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# Hartung, Jan-Peter. *A System of Life: Mawdūdī and the Ideologisation of Islam*

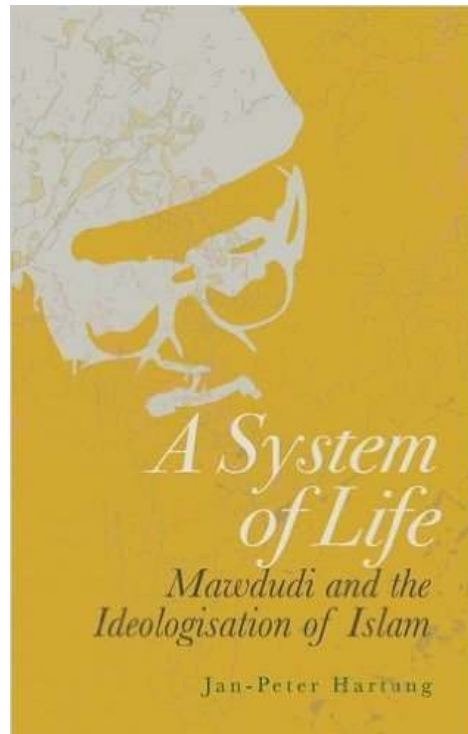
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Hartung, Jan-Peter. 2013. *A System of Life: Mawdūdī and the Ideologisation of Islam*. London: Hurst, 320 pages.

- 1 As Vali Nasr rightfully points out, biographies can be essential sources for understanding contemporary Islamic revivalism (1996:3). Among the individuals whose biography can contribute to shedding light on the phenomenon, the Indo-Pakistani thinker Abu'l A'la Mawdudi (1903-1979) stands out prominently; his importance has however been somewhat underestimated outside the circles of scholars specialized in Islamism. Such lack of fame is all the more surprising as Mawdudi has been particularly instrumental in developing a systematic vision of political Islam, inspiring in turn highly renowned Islamic thinkers such as the Egyptian Syed Qutb (1906-1966, propelled to the hall of international fame after September 11<sup>1</sup>). This relative absence of notoriety—which may be due to the fact that South Asia is generally not identified



with Islam even though the majority of Muslims on the planet live in that region—does not mean however that the study of Mawdudi has been neglected by academia. Quite the contrary since a few major works have been devoted to studying his biography along with his thought and action: among the most notable are an excellent study by Vali Nasr as mentioned above (1996), two pioneering articles by Charles J. Adams (1966 and 1983), as well as a more recent book by Roy Jackson (2010). The book under review here, *A System of Life: Mawdudi and the Ideologisation of Islam*, is another fascinating contribution to the understanding of the genesis of Islamism through a careful analysis of Mawdudi's system of thought. Started as a M.A. dissertation at the University of Leipzig, this book is at the crossroads of political philosophy and Islamic studies. It is the result of over 15 years of thorough research in which the author, Jan-Peter Hartung, using a vast array of vernacular sources in different languages (mainly Urdu and Arabic), not only demonstrates the political impact of Mawdudi's thought on the rise and dissemination of Islamism in both the pre- and post-9/11 periods but also provides fresh insights into the various sources which have supplied Mawdudi with conceptual material to elaborate his vision. In other words, at the heart of this book lie both the analysis of the influences inspiring Mawdudi's religious and political thought and his own influence and legacy on the ideological framework of others. In the process, borrowing from Daniel W. Brown's concept of the "prism of modernity,"<sup>2</sup> Hartung shows how Mawdudi's reconceptualization of Islam combines critical engagement with Western philosophy and ideologies with an approach deeply entrenched in Islamic tradition.

