



# Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern

*John N. Gray*

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While many Americans view the September 11th terrorist attack as the act of an anachronistic and dangerous sect, one that champions medieval and outmoded ideals, John Gray here argues that in fact the ideology of Al Qaeda is both Western and modern, a by-product of globalization's transnational capital flows and open borders. Indeed, according to Gray, Al Qaeda's utopian zeal to remake the world in its own image descends from the same Enlightenment creed that informed both the disastrous Soviet experiment and the new neoliberal dream of a global free market.

In this "excellent short introduction to modern thought" (*The Guardian*), first published in 2003, Gray warns that the United States, once a champion of revolutionary economic and social change, must now understand its new foes. He also confronts some of the faults he perceives in Western ideology: the faith that global development will eradicate war and hunger, trust in technology to address the coming catastrophe of population explosion, and the belief that democracy is an infallible institution that can serve as political panacea for all.

## Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern Details

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# From Reader Review Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern for online ebook

## Patrick McCoy says

Al Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern by John Gray is quite short, but very provocative. He packs a lot of ideas into a 119-page book. He manages to include several different threads:

- \*The idea that modern doesn't necessarily mean liberal and secular.
- \*The global aspects of the marketplace and its effects, as well as the existence of different types of successful markets.
- \*The issue of resources and the social and political impact as the source of the issue.
- \*The rise of unconventional warfare on the global level.
- \*Dollar diplomacy and American hegemony and the rise of American imperialism.
- \*He stresses the accidents of history that have brought us to where we are.

He is particularly good on "the original modernizers" and as he should be, since he is a professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics. It is basically a criticism of American "one size fits all" approach to foreign policy, but very it is stimulating and fascinating. It stays with you long after reading it.

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## Murtaza says

Although I like John Gray I wasn't a fan of this book. The thesis has less to do with what the title may suggest and for the most part it is a huge exercise in dreary pessimism about the trajectory of modern societies. Straw Dogs contained elements of this too but it was mixed with enough insights into the really interesting issue - the continuities and mutations of "pre-modern" thought in our modern ideologies, as well as the incoherence of many of the latter - to make it a great book. This on the other hand makes a few passing points but focuses otherwise on the collapse Gray sees around the corner, which he might be right about but that isn't a particularly novel or interesting observation.

Had this book focused more on what the title suggested, the huge influence of modern European revolutionary ideologies on Muslim terrorist organizations, it would've been interesting. It is a thesis Gray endorses, and there are a few passing points on this, but for the most part the topic is not focused upon, to the detriment of the work writ large.

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## Alex Zakharov says

Short, and as thought-provoking as "straw dogs" and "black mass", but in the end not as convincing.

There are few related themes in the book, but perhaps the central theme is that the world becoming more modern does not imply the world becoming more similar. The core characteristics of modernity express themselves differently in different states and are very much shaped by local culture, traditions, and philosophy. And the same logic applies to values as well – despite the spread of technology and modernity we should not expect various cultural values to converge.

Al Qaeda is one of the few movements he looks at and shows how it supports his thesis. He does a quick analysis of Al Qaeda's history and operations, and shows that ironically, despite espousing the return to traditional values, Al Qaeda in its essence is modern. As such, and as John Gray puts it, radical Islam is a symptom of a disease that it itself claims to be the cure.

Inversely, Gray also makes an argument that the West has fundamentalist tendencies, despite claiming modernity. The fact that the two are involved in a conflict makes irony particularly twisted, and even if the reader disagrees with line of reasoning one must admit it is quite clever. Read it and decide for yourself.

And of course both radical Islam and in the West try to transform the world in their own image and as such are utopian. Which brings us right back to the main thesis of the book.

There are a few other interesting tidbits thrown all around the book: role of positivists, the original modernizers; short history of free-market; reversion of 20th century ideological conflicts back to the Malthusian confrontations – Rwanda, Middle East; metamorphosis of Clausewitz style wars among the states into less circumscribed conflicts of “all against all”. Yes some arguments don't quite drive the point home and some ideas are a little specious, but overall it is an intellectually stimulating read and in the end that is what matters.

