

# **Orientalism and World History: Representing Middle Eastern Nationalism and Islamism in the Twentieth Century**

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"The problem with Europe is that it has forgotten its history, most of which takes place outside its borders."

-Salman Rushdie

## **Framing the Present Time (I)**

This is an essay about framing, about contextualization. It seeks to situate the political and cultural transitions the modern Middle East has undergone in this century in their world historical contexts, the better to help us understand the meanings of the present shift to Islamist forms of politics in the region. It is my contention that scholars have misunderstood the world historical significance of the emergence of nationalism in the area, that they have misconstrued its relationship to orientalism and to the European enlightenment more generally, and (as a result) largely misunderstood the nature of the Islamist challenge. In many ways my reflections here spring from a dissatisfaction with the inadequacies (both epistemological and world historical) of the ways in which some critics of orientalism have located modernity.

First, some background. The independence movements of the Middle East and North Africa--especially the Algerian revolution--provoked a debate about orientalist knowledge in which the interventions of Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon were crucial. For Fanon, the anti-colonial struggle was also a cultural struggle with liberation as its goal. The publication of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) recast the terms of the debate. Following Michel Foucault, Said portrayed orientalism as not just an academic discipline, but as an ideological discourse inextricably involved with European power. In the debate that followed, neither Said nor his critics were always careful to distinguish the elements of the critique or the complex epistemological issues involved: in part it is about the nature of Enlightenment thought and the epistemological underpinnings of scientific knowledge, in part about the connections between particular scholars and orientalist institutions and imperialism.

Said argues that because all knowledge is the product of its age and necessarily contingent, there can be no knowledge unaffected by the auspices under which it comes to be. If this premise is accepted, it follows that there can be no knowledge which is fully objective: thus, orientalism has no privileged claim to truth. However, Said and his supporters go further, arguing that because orientalism as a species of discourse was fatally entangled with imperialism, the knowledge it produced was inevitably distorted, if not willfully racist.

While there is much truth in these observations, they are lacking in complexity. Certainly, orientalism as a discourse could not but reflect the views of the ambient culture in which it flourished. Thus some orientalists did place themselves in the service of European empires; the fortunes of the field were frequently linked to imperialism; and European assumptions of superiority to non-Europeans and of the progressive role of imperialism were widespread. On the other hand, it is important to note that some orientalists opposed imperialism or wrote favorably about Islamic culture and society; that some Middle Eastern nationalists were themselves inspired by Western orientalist writings; and that nationalist and Muslim theological positions have their own biases and assumptions.

It is undeniable that as a species of Enlightenment discourse, orientalism has been a carrier of basic Western notions of the European self and the non-Western other which generated unfalsifiable propositions about the superiority of Europeans to non-Europeans. In this way, orientalists participated in the elaboration of modern European cultural identity. However, it is only as a result of the subsequent development of Western thought that it is possible to raise these criticisms.

We can now see that modernity was a global process rather than a manifestation of European genius. This does not mean that orientalism's claim to scientific status is void, but that like other forms of human knowledge, it is both contingent and subject to constant critique and reformulation in function of changing perspectives on the past. It is only through the evaluation of these issues that one can understand orientalism as a form of intellectual inquiry.<sup>1</sup> I will return to this discussion in the conclusion.

As a world historian interested in both the history of European orientalism and modern Islamic history, I have long been struck by the similarities between the indeterminacy of our present time and that of the early twentieth century. One place where these indeterminacies come together is the Middle East. Unpredicted by all observers, an Islamic political revival is under way. Since the Islamic revolution in Iran (1978-79), secular nationalism is in retreat in the region, confounding both Left and Right alike. Why is there an Islamist movement in Algeria (the erstwhile center of Third

Worldism)?<sup>2</sup> Why is Egypt, which was the leader of progressive Arab nationalism under Nasser, itself increasingly exposed to an Islamist challenge? How are we to understand these developments? Do they represent a retreat from modernity? Accounting for the Islamist movement in the Middle East has thus far confounded all theories. For those concerned with theory and history this gap should induce more concern than it has so far. One way to remap the dimensions of this problem is through a consideration of the similar incomprehension that greeted the emergence of nationalisms in the area following the collapse of the Ottoman empire.