- 2 The book is divided into four chapters which first deal with the development of Mawdudi's religious and political thought and then focus on the practical realization of his ideological project. In the first chapter, Hartung starts by critically examining Mawdudi's formative years (1910s-1920s) showing the various means used by the thinker, and later propagated by the movement he founded, the Jama'at-i Islami, to stage him(self)

as someone “almost predestined for intellectual leadership” (2013:11). These means included a double claim: the acquaintance with “traditional” religious sciences and proficiency in Arabic on the one hand (an assertion called into question by ‘*ulama* then and to this date, and by the author himself who wonders why Mawdudi had some of his writings translated, instead of directly writing in Arabic, if he was so fluent in that language) and on the other hand the competence in contemporary non-Islamic sciences (comprising history, philosophy, political science, sociology...) along with proficiency in English. Beyond a mere politics of self-promotion, these simultaneous claims are symptomatic of this particular “prism of modernity,” fairly typical of Islamism, whereby while “traditional” sources *have to remain* the ultimate source of authority, the (not-necessarily intentional) mobilization of “modern” sources and means of knowledge provide an essential basis for the formulation of ideas and concepts.

- 3 Hartung then reintegrates Mawdudi’s biography (a journalist-cum-thinker-cum-political activist) and thought into its historical context, so as to demonstrate the decisive influence the contemporary religious and political environment exerted on the development of his ideology. This period was altogether marked by the anti-colonial struggle for self-determination along with the thriving of reformist Islam: rooted, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, partly in Arab lands (through the Wahhabi movement in particular) and partly in Indian soil through leading figures such as Shah Waliullah (1703-1762), it found a new impetus at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which witnessed the emergence of movements like Deoband (with which Mawdudi initially had close affinities) and the Ahl-i Hadith. In this specific context, one particular event had a decisive impact on Mawdudi’s religious and political thought: the Caliphate movement (1919-1924) marked in the beginning by the acceptance of Hindu-Muslim unity in the anti-colonial struggle and then followed by an increasing communalization, setting Hindus and Muslims apart (Minault 1982). Hartung shows in the book how this shift in the movement, closely followed by Mawdudi then still in his teens, urged him to consider an alternative path, paving “a third way to the then prevalent various secular and religious nationalisms” (p. 19). Far from being confined to a description of unfolding events, Hartung’s analysis is enriched by comparisons with the Middle-East where similar developments, including the rise of reformist Islam as an anti-colonial response, were taking place, and which are essential to account for in order to understand future reciprocal influences between the Middle East and South Asia.
- 4 No less interesting is his exploration of affects (limited to the historical section, however), and this in two ways: first he takes into account the underlying emotions at play (such as humiliation in the aftermath of 1857, anxiety over the colonial situation and disappointment after the failure of the Caliphate movement) that were not negligible in triggering action among the Muslim leadership; second he highlights the role of emotions in molding Indian Muslims “into a—somewhat imagined—single community which was part of an—equally imagined—much larger entity, that is the global Muslim *umma*” (p. 31). Hartung ends this chapter by presenting the impact of the two predominant Western political ideologies with universal aspirations, namely Communism and Fascism, on Indian elites in general and on Mawdudi in particular, who were in search of models of “societal development” to build future societies in independent India/South Asia.
- 5 The second—very long—chapter, aptly entitled “Forging a System,” is devoted to a careful reconstruction of Mawdudi’s “Islamic path” (*Islami tariqa*, p. 69), i.e. an alternative system to other predominant ideologies, in which religion would provide the ideological

