



**1949**

**Sayed Kotb [Sayyid Qutb], 'The World is an Undutiful Boy!'**

**Citation:**

"Sayed Kotb [Sayyid Qutb], 'The World is an Undutiful Boy!'", 1949, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Fulcrum 3, no. 1 (1949): 29, University of Northern Colorado Archives, Record Group 10, Sub-Series 5. Contributed and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh. <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/291033>

**Summary:**

After World War II, the political, military, and economic power of the United States' rising international empire—one working with and through other nation-states—was accompanied by “soft power,” to use a term coined later. Victorious in a global war, Americans embraced “nationalist globalism,” as John Fousek put it in *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (2000). They wished the postwar world to follow their way of life rather than that of their Cold War Soviet rivals. Vice versa, people around the world paid more attention to them. Very few swallowed Americans' self-view hook, line, and sinker. But a good number came, adopted what seemed of use—and often did (and could) openly oppose what they disliked, as Matthew Shannon discusses in *Losing Hearts and Minds: American-Iranian Relations and International Education during the Cold War* (2017).

An Egyptian visitor was Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a Cairene inspector of public schools. Egypt's Ministry of Education chose him to analyze US education from November 1948 to August 1950. He studied at the Wilson Teacher's College in Washington, DC, and the Colorado State College of Education, in Greeley. He visited New York, San Francisco, Palo Alto, and San Diego. Qutb wrote about this experience—for by the mid-1940s he had become a rising author and cultural critic in Egypt. There, as Giedre Sabaseviciute has shown in “Sayyid Qutb and the crisis of culture in late 1940s Egypt” (2018), Qutb, like others of his generation, accused the cultural establishment of selling out to Western imperialism culturally and hence politically; at the time, Britain still controlled the Suez Canal, and would withdraw its last troops only in June 1956. Some young nationalist critics were leftists; others, like Qutb, had a more religious bent. (In the early 1950s Qutb would officially join the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and later texts like *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* [Milestones (1964)] would make him the intellectual father of contemporary Islamic radicalism; Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime imprisoned him after an MB coup attempt in 1954, until 1964, and again from 1965 to 1966, when he was executed.)

As for Qutb's texts on America, they were much more critical than texts by earlier Arabs

who had visited and studied in Western imperial countries. Thus, Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi's (1801-1873) or Taha Husayn's (1889-1973) reflections on sojourns in France, while critical, also identified commonalities and affirmed that Egypt could use some European traits to catch up with Western imperial powers. Not so Qutb, as John Calvert's "'The World Is an Undutiful Boy!': Sayyid Qutb's American Experience" (2000) shows. In letters home and in a three-part Arabic article titled "The America That I Have Seen," published after Qutb's return, he described Americans as a shallow, soulless people driven by status and money: Egypt's opposite. This was the external inter-civilizational front of a conflict whose domestic cultural front countered those who presumably served Western imperialism. Qutb's thinking was complex, then. This was the case doubly as it embraced Islam, whose spirituality imbued Egypt's, and as he called Egypt a civilization—nay the civilization, the world's first. In the late 1940s, in sum, Qutb was an anti-imperialist civilizational nationalist with a religious bent, or, perhaps, an Eastern civilizationalist of Egyptian nationality and Muslim faith. This showed also in the text here: Qutb's first one in English, printed in the Greeley College literary society magazine in 1949.

## **Original Language:**

English

## **Contents:**

Original Scan

Transcript - English

***The World is an Undutiful Boy!***

Sayed Kotb

History, the wayward child, has forgotten the examples of mother Egypt.

There was an ancient legend in Egypt. When the god of wisdom and knowledge created History, he gave him a great writing book and a big pen, and said to him: "Go walking on this earth, and write notes about everything you see or hear."

History went down and did as his god had told him, but sometimes he did not understand some subjects or did not know some things because he was yet young. Then he asked his god who answered every question.

Once History was walking and writing in his great book then, surprised, he saw a beautiful young woman who was a wise woman, too; she had a little boy whom she was teaching in a gentle manner.

History looked at her with great astonishment and cried, "Who is it?" raising his face to the sky.

"She is Egypt," his god answered. "She is Egypt and that little boy is the world who is studying"—the god answered again.

"When was she born?" History asked.

"I don't know"—the god of wisdom and knowledge said—"I should ask the headgod."

"Oh, sacred chief, when was Egypt born?"

"I don't remember"—replied the chief god—"my grandfather told me a long story about this matter but I don't remember now. You may ask her about it. She knows that. She knows everything. She drank from the sacred Nile and learnt all."

The god of wisdom and knowledge said to History: "You are allowed to ask her about her birth and about any other matter you have no knowledge. Don't ask me anything else. Sit down now to study this lesson, and I will listen."

Why did those ancient Egyptians hold this belief? Because they were very advanced and possessed a great civilization before any other country. Egypt was a civilized country when other peoples were living in forests. Egypt taught Greece, and Greece taught Europe.

What happened when that little boy grew up?

When he grew up, he had thrown out his nurse, his kind nurse! He struck her, trying to kill her. I am sorry. This is not a figure of speech. This is a fact. This is what has actually happened.

When we came here to appeal to England for our rights, the world helped England against the justice. When we came here to appeal against Jews, the world helped the Jews against the justice. During the war between Arab and Jews, the world helped the Jews, too.

Oh! What an undutiful world! What an undutiful boy!