

## Gay Rights versus Human Rights: A Response to Joseph Massad

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Joseph Massad's article "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World" (*Public Culture* 14 [spring 2002]: 361–85) is a strange concoction. Although ostensibly against the Gay International (GI) and its view that always and everywhere there are gays waiting to be freed by U.S. organizations, Massad attacks scholars who oppose this assumption. To justify his attacks he distorts our writings.

As one learns from the acknowledgments, Massad started the article over ten years ago. But the organizations he criticizes, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), Gay and Lesbian Arabic Society (GLAS), and Al-Fatiha, were not yet around. His motivation appears to be resentment against non-Arabs writing about "his subject."

Although Massad speaks indiscriminately of the "Arab world," "Muslim world," and "Arab and Muslim worlds," he has the nerve to state: "other problems [with the use of the term *Middle East*] relate to the fact that the Muslim world extends beyond the 'Middle East' into Asia and Africa and that the 'Middle East' includes non-Arabs and non-Muslims. . . . It is not clear if what [Bruce] Dunne and others describe as 'Middle Eastern' applies to all these people or not" (369 n. 28). Instead of explaining why he has "Arab world" in the title but "Muslim" 129 times in his article, often clearly referring to non-Arabs, Massad attacks Dunne, who knows what he is writing about: Dunne includes both Turkey and Israel in his overview

article—and this is the true reason for the animosity of our Christian Palestinian writer: he resents being in the same category as Israelis and Turks. Like a spoilt child, he does not judge articles on their internal logic but compares them with the article he would have liked to have written.

Massad writes:

[Arno] Schmitt . . . makes the essentialist claim that the absence of these categories in the Muslim world is a phenomenon that remains constant over time. Although [John] Boswell was careful to restrict his pronouncements . . . to the classical period of Islam—the seventh through fourteenth centuries—recent scholars, including Schmitt, tend to *extend whatever judgment they have to the whole of Arab Muslim history* (this is tantamount to using studies of the European medieval period to *generalize about all of Western history*). Schmitt, like orientalist scholars who use the seventh-century Qur'an to study Muslims of the twentieth century, insists without any scholarly evidence that “. . . the behavior of Muslims today can be seen as modification of older behavioral patterns. . . .” . . . Everett Rowson draws upon Arabic texts written in the eleventh century to conclude that these texts’ “concepts can be taken as broadly representative of Middle Eastern societies from the ninth century to the present.” (366–67; emphasis added)

First, essentialists believe that something does not change because that thing is anchored in the nature or essence of a particular people; to study the history of a region and to find no fundamental change in its mode of production over a period of time has nothing to do with essentialism.

Second, I do not proclaim unchangeability—on the contrary: “Economic and social changes (industrialisation, entry of women into the public sphere, decreasing influence of the three-generation household), . . . the influence of western ideas (through colonial rule, tourists, media) . . . bring with them a change in the relationship between men and women and consequently in the sexual relationship between males.”<sup>1</sup>

Third, Massad insinuates that I studied a period and then generalized my findings. I studied the culture, mode of production, mode of reproduction, social stratification, law, ritual, medicine, and theologies of Eastern Mediterranean people over a 3,000-year period. I supplemented this with studies from other shores

1. Arno Schmitt, “Different Approaches to Male-Male Sexuality/Eroticism from Morocco to Usbekistan,” in *Sexuality and Eroticism among Males in Moslem Societies*, ed. Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofer (New York: Haworth, 1992), 20.

of the Mediterranean, from Latin America (a cultural extension of Iberia), to Iran, India (influenced by Iran), and the Malay archipelago (influenced in turn by India), as well as transmigrants. Where I detect change, I name it; and where I do not find change, I point out the underlying factors.<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, Massad accuses orientalist of applying findings from a seventh-century text to the twentieth century. Whether the Qur'an is a seventh-century text is an open question. What is unquestionable is that the Qur'an from al-Tabari's time is not read the way it was written.<sup>3</sup>

Fifth, no "orientalist scholar" applies a text written some thirteen hundred years ago to today. Orientalists study the way thirteenth-century Muslims use and interpret the Qur'an, the way fifteenth-century Indians understand it or the differences between Maghrebi, Ottoman, and Moghul lithographs of the Qur'an, or how a nineteenth-century Egyptian uses a twelfth-century commentary on it.

Sixth, Massad works with fixed entities, such as "Arab Muslim," "Western," and "medieval period." It was the proud ideology of the Renaissance that constructed "the Dark Ages." Historians are not so sure about the start or the end of the Middle Ages. And what is the West? Do Albania, Serbia, and Turkey belong to the West? In the beginning of the nineteenth century Italy was "the Orient" for Germany; toward the middle of the century Spain served as such for France, the Balkans for Austria. For the English even Ireland was not part of "the West."