Following World War I, the Middle East came to modern politics. This transition, and the ways it was represented by nationalists and Western orientalists at the time, frames the contemporary transition from secular nationalism to political Islamic discourse in the area. In the first section of this article, "Framing Orientalism," I argue that the ways in which both nationalists and Western orientalists have historicized this transition is seriously deficient. In order to resituate our understandings of how the Middle East came to modern politics, it is necessary to reexamine the deep and unsuspected filiation between orientalism and nationalism. In the second and third sections, "Framing the Iranian revolution," and "Framing Fundamentalism," I examine the transition the region has been undergoing since the Iranian revolution (1978-79) and the ways in which it has been historicized and theorized. In the following section, "Framing the Present Day (II)," I locate the studies on the Iranian revolution and fundamentalism in the contemporary political field. Finally, in the conclusion I argue that the study of these transitional moments in the politics of the modern Middle East, and the gaps and silences in the ways they have been historicized, raise questions about the adequacy of certain models of social theory and of world history. Ultimately, I argue that Islamism and its critique must be contextualized in world historical terms, in order to comprehend ways in which meanings are historically embedded.

### **Framing Orientalism**

Take One : In 1890, the Middle Eastern political scene from the Atlantic to the Hindu Kush was dominated by Islamic empires (Morocco, the Ottoman empire, the Persian empire, Afghanistan). A congeries of opposition movements (nationalist, Ottomanist, pan-Islamic) sought power. But they lacked both favor and money: the Islamic monarchies, heavily mortgaged to Western banks, remained a part of the existing order of things, pending a decisive push from some quarter. For Muslim intellectuals the period 1880-1914 was a time of profound crisis. "Li madha ta'akhkhur al-muslimun?" ["Why are Muslims backward?"] asked Shakib Arslan in a famous book.<sup>3</sup> The same question was being posed by many others. While some sought to reimagine the Ottoman empire as a Turkish-Arab condominium, a region of linguistic national states, or a pan-Islamic empire, how to get from the decrepit Ottoman empire to the desired goal was far from clear.

Take Two : By 1920, the Ottoman empire was a defeated power, stripped of its Arab provinces, with its territories occupied by British, French, Italian and Greek armies. The writ of the Ottoman sultan/caliph ran mostly to Istanbul and adjoining provinces, while in the interior Ataturk's Grand National Assembly organized resistance. By 1924 the new Republic had abolished both the caliphate and the sultanate, and compelled a renegotiation of the Versailles settlement. Elsewhere the Qajar dynasty in Persia had fallen by 1920 to Reza Khan, ending a period of constitutional rule and inaugurating a new dynasty (soon to be known as Pahlavi) and a new imagined identity: Iran. Following a constitutional revolution in 1919, the Muhammadzai dynasty clung to power in Afghanistan with the blessings of the British. Morocco, the only old Islamic empire to succumb to direct colonial rule, became a French protectorate in 1912.

In a little over thirty years, the Middle East came to modern politics. In this transition, the key events were the abolition of the Ottoman sultanate in 1923 and of the caliphate in 1924, which desacralized the Islamic past even as they completed the delegitimization of the old Islamic elites. In addition, the Bolshevik revolution, which while largely contained by the Allies, set off deep reverberations throughout the region. For the next fifty years Middle Eastern politics was largely contained within the homogenizing discourse of nationalism.

Although nationalist histories portray a seamless transition from the pre- to the post-war political eras, the Ottoman empire did not devolve in an orderly way into any of its alternative futures. Generally left out of the narrative are the "Islamic revolutions" of 1906-1908. Little remembered today, these revolutions were a Middle Eastern 1848 (or 1905) a "springtime of the peoples" that occasioned an outpouring of enthusiasm from the non-Turkish populations before the harsh realities of imperialist endgame took hold. These include the Persian constitutional revolution of 1906, the Young Turk revolution of 1908, and an abortive constitutional revolution in Morocco also in 1908.<sup>4</sup> The first precocious signs of labor militancy, including an Istanbul docker's strike in 1908-1909 and tramway strikes in Alexandria, Tunis and Beirut, and the emergence of Mazzinian-style nationalist groups like Young Egypt, Young Tunisia and Young Algeria all point towards other futures. They and a host of ephemeral popular movements without a name pulled in different directions. Only later, following the development of the official nationalist histories, was it possible to retrospectively rebaptize as nationalist the eclectic and experimental social movements of this period.<sup>5</sup>

If Middle Eastern nationalist histories emphasize continuity and downplay discordances, how did European orientalists understand this transition at the time? Mostly they continued as before — producing studies of obscure manuscripts, folk traits, rural sufism and popular religion. A central premise of pre-war orientalism was that Islam was retrograde and incapable of change, and that Pan-Islamic or mahdist uprisings were imminent. Despite Ottoman calls for jihad, however, a pan-Islamic rebellion failed to materialize during the war. When nationalist movements began to flex their muscles following the war, a new analysis seemed

required. But no such analysis was forthcoming. Rather than addressing the cultural and political stirrings of the Ottoman fin de régime, orientalists kept their eyes firmly planted on the rearvision mirror.