foundation. In order to do so, Hartung shows how Mawdudi creatively reinterpreted some core Islamic concepts and paradigms. Among these concepts, particularly noteworthy is the notion of *jahiliyya* whose redefinition was to have a decisive impact on revivalist movements in other parts of the world as we shall see below. *Jahiliyya* (literally “ignorance”) refers to a conception dividing history into pre- and post-Islamic periods. As a moment preceding Islam, it has thus been “traditionally” (i.e. from the early Islamic period) understood in temporal terms. While Mawdudi was not the first one to assess *jahiliyya* as a moral state persisting among Muslims—Ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328) and Muhammad Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792) had shared similar views before him—, he went further by proposing a definition in which he replaced the “epochal designation” with a “typological” approach whereby the term was granted the exclusive meaning of “ignorance towards God, his Prophet, and the revelation”—in the sense of a deliberate refusal to recognize their authority—beyond any temporal division (p. 64–65). In doing so, Mawdudi distinguished two types of inter-connected *jahiliyya*: “sheer ignorance” characterizing these worldly oriented and individualistic societies (mainly capitalist ones but also, more unexpectedly, communist societies as well); and a second one under which he subsumed so-called polytheist practices (including in this category some Sufi and Shia customs), as these approaches would all ultimately lead to “the dominance of man over man” (p. 67). Interestingly, he also critically assessed ascetic practices as they aimed to engender the “suppression of man by man” (p. 68). As Hartung rightfully emphasizes, such definitions suggest an equation of *jahiliyya* with unbelief (*kufir*), and hence are in turn “an indication that, on the one hand, “Islam” [as defined by the authoritative texts] was not just one of a number of possible choices for Mawdudi, nor was it only the best of all choices, but it was the only choice to be considered legitimate” (p. 70). Beyond the very meaning he imparted to *jahiliyya* along with its implications and repercussions on the development of Islamism throughout the world, this redefinition of *jahiliyya*, as Hartung shows, results from a combination of elements and approaches from various sources giving its distinctiveness and originality to Mawdudi’s paradigm: Islamic tradition on the one hand, Western philosophical and political thought on the other. But there is a distinction between both: as already suggested above, while Mawdudi deliberately referred to Islamic tradition to legitimize his claims, his position vis-à-vis Western philosophers pertained to a logic of critical assessment but the influence as such was usually not deliberate, even less so acknowledged (this, as a matter of fact, making it hard to precisely evaluate).

- 6 In any case, while Mawdudi constantly reasserted the uncompromising supremacy of the authoritative texts of Islam, he resorted to “scientific methods,” as is shown by his use of rules of logical deduction to frame, through a few axioms (*usul*), his concept of Islam as a complete system of life. He searched for these axioms within Islam itself in order to show the rationality inherent in the Quran as a self-sufficient system, and justifying in turn its ultimate authority (“every thing is in a logical relation to its fundamental principles” thus wrote Mawdudi in *Islam ka nazariyya-yi siyasi* (1972), see Hartung 2013: 83). As Hartung emphasizes, Mawdudi’s deductive approach also helps to highlight the inconsistencies in his thought (some of which he was aware of) and the dilemmas he went through. Beyond methodology, on a more conceptual level, his (not so successful, as Hartung points out) attempts to reconcile man’s freedom of choice with his absolute dependence on God were also symptomatic of the fact that his reassessment of Islam was entrenched in the intellectual landscape of his times. Thus, his idea of the possibility for man to understand the essence of the Quran in an unmediated way was not only an

implicit criticism of the monopoly of interpretation by trained *‘ulama* but was also in line with the “philosophical *zeitgeist*” (p. 87) whereby it was admitted (in keeping with the thought developed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment among others) that individuals had the potential to rely on no other authority than their own intellectual abilities.

