rift among people today “is the gap between the ‘somebodies’—the relatively powerful and successful—and the ‘nobodies’—the relatively weak and vulnerable” (p. 155). Fuller asserts that all people at some point in their lives experience both the feelings of somebodiness and nobodiness. Fuller makes a sufficient case for the first assertion that all people, at one time or another, feel that their dignity has been violated. However, the