A case in point is the reception of the first stirrings of what would later be recognized as nationalism in Algeria. When the Algerian Muslim leader Amir Khaled, the grandson of the resistance hero Abd al-Qadir, and a graduate of St. Cyr, publicly opposed certain onerous features of French rule (while steadfastly professing his loyalty to France) in 1921, he was denounced by the French press as "the mahdi of North African Bolshevism." The diagnosis was accepted by many French orientalists. The fact that Amir Khaled was neither an agent of the Comintern, nor an Islamic millenarian, does not appear to have troubled them overly.<sup>6</sup> Similar confusion existed in the minds of European observers of the emergence of the Turkish resistance movement to the imposed World War I peace settlement. Was Ataturk a pan-Islamist? a crypto-Bolshevik? a Turkish Mussolini? The most surprising thing is that so few could see that he was a nationalist.

This example, which is far from unique, points to a forgotten fact: that European observers were extremely slow to comprehend the challenge posed by nationalism. Here we see the power of the discourse of Orientalism — the repository of stereotypes, essentialisms and binary logic. To the end of French Algeria, many orientalists remained convinced that Algerian nationalism was a communist plot.

In the inter-war period, nationalist histories emphasized that the transition from pre- to the post-war political contexts was a seamless one, in which subaltern struggles and alternatives voices were either recoded as nationalist, or simply erased.<sup>7</sup> The orientalist view on the other hand, emphasized the alleged continuities of essentialized features of Islam, and denied history.

How do we explain the failure of theory in the case of the discursive transition which the Middle East underwent in the post-World War I world? Beyond the gaps and absences, as well as the ideological amalgamations, it is interesting to note that nationalist intellectuals and orientalist commentators both truncated history in parallel but opposed ways, although for different reasons. Said gives us an orientalism to which the antidote is nationalism. Here I'd like to suggest that despite their evident opposition, orientalism and nationalism are deeply interconnected. On one level, that of direct influence, it has been known (although mostly little remarked) for some time that orientalist texts were often appropriated by nationalists in order to legitimate their claims about the volk. Thus for example, Leon Cahun's texts served as a source for the Ataturkian nationalist theorists and Gobineau's texts about the Persian origins of the ancient Aryans were utilized by the Reza Shah's theorists of the Pahlavi state.<sup>8</sup>

At a deeper level still, I'd like to argue that as products of the European Enlightenment, orientalism and nationalism are deeply imbricated in one another

in ways hitherto largely unsuspected. Thus, for example, orientalists revalorize and systematize the indigenous pasts of Asia. As an Enlightenment discourse, one can note, orientalism assumes a world of ethnic nations, while in observing non-Western societies, it pre-marks their ethnic faultlines, tracing in advance the borders along which new lines of cleavage would emerge and new identities would blossom. Nationalism, like orientalism, is imbued with idea of progress, accepts the idea that human history unfolds according to stages and regards non-modern traits as survivals from an earlier age. Indeed, nationalists are inside-out orientalists, who revalorize what orientalists perceive as lack. Thus orientalism in effect summons nationalism into existence. Also we can note that orientalism's critique of religion was adopted by nationalists, who sought to portray themselves as secular, in opposition to the retrograde forces of religion. In any effort to rehistoricize orientalism and nationalism, these intellectual operations must be systematically unpacked. I will return to some of the implications of these findings in the conclusion.

### **Framing The Iranian Revolution**

The so-called Islamic revival burst upon the world in 1979 with the Iranian revolution. Unpredicted by area specialists, whether of the Left or the Right, it posed an immediate challenge to social analysis. At the time the intersecting paradigms of modernization theory and progressive nationalism largely dominated social science interpretations of the region, although Left critics within the field were beginning to publically critique many the premises of the official consensus. Almost from the outset, there were difficulties to theorizing Islamist radicalism. Symptomatically, up until almost the last moment leading U. S. Iran specialists displayed incomprehension.<sup>9</sup> The Left, while sympathetic in varying degrees to the Islamic critique of the Shah's regime, espoused a structural critique of the weaknesses of the Shah's regime, rather than engaging the content of the revolutionary ideology. Iran experts for the most part "did not get it."<sup>10</sup>