- 7 A section of this chapter then studies in detail the system of thought imagined and constructed by Mawdudi, highlighting in particular his specific approach to the notion of *hakimiyya* to which he imparted the exclusive meaning of God’s unlimited sovereignty (while the term “*hukm*,” as used in the Quran, may refer to larger meanings such as “arbitration” and “judgment”<sup>73</sup>). Related to this conception is the idea Mawdudi is most renowned for, i.e. the Islamic State. Hartung examines in particular such re-assessed concepts as “theo-democracy” (*ilahi jumhuri hukumat*), a neologism coined by Mawdudi to designate a notion of democracy in accordance with one of his main principles, i.e. man’s sovereignty is relative in that it remains subordinated to God’s sovereignty. Once again, in doing so, the author systematically refers to the different sources that probably inspired the thinker when he drafted his theory: religious texts (as shown by his re-reading of the notion of *shura*, i.e. the classical institution of mutual consultation in Islam); Western philosophers such as Hegel and his conception of an ethically and not territorially defined State, Hobbes and his notion of the alienation of their rights by members of a polity for the common good in favor of the most susceptible (“righteous” as re-interpreted by Mawdudi) person to guarantee the rights of his subjects, Rousseau and his idea of a state uniting the wills of individuals in a general will for the common good, and so on. Hartung ends this chapter with a critical analysis of the two groups, namely women and non-Muslims, who theoretically undermine Mawdudi’s conception of the state as a “theo-democracy”: the fact that his system does not grant them any space in public affairs challenges the initial idea of egalitarianism associated with this conception.
- 8 In the third chapter, Hartung analyzes the theory developed by Mawdudi for the practical implementation of his project, by particularly focusing on his understanding of the concept of “revolution” (*inqilab*) whereby revolution as such (i.e. a complete reassessment of values and structures primarily inspired by Western thought) was not a process but rather the end result while the process itself was more akin to reform (*islah*). The various sources of inspiration Hartung identifies are both contextual (like the Indian movement for independence, European Communism and Fascism,) and conceptual, such as the Islamic notion of *tajdid*, or cyclical renewal, mixed with perceptions drawn from Hegel (the notion of moral self-perfecting, for example) and Nietzsche (his critique of the one-dimensionality of historicism, for instance). It is also in this chapter that Hartung analyzes the body that would serve as the vanguard (by its “unquestionable moral integrity”, p. 176) of the Islamic revolution, i.e. the Jama‘at-i Islami (created in 1941). This analysis is enriched with some interesting comparisons with the rival Tablighi Jama‘at, created a few years before.
- 9 The last chapter provides insights on the reception and legacy of Mawdudi’s theories and project. The first section is a very stimulating analysis of the impact of Mawdudi’s line of thought on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) through one of its prominent ideologues, Syed Qutb whom Hartung qualifies as Mawdudi’s “true spiritual heir” (p. 8). While this influence has been acknowledged in other studies (see for instance Euben 1999:55 *et passim*), it is analyzed in fairly great detail in the present book, the author showing in particular how Syed Qutb selectively and creatively re-appropriated

some of Mawdudi's terms and concepts (primarily *jahiliyya*, *hakimiyya* and jihad, the latter intrinsically linked to Mawdudi's notion of "revolution," Hartung 2013:212) so as to formulate his own much more radical political theory (a radicalization resulting, as Hartung rightfully points out, from the political circumstances of post-Second World War Egypt where persecution of political opponents was rampant). It is this radicalized, but also more concrete, systematic and "emotive" (p. 213), version which would lay the foundation of militant Islamist thought. This ideological heritage was re-appropriated and sustained by both moderate and radical groups (including al-Qaida), this testifying to, as Hartung emphasizes it, the "richness" (p. 258) of his ideological framework which could be appropriated by militants from "opposing views within the Islamist spectrum" (p. 258).