Seventh, Massad claims that not detecting revolutionary changes between classical and postclassical Muslim society is equivalent to not finding epochal changes between medieval and postmedieval European society. I thought the rise of capitalism, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment *did* happen in Europe and not at that time in Southwest Asia or North Africa.

Eighth, it is hard to imagine that Massad actually believes that Rowson drew conclusions about nine centuries by studying texts from one century only. Rowson cites texts from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries and has studied more.

Ninth, throughout his article Massad opposes a timeless West to a changing (i.e., Westernizing) East; for example, he writes how the Western word *sexuality* influenced Arabic, unaware of or ignoring the fact that it appeared on the Euro-

2. See, e.g., Arno Schmitt, "Schwule? islamisches Recht? Ein Aufklärungsgespräch," in *100 Jahre Schwulenbewegung: Dokumentation einer Vortragsreihe in der Akademie der Künste*, ed. Manfred Herzer (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1998), 209–10; Schmitt, "Sexual Meetings," in Schmitt and Sofer, *Sexuality and Eroticism*, 125–29; and Schmitt, "Liwāṭ im Fiqh" [Sodomy in Islamic jurisprudence], *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 4 (2001–2): 1–2.

3. For recent orientalist scholarship on this topic, see: [syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol6No1/HV6N1PRPhenixHorn.html](http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol6No1/HV6N1PRPhenixHorn.html).

pean linguistic stages only in the early nineteenth century and gained its present meaning only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Massad states: “most non-Western civilizations, including Muslim Arab civilization, have not subscribed historically to [the straight-gay binary]” (383); the desires of Arab and Muslim men are sexually polymorphic. Thus he overlooks significant historical factors: before the replacement of most personal links by anonymous market forces, before the creation of free individuals rather than members of primordial solidarity groups, before apartments for singles and pension funds, societies do not subscribe to the straight-gay binary. Only when the state enforces law and order, when one does not depend on the martial posture of the males of the clan, when education becomes more important than physical strength—only then can men be gay. As a typical orientalist-in-reverse, Massad cuts the world into West and non-West, instead of modern and premodern.<sup>4</sup> He is so fixated on what the devilish GI does to the Arab world that he does not see that before Stonewall there was much working-class same-sex sex without gay identity, that this is still common just north and east of Columbia University among “homo thugz” who keep their sexual practices on the DL (“down low”).<sup>5</sup>

Massad’s only reference to change makes matters worse. He writes, “Ironically, [increased harassment by police] is the very process through which ‘homosexuality’ was invented in the West” (384); with this footnote: “On the invention of homosexuality, see Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.” A few corrections are in order: (1) Foucault’s inventor is not the police but psychiatry; (2) Foucault wrote this book without a thorough study; (3) the book was published in 1976 and should not be cited for its facts—they are wrong.<sup>6</sup> The ground for the *egalitarian gay* ideal was laid two hundred years ago. And the acceptance of infertile same-sex sex was helped along by the separation of reproduction and coitus with the advent of the birth control pill and the vulcanized condom. Massad attacks Rowson and myself for discovering stability over a long period of time without ever telling his reader when, where, and how change *did* occur.

Although I contest the “ontology and epistemology” (365) of the GI, I doubt

4. See Jalâl Sâdiq al-‘Azam, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse,” in *Khamsin* 8 (1981): 5–26.

5. Guy Trebay, “Homo Thugz Blow Up the Spot,” *Village Voice*, 2–8 February 2000.

6. The deathblow was delivered by Klaus Müller, *Aber in meinem Herzen sprach eine Stimme so laut: Homosexuelle Autobiographien und medizinische Pathographien im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1991). Foucault’s *Histoire* can still be read for its ideas, but since 1976 so many historians have come up with new facts that Massad’s invocation of Holy Foucault is pathetic. I recommend works by David M. Halperin, Michael Rocke, Jeffrey Weeks, and Randolph Trumbach; see [www.utexas.edu/utpress/journals/fajhs.html](http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/journals/fajhs.html) and [www.gayhistory.com/rev2/books/subjects03.htm](http://www.gayhistory.com/rev2/books/subjects03.htm).

that they are especially dangerous. Massad sees conscious forces at work—“efforts of [Western capital] to impose a European heterosexual regime on Arab men” (372) plus all “the machinations of the GI” (380)—whereas I see heterosexualization as the result of salaried work, the welfare state, and “the proliferation and hegemony of Western cultural products.” I believe the French popularized cigarettes in Morocco to make money, not to undermine the health of the natives, and that Time-Warner is more interested in profits than in spreading the American way of life.

Two questions Massad does not even ask: Why does the GI carry on in spite of disappointing results? And why is the Arab reaction so negative? Find my answer at [userpage.fu-berlin.de/~arno/massad.html](http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~arno/massad.html).

<https://jmassad.blogspot.com/2019/07/gays-rights-versus-human-right-reply-to.html>

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