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## **Liam89 says**

A brilliant scholarly and intellectual analysis of the roots of Al-Qaeda that challenges the common claim that it is a medieval organisation. Instead, Professor John Gray argues that, like Soviet Communism and Nazism, Al-Qaeda is a very modern outfit, whose origins can be traced back to the Enlightenment, the progress of science, and the Positivist movement, and the idea that society cannot just be altered, but totally reimagined through a combination of religious fundamentalism and propaganda by deed. Moreover, he argues that jihadism in its modern form would not be possible without the effects of globalisation; the free flow of capital, open borders, and technological progress in weaponry. Essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand our current crisis.

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## **Jason says**

I cannot think of a more important book to read concerning current events. This book will demonstrate to you that the idea that any terrorist network is an ancient relic jostling to bring things back to the way they used to be is simply false. Al-Qaeda, or any group associated, are more comparable in ways to Nazis, in that their goals and methods are thoroughly modern. The idea of a global jihad has more to do with radical elements of Islam superimposing Western ideals of enlightenment on their theology than it does to do with a group of medieval throw-backs screaming for a return.

This book is also refreshing because the writer does not take sides in either direction, not being a conspiracy theorist or politically correct in his examination. The book is a very easy read and will give you a lot to reflect upon.

Unfortunately I lost this book a while back and should probably re-read it before properly reviewing it. However, this is one of the few books I would recommend to anyone, regardless of background or interests.

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### **Vivian Sophia says**

Terrorism for the purpose of changing the world order is a modern idea.

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### **J. Dunn says**

A very important book. The first thing I've read that systematically gets Al Qaeda right, as far as I can tell. That is, that Al Qaeda is essentially Western; another breakdown in Western society in response to Modernity, in the same way anarchism or nihilism or militias or other extreme movements were. It has the same vision of a revolutionary vanguard that will remake the world that Marxism, Fascism, and other radical modern political movements have had. It's like a fusion of Fundamentalist Islam and Bakunin. Grey correctly locates the fundamental danger of the modern world in the urge on the part of any group to use technology to radically remake society. Also, he emphasizes Al Qaeda is another consequence of post-nation-state globalization (and probably the first of many similar movements), and must be addressed as such. It is an ideology and a movement, not a discrete group of people and not ultimately defeatable by attacking states or killing individuals. He paints a bleak picture of the coming decades, but I'm afraid a largely correct one.

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### **Hamza A says**

John N. Gray shakes your preconceived Ideas of what a modern society and the positivist illusion that as science progresses humanity does as well. The book gives an interesting history of Ideas and shows how Al-Qaeda is a modern phenomenon. However I think his analysis of how Sayid Qutb caused extremism in Islam could have gone deeper since that is the title of this book. Nevertheless still a very interesting book.

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### **Saunaguy says**

<https://digitalsauna.wordpress.com/20...>

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### **Sean Blevins says**

Science makes progress; humanity does not. The fallacy that the advance of science inevitably leads to the advance of ethics and politics is a defining trait of modernity, argues Gray. The belief, beginning in the

seventeenth and reaching full flower in the 19th, that science will usher in a new age of peace and prosperity and universal (i.e., uniform) culture and rationality is the faith of modernity.

What does this have to do with al Qaeda? Just as it was - nay, is - believed that science can remake the world - ostensibly by changing human nature - al Qaeda and several other 19th and 20th century terrorist groups believe that the world and human nature along with it, can be remade through terror. Gray argues that al Qaeda has more in common with nineteenth century European revolutionary movements, particularly the anarchists, than any medieval movement. "If Osama bin Laden has a precursor, it is the nineteenth century Russian terrorist Sergei Nechaev," writes Gray.

The fixation on the creation of a single uniform culture and the transformation of human nature are modern fixations. They are held equally by neo-liberal utopians whose faith is in the free market and by al Qaeda.

The universalist message of both Christianity and Islam are precursors to their modern children, but, at least in the case of Islam, the pre-modern faith found ways to accommodate diversity without insisting on hegemony (see Muslim Spain, the Mughals, and the Ottoman Empire.) For this reason, the answer to the problems of diversity and conflict are not hegemony, but discovering, or rediscovering, or inventing, or reinventing, ways to live together separately.