- 10 The second section of this chapter is devoted to the transformation of the movement whose mission was to put Mawdudi's ideological system into practice, the Jama'at-i Islami. Hartung convincingly demonstrates how, following the path of all other ideologies, the adaptation process of the movement in different South Asian countries according to the various political situations (particularly noteworthy is Hartung's analysis of the Sri Lankan Jama'at-i Islami which has hardly been studied so far) was so drastic that it somewhat diluted the original ideological framework. In other words, the richness of Mawdudi's ideas mentioned above goes hand in hand with a high level of abstraction engendering a fairly widespread but very eclectic re-appropriation.
- 11 The existence of earlier good biographies of Mawdudi could have made the task of studying his life and thought once again a fairly daunting challenge but this challenge has been taken up brilliantly by Hartung. While it does not make other works obsolete (Nasr's book will remain a reference regarding Mawdudi's life story in particular, as well as his position on several social and political issues), Hartung's book is very original in the way it meticulously identifies the determining influences on Mawdudi's thought. This allows him in the process not only to show the competing and potentially conflicting influences at play but also the tensions and complexities within Mawdudi's system of thought, such as the intersection between an innovative approach to Islam and a more conventional interpretation in line with classical exegesis, which in turn is fairly reflective of the very mode of thinking of Islamism at large. Equally stimulating is the analysis of how concepts and contexts decisively interact in the formulation of an ideological system. The book also offers interesting comparative perspectives with other Islamic movements through a discussion for instance on the nuances of interpretation of some Islamic concepts mobilized by competing groups: examples in case would be a comparison of the understanding of the notion of *tawhid* (Unity of Allah) and of the ethical maxim *amr bi'lma'ruf wa-nahy 'an al-munkar* ("enjoining the commendable and preventing the reprehensible") by Jama'atis and Salafis (with potentially reciprocal influences). Beside the sophisticated analysis supported by a vast mobilization of primary sources from various prominent Islamic thinkers, and theoretical references, the value of this study also resides in its enormous corpus of notes and bibliography (there is however a very surprising absence of reference to the pioneering work of Charles J. Adams on Mawdudi).
- 12 A weaker part of the book, to my mind, is the introduction which could have been a bit more elaborate. A more thorough discussion of the existing literature would have brought out the originality of Hartung's work even more clearly, given the fact that, as mentioned before and as the author himself states it, two books already exist on Mawdudi, Nasr's and Jackson's. Throughout the book, as a matter of fact, there is hardly



any mention of Jackson's study; as for Nasr's book, a few criticisms (such as the lack of distance vis-à-vis Mawdudi's autobiography and hagiography) are (elegantly) relegated to the notes section, but it would have perhaps been interesting to engage in a critical dialogue with Nasr within the book itself, especially on differing interpretations of Mawdudi's thought, such as the role of the concept of *zimmi* in his ideological framework (p. 300 note 504). Another point to be noted is that Hartung and Nasr do not entirely agree about the sources of influence on Mawdudi (for instance, Hartung dismisses Nasr's comparison between Hannah Arendt's theory of revolution and Mawdudi's own conceptualization of this notion, see p. 304 note 52).

- 13 This leads to another comment: a more reflexive approach (formulated in the introduction particularly) when mentioning the potential sources of influence on Mawdudi's thinking would have perhaps been beneficial. While the influence of Western political thought on Mawdudi is a key element in Hartung's analysis, it is in some ways based on assumptions, for although Mawdudi was in critical dialogue with Western theories, which, as rightfully demonstrated by Hartung, he did use and refer to in his writings, he did not explicitly mention them as sources of *inspiration* for his system of thought. Thus, while this does not disqualify Western theories as sources of *influence* on Mawdudi, this fact could have perhaps been more clearly stated, as a methodological caveat, at the onset of the book. In the same vein, there are a few sections in the book where we are not sure whether Mawdudi was only in line with the system of thought of his times or whether he was directly influenced by the thought of particular philosophers on specific points. That said, none of these few remarks diminish the quality of this very comprehensive and perceptive study.

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## NOTES

1. See for instance: [http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-philosopher-of-islamic-terror.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/23/magazine/the-philosopher-of-islamic-terror.html?_r=0)
  2. In his work on the relationship between Islamic tradition and modernity, Daniel W. Brown conceptualizes the “prism of modernity” in the following way: “a tradition emerges from the prism of modernity as a multi-colored spectrum of responses. Some responses will show the effects of modernity much more dramatically than other, but none will be entirely untouched. At the same time, each color of the spectrum, each different response, is clearly rooted in the tradition, and even those who seem to have left the tradition altogether behind, maintain a certain continuity with the tradition, just as each band of the spectrum is present in the light entering a prism” (Brown 1996:3).
  3. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e890>
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