

powerful, Nilekani sees its potential as an agent of democratization and enlightened public policy.

Nilekani acknowledges that India's vaunted high-tech sector accounts for less than one quarter of one percent of the country's labor force. He is quick to warn that the stubborn social cleavages that historically have divided India—principally those of caste, language, region, and religion—will only widen and deepen unless the government addresses the urgent question of universal access to quality education.

*It is our schools that now delineate our class lines most prominently . . . . The collapse of our schools is a deep crack in India's foundation, and it impacts everything from our health achievements and fertility rates to our economic mobility and political choices . . . . Our success or failure here will, more conclusively than any other reform, determine India's economic future. (173, 194)*

The public university system, including its prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, is chronically underfunded. Since the 1960s, India has funded its schools but neglected schooling. The government has built infrastructure but has not funded needed teacher training, curriculum, effective teaching methods, and performance measurements. India's elites long ago abandoned substandard state schools for high-performing, English-medium private schools.

The poor are largely left behind. Although ninety percent of India's children enroll in state schools, two-thirds drop out by the sixth year and ninety percent drop out before high school. In Nilekani's view, powerful teachers' unions pose the greatest barrier to quality state schooling. Growing discontent has led a significant number of poor families to send their children to private schools, but without vouchers, contends Nilekani, prospects for widespread progress remain severely limited.

Despite his warnings, the bracing optimism of the entrepreneur asserts itself in Nilekani's boldest proposal for social reform. In a massive initiative that would require as much political will as technological savvy, the government would issue biometric national ID cards to its 1.2 billion people. The poor, who often do not have the proof-of-identity documents needed for a range of everyday needs, now would have access to public services ranging from government wheat rations to mobile-phone subscriptions. Since the publication of *Imagining India*, the Indian government has appointed Nilekani as a cabinet-level minister where he will have the resources and power to realize at least one of the exciting possibilities for India's transformation. What higher praise for *Imagining India* than the eagerness of India's government, the chief target of the book's argument and its most important audience, to make Nilekani its valued partner. The high-tech entrepreneur working side by side with the career bureaucrat frames yet another surprising snapshot of contemporary India. Anyone interested in making sense of its changing, often bewildering, images should consult *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation*. ■

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## DESTINY DISRUPTED

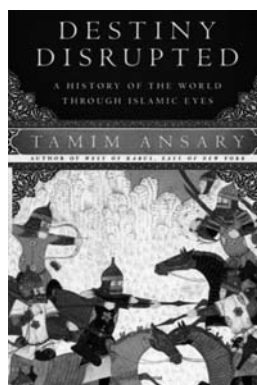
### *A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes*

BY TAMIM ANSARY

NEW YORK: PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2009

416 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1586486068, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Thomas Frederick Howard



The need for teachers of survey courses in history and geography to cover the Muslim world has become fraught, since 9/11, with a tension that doesn't arise when the subject matter is, say, the Buddhist or Hindu world. Trying to be broadminded, non-Muslim Americans may end up presenting a bland version of the history of Islam that robs the subject of much of its dramatic interest. This book will help to correct that error.

Tamim Ansary grew up in Helmand province in Afghanistan. He comes from an impeccably Muslim background, including descent from a mystic whose tomb is still a shrine. Yet he evidently has spent most of his adult life in the US. He refers to living in Oregon at the time of the OPEC oil embargo in 1973, and he is identified on the dust jacket as being director of the San Francisco Writers Workshop.

*He gives a full and fascinating account of the power plays, plots, and assassinations, without being either dismissive or defensive about Islam's essential message.*

Working as a history textbook editor in the US gave him the idea of writing a summary of world history as it would be commonly seen in the Muslim world today. The result is a work of high popularization, and can be described without disparagement as a real page-turner.

Ansary moves quickly through the career of Mohammed and spends more time on the period of the first four caliphs and the Umayyad caliphs. The Shia/Sunni split, often a challenge for the outsider, is exceptionally well explained. Ansary is frank about the political and military aspects of the rise of Islam. He gives a full and fascinating account of the power plays, plots, and assassinations, without being either dismissive or defensive about Islam's essential message.

He shows how much of what became distinctive about Islamic civilization was developed by Persians and Turks. His two chapters on the Abbasid caliphate provide an excellent summary of that era's globalization of Muslim thought—the intense and exacting scholarship that

produced the *shari'a*, the philosophers who harmonized Greek and Sanskrit traditions with Islam, and the Sufis, who brought in the flame of personal devotion.

