“A Disenchanted Exile: Secularism and the Islamic Revival among Second-Generation Palestinian Immigrants in Chicago”
Loren D. Lybarger

Response by Naomi Davidson, University of Ottawa

Loren Lybarger begins his essay by citing Abū Mājid, a septuagenarian defender of secular pan-Arab nationalism, who tells him that both “the religious fanatics” and the secularists are to blame for the lack of unity and purpose in the Arab world. He ends by citing Mūnā, the thirty year-old daughter of a Palestinian immigrant, who defines herself as a “secular” or “cultural” Muslim whose affinity to Palestine is cultural rather than political. One of the main contributions of his article is to trace the shifting place of secularist politics and investments over three generations of Palestinians living in the Chicago area. In a careful discussion of the vast literature that seeks to understand the nature of “secularism,” Lybarger ultimately proposes an ideal-typical definition: secularism is “any social orientation, practice, mode of solidarity, or stance that implicitly or explicitly resists, rejects, demotes, or otherwise ignores the prior claim of religious solidarity.” While acknowledging the marginal, disenchanted status of this kind of secularist attitude among young Palestinian-American Chicagoans, Lybarger nevertheless highlights “secularism’s persistence” as a way of tracing out “possibilities for diverse and alternative forms of affiliation and self-articulation in and beyond prevailing regimes of piety.”

Lybarger’s defense of examining secularist attitudes in spite of their marginal status is convincing, and I am fully sympathetic to his arguments about the way so many social scientists have insisted on the “Islamization” of all facets of the lives and beliefs of people identified as Muslim to such an extent that any other commitments and investments are ignored or discounted. His discussion of Abū Mājid’s son, Mājid, demonstrates clearly how someone raised in the Chicago area in a secular, Arab nationalist context continues to privilege a secularist worldview even as he shows himself to be capable of accommodating the religiosity of a younger generation of Palestinian-Americans. Yet in his discussion of “syncretic” secularists, Lybarger at times seems to reproduce a similar analytical move in emphasizing “secular” attitudes and underemphasizing commitments that might be called “culturally” Muslim. The generational comparison Lybarger makes here clearly proves that he has developed the analytical and ethnographic tools and frames to further develop a theory of how the lived experiences of people like Mūnā might ultimately challenge the notion he presents here of secularism as something which denies prior religious claims. While this young woman clearly articulates the ways her “secular” attitudes result from her experience of the “contradictions intrinsic to regimes of piety,” mainly surrounding her adulterous, alcoholic father’s emphasis on the performance of Muslim religiosity, I wonder if we could not just as easily identify her as a syncretic Muslim (or, to use her words, as Lybarger does, a “cultural Muslim”). Both she and her husband talk about drinking and smoking weed, but her husband explicitly mentions not eating pork while she says she “still believes in God.” Lybarger certainly acknowledges the complexity of these young Palestinian-Americans’ relationships to the communities in which they were raised, and
the American and (in Mūnā’s case) Palestinian communities they discovered later in life. He also astutely traces the way his informants, like all other individuals, are shaped by the settings in which they live and by their encounters with other ways of being from the ones in which they were raised. Yet by focusing on the persistence of marginal secularisms, the persistence of and importance of “Muslimness” in the lives of his informants, whether defined culturally, ethnically, or religiously, might be underestimated.

I am a specialist neither of Palestinian identity politics, nor of Muslim practice in the contemporary United States. Yet in reading Lybarger’s discussion of the tensions between “regimes of piety” and “secularism” among people with differing levels of engagement in or commitment to the Palestinian community in the context of the Chicago suburbs, I could not help but be reminded of the example of North African leftist movements in 1960s and 1970s France. While their activism was circumscribed by a very different set of historical circumstances than those which define the post-9/11 lives of Palestinian-Americans, Arab-Americans and Muslims in the US, it may be useful to consider the ways in which a secular, Marxist-inspired movement, the *Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes* (MTA), allied with the extreme left in France and a supporter of the Palestinian struggle, nevertheless invoked the language of Islam and of Muslim religiosity in its work. In the series of strikes that erupted in workers’ hostels throughout France from 1975-1980, the MTA was very active in defending the strikers and supporting their specific demands for better living conditions in their shared quarters, as well as their broader quest to end the paternalist practices of both the state and their employers. Many hostel directors, often former colonial officials who had resettled in France after the wave of decolonization from 1960-1962, quickly promised the strikers that they would allocate space for Muslim religious practice in their hostels. There is considerable disagreement among social scientists about the extent to which the workers’ struggle was about Islam-based claims or whether the state and employers chose to identify a class-based movement fighting neo-colonial practices as a religious one in order to dismiss it. Nevertheless, the MTA itself invoked Muslim practices as part of its program of support for the strikes. For example, workers and other supporters were invited to celebrations of all major Muslim holidays sponsored by the MTA.

Perhaps in this example, Lybarger might compare the MTA’s position to that of Mājid, firmly secular and the defender of a certain anti-colonial and pan-Arab ideal, but nevertheless accommodating of the religious sensibilities of the populations with whom he works. Lybarger’s article provides us with an engaging piece of theorized ethnography with which to further consider the complicated ways that people raised in “Muslim” contexts in non-Muslim majority places articulate positions that may ultimately be neither “Muslim” nor “secular.”