The consensus view, contained in Nikki Keddie's Roots of Revolution (with Yann Richard). A political history of modern Iran with few theoretical ambitions, Keddie argued that in response to the dislocating effects of Iranian modernization and the success of the regime in coopting opponents, an Islamic critique developed which led to revolution. This essentially Weberian theory depicts the revolution as a response to the "two cultures split" between traditional and modern in Iran, a welling up of primordialist sentiment.<sup>11</sup>

Following Keddie's synthesis, a generation of researchers published an impressive group of books and articles seeking to explain the earthquake. While much of this literature is outstanding, in retrospect one can now see the difficulty they experienced in historically locating the point of cultural

rupture. One family of analysis, inspired by Marxism, sought to expose the structural roots of the revolution. Because they do not engage the Islamic roots of revolution, they are not discussed here.<sup>12</sup> Others, inspired by the new orientalism have taught us a great deal about the role of the clergy, and the history of Iranian Shi'ism generally.<sup>13</sup> It is striking however, how few Iran specialists nor Middle East area specialists have attempted to theorize the Islamic revolution, or to situate it in a global historical context.

Despite the challenge posed by the Iranian revolution to existing theories of revolution, it is remarkable how little impact it has had on social theory generally. One of the most important interpretations by a theorist of revolutions is that of Theda Skocpol. Her article, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," appeared in a special issue of Theory and Society in 1982 (along with critiques by Eqbal Ahmad, Walter L. Goldfrank and Nikki R. Keddie). Fresh from the publication of her States and Social Revolutions, Skocpol sought to apply her structuralist understandings of revolutions to the Iranian case. She strongly and to my mind correctly rejected Durkheimian interpretations that viewed the revolution as being caused by modernization. She clearly noted the ability of the clergy to manipulate the networks and symbols of Shiite Islam in building its revolutionary coalition. However it is clear that she did not know what to make of the ideological content of the revolution, which she refers to as a "populist brand of Islamic traditionalism." (274) Her bewilderment is evident (she speaks of the "mystery") in the face of the remarkable capacity of the opposition to sustain popular mobilization sufficient to bring down the regime. In the end Skocpol's effort to incorporate culture into her structuralist analysis of the revolution is not convincing, a point made by several of her critics.<sup>14</sup> She would not be the last social theorist to avert her glance when confronted with the Islamist challenge.

One of the few other attempts at theorizing the Islamic revolution is Said Amir Arjomand's "Iran's Islamic Revolution in Comparative Perspective."<sup>15</sup> In this essay Arjomand seeks to historicize the relations between the state and what he calls the hierocracy, that is the ulama. He juxtaposes the historical experience of Iran against that of Western Europe as part of a discussion of the situation of privileged social groups in the context of consolidating states. The interest in this exercise, which otherwise is an uneasy mix of Durkheim and Weber, of relative deprivation theory and structuralism, is its focus on ideology. Arjomand was one of the first to recognize the extent to which the ideology of the Islamic revolution was composed not of an eclectic mixture of traditional, progressive, and fascist elements. Unfortunately, he does not draw out the implications of this observation. On the crucial question of how to situate the religious ideology of the revolution: pro- or anti-Enlightenment, he opts for the negative. Just at the moment when his analysis makes possible a more complex theorization, Arjomand's basic Weberian position asserts itself. The

revolution was a form of "revolutionary traditionalism," a volatile compound which he is eager to amalgamate to fascist ideologies.<sup>16</sup> Here we are not far from the orientalist fantasies of the "mahdi of Bolshevism". It is an important missed opportunity.

It soon became clear that the Islamic revolution in Iran, while deeply rooted in the history of Iran (and the specific culture of Iranian Shi'ism), had a wide resonance among world Muslims. By the early 1980s most states in the region found themselves challenged by opposition groups which explicitly presented themselves as inspired by Islam. There is a tendency now to see the emergence of Islamist politics as heavily over-determined, and secular nationalisms and the state as weak. It is important to resist this temptation. Although the first signs of the waning of secular nationalisms began in the mid-1970s, it is only by hindsight that their decline looks irresistible: even now it is not certain. The failure of revolutions initiated by Left/progressive forces in the mid-1970s in Lebanon and in Afghanistan, although strikingly different, testified to the new power of religion as a badge of communal identity and a symbolic counter in political struggles. At the time, few observers saw the larger picture, saw that a new political culture and vocabulary was installing itself. To a consideration of the larger dimension of Islamic fundamentalism I turn next.