After dealing with the assaults from west and east, Crusaders and Mongols, Ansary reminds us of the seventeenth century glory days of the Muslim enterprise, as seen in the three simultaneous empires of the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Moghuls. But if this was Islam's destiny, we soon see what disrupted it—an expanding and secularizing Europe. The disruption was partly from invasion and conquest, but more profoundly from the penetration of the Muslim world by a variety of European merchants, advisors, overseers and consultants, so that “by 1850 Europeans controlled every part of the world that had once called itself Dar al-Islam.”

The last five chapters are about the Muslim world's response to the perception of disrupted destiny. These chapters are an excellent summary of reformers and reform movements that have established the bounds of discourse in the Muslim world today: the reaffirmation of fundamental values on the one hand and the incorporation and do-

mestication of such European influences as secularism, science, and nationalism—in a word, modernism—on the other.

Ansary is persuasive in describing how oil wealth and Cold War foreign aid, by forcing the pace of modernism, effectively alienated and side-lined huge segments of the population. Those segments instead turned to “the submerged, even suppressed ‘other’ currents of Muslim revival—the political Islamists, the Salafis, the Wahhabis, the Deobandis, the jihadists, et al [who] continued to thrive among the excluded people of the left-behind economies.”

Ansary is perfectly situated to write this kind of book. He has the born and bred background, yet has been in the US long enough to have developed an informal idiom that will be immediately accessible to American readers and students. ■

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## “SOCIALISM IS GREAT!” *A Worker's Memoir of the New China*

BY LIJIA ZHANG

NEW YORK: ANCHOR BOOKS, 2008

384 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0307472199, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Arthur Barbeau

Those interested in teaching the China of the past fifty years have a plethora of good materials available to them. There is a wealth of information on the last ten years of Mao's life, ranging from scholarly studies, accounts of travelers, to personal memoirs. These cover the Cultural Revolution, the rise and fall of the “Gang of Four,” and the deaths of both Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. For the past two decades, there are a number of accounts of the student movement of 1989 and its tragic dénouement. The reforms of Deng Xiaoping and the economic growth of China since then are well covered, though personal narratives are not as numerous as for the earlier period.

Yet there appears to be one striking gap. The years from the death of Mao in 1976 to the student movement in 1989 seem to have produced little narrative. These years saw the beginnings of economic reform in China under Deng and the struggle between modernizers (such as Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, the outspoken Fang Lizhi, and the hard-liners). In those years, many of the “sent-down” youths (some no longer young) returned to their cities, and many young people found themselves in the category of “waiting for work.” During this period there were experiments with new methods of higher education, the “iron rice bowl” began to crack, the family responsibility system was inaugurated in agriculture, and temporary migrant workers began flooding China's



cities despite their lack of the necessary residence permits. From groping and miniscule beginnings, a free market began on the streets. In small restaurants and tiny shops, private enterprise began to compete with state-owned enterprises. A China that closed early and was nearly dark at night became a country where city life brightened. China was a country where privacy was an almost absent commodity; the most populous country in the world often seemed like a small village.

It is this China that is chronicled in Lijia Zhang's “*Socialism Is Great!*” Her personal life narrative and her desire to participate in an awakening China offers a resource for teachers seeking to close the gap and make this period in China's history meaningful to their students. Though it focuses on her personal story as a factory worker in Nanjing, my own experiences during those years make it clear she represents the new generation in both factory and university. Almost every page triggered strong memories. There are brief, but repeated, encounters with *guanxi* (the personal networks), the importance of the *danwei* (work unit), the backdoor that was necessary to get goods or make changes, the weekly political meetings, and the importance of politics for any advancement. Despite her struggles against the system, there are some efficient and hard-working cadres. And, yes, there are honest and kind members of the Communist Party. Zhang does capture the spirit of the age.

This book can be a great resource for teachers and useful for undergraduate students, as well. At the secondary level, while it can be a godsend for teachers, it should not be used for student reading as Zhang is too open about her personal sexual experiences. I have rechecked with trusted friends of the appropriate age, and Zhang was far more active than the vast majority of her age cohort. With this one caveat, I strongly recommend Zhang's “*Socialism is Great!*” to teachers of modern China at just about every level. ■

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