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### **Joaquina Pereira says**

fiquei fã de John N. Gray, alargou o meu conhecimento e visão acerca do mundo politico e economico

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### **José MeLo says**

«El mensaje de anarquismo revolucionario implícito en la afirmación de que “todo sistema que permita que unas personas gobiernen a otras ha de ser abolido” debe más a las ideas radicales europeas que se remontan a los jacobinos que a las ideas clásicas o tradicionales sobre la gobenanza islámica.

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### **James says**

It was naivety that caused me to not realise that the author of this book, John Gray, is the Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics. If I had realised his economics background I would have perhaps not misinterpreted the content of the book when I bought it. Although it turned out to be a better book than I had actually expected.

Instead of being an analysis of Al Qaeda, it was actually a brief, but incredibly insightful analysis into the economic history that shaped Al Qaeda and refutes the common perception that Al Qaeda is a 'medieval' organisation.

The book covers topics ranging from the philosophical beginnings of modern Economics, into policies that shaped the start of the Twentieth century, and the outbreak of two world wars and the cold war.

The author believes that following the cold war, American 'universalism' caused a hatred of American values in societies and cultures which did not agree with having to conform to the American way of thinking.

Which in turn set the stage for the rise of Al Qaeda.

The economic argument for the creation of the organisation allows for religion to be removed from the

discussion, and instead of implicating Muslims and Christians, it is a conflict of economic values.

As economics is the study of human behaviour I feel that this quote - found in the penultimate chapter - rings very true;

"History shows that human beings use their growing knowledge to advance the purposes they already have - however conflicting they may be."

What is particularly interesting is reading this book around 10 years after it was first published. John Gray clearly had a good understanding of the modern economy in that he predicted the global economic crash of 2007 ("By doing all they could to project the free market throughout the world, American-policy makers ensured that its inherent instabilities became global in scope") and the privacy eroding practices of the NSA, as revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013 ("Using new technologies of electronic eavesdropping, face-recognition and the like, modern liberal states are acquiring unprecedented powers of surveillance over the populations within their borders. In an effort to track the potential terrorists in their midst, they are subjecting the entire population to high levels of monitoring. The price of individualism is proving to be the loss of privacy.")

A paragraph in the final chapter sums up the book perfectly;

"Western Societies are ruled by the myth that, as the rest of the world absorbs sciences and becomes modern, it is bound to become secular, enlightened and peaceful - as, contrary to all evidence, they imagine themselves to be. With its attack on the Twin Towers, Al Qaeda destroyed this myth; and yet it continues to be believed. Al Qaeda is driven by the belief that the world can be transformed by spectacular acts of terror. This myth has also been repeatedly disproved; but it still persists."

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## **James says**

This book is everything that is wrong with contemporary, leftist political argumentation. I picked it up from the library assuming it would be about the ways in which Western policies, etc., are implicated in the formation of contemporary terrorist movements. People say this is true, but I wondered if the argument went further than, "We support Israel" or "We funded the mujahideen in Afghanistan." Instead, what it does is portray Islamism as the third form of totalitarianism against which noble liberals have to struggle (the other two being Nazism and Bolshevism). So they're modern in the sense that they are genealogically rooted in those two, and liberals have to keep up the good fight. It's fine if you want to think that, even though it seems patently absurd, but at least don't pretend that this stuff comes from the left! It's the "liberalism of terror" (cf. the Corey Robin review I wrote like ten minutes ago): by creating a generic concept of "fanatical evil", from Robespierre to bin Laden, Gray et al allow liberalism (a) to exist only as the flipside of an omnipresent evil; (b) to disavow any positive claims to political rationality, equality, or the good society, as all of those forms of "rationalism in politics" are proto-totalitarian.

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## **Muhammad Ahmad says**

Provocative and brilliant, like all of Gray's work. The philosophical argumentation is solid, but his geopolitical analysis is marred by reliance on the alarmist works of Michael Klare and James Lovelock which lend the same kind of determinism to his argument which he is criticizing in others.