### **Framing Fundamentalism**

In the history of Islamic societies the emergence of the Islamist movement in the wake of the Iranian revolution was as momentous a transitional moment as the destruction of the Ottoman caliphate and the establishment of European hegemony after World War I. Like that earlier transitional moment it marked a major discursive shift, as well as a new phase in the politics of Islamic societies. Thus far I have reviewed efforts to theorize and historicize the Islamic revolution in Iran. I want to move next to a consideration of the ways in which the broader phenomenon of the Islamist movement has been received by Western orientalist and social theorists.<sup>17</sup>

How were Islamist movements theorized by social scientists? Three of the most significant attempts are those of John Esposito, Ira M. Lapidus and Ernest Gellner. I will briefly examine the work of each in turn. John Esposito has been one of the most energetic scholars in proposing alternate understandings of the nature of The Islamic Threat (the title of his most recent book).<sup>18</sup> Although I am in sympathy with the intentions of this work to dispel the many misunderstandings and racist myths about contemporary political Islam, as well as about the Muslim past, I am not persuaded that the book is successful in its objectives. One difficulty is Esposito's Weberian approach, which seeks to explain "Islamic responses" through a series of typologies. This has the effect of presenting Islamic thought as an unbroken stream from the 18th century hadith revival to contemporary Islamist politics.<sup>19</sup>

More significant is the way in which it counterposes the Islamist current as oppositional to modernity, rather than viewing it as a manifestation of an alternate form of modernity. Finally, by omitting mention altogether of the Ottoman self-strengthening movement (the tanzimat), and skipping rapidly past the colonial past (which is viewed only in cultural terms) and secular nationalism (which is viewed only as a failed ideology) it mislocates the actual historical relationship of Islamism to nationalism and modernization. Despite its intentions, The Islamic Threat accepts the civilizationist premises of the Weberian model and thereby ends up replicating the weaknesses of previous analysts.

A second scholar whose work on Islamic history commends itself to us is Ira Lapidus, whose A History of Islamic Societies<sup>20</sup> is the most successful recent synthesis of Islamic history. In one volume it provides the reader with a way of understanding the particular histories of different Muslim peoples from Morocco to Indonesia in terms of the diffusion and elaboration of distinctively Islamic political institutions, religious and legal institutions and cultural norms. It is the considerable achievement of Lapidus to have so complexified the story while operating within the Weberian tradition that it is difficult to extract any simple determinism which applies to all Muslims. Through the generosity of his vision a complex array of patterned lives now supplants these more primitive formulations.

While in many respects a tour de force, the book fails to provide a sense of the ways in which Islamic histories fit into the patterns of global history. Precisely because Islam spills beyond the borders of its regional origins, it is difficult to disentangle its history from that of Afrasia as a whole. Not to situate the history of Islamic civilization in the context of world history as a whole is to risk presenting an essentialized Islam, shorn of its links both to global processes of change as well as to contemporary societies at each point along the line. It is also to leave ourselves unable to comprehend fully the meaning of any given development.

Most crucially, the absence of a global dimension weakens the discussion of the modern era. Unlike earlier scholars who posited a unitary model of modernity based upon the British model, Lapidus is aware that different European societies took different roads to modernization. However, having discounted the idea of a single capitalist road to development, he nonetheless goes on to argue that it was the unique qualities of the European peoples — their social and institutional pluralism, a mentality that stressed innovation, individual worldly activity, aggressive dominance and technical experimentation — that resulted in historic processes of change, notably secularization and industrialization which helped assure European dominance. Such culturally essentialist definitions of Europe return us to the modernization theories of the 1950s and 1960s.

Because A History of Islamic Societies does not adequately historicize modernity, there is no way of disentangling its history from that of the West. If the explanation for Europe's priority in modernization is presumed to lie in certain uniquely European cultural traits then the answer to Shakib Arslan's question,

"Why are Muslims backward?" can only be Islam's cultural deficiencies. This is unsatisfactory. For what happened to Islamic societies happened to all other world societies as well. The whole globe, and not just the Muslim portions of it, were engulfed successively by European imperialism and then by anti-colonial movements. Finally, the post-1973 rekindling of ethnic nationalisms, both linguistic and religious, (including the so-called Islamic revival) are as much a result of increased globalization as they are endogenous cultural developments.

Ernest Gellner is the social scientist who has most directly sought to theorize modern Islam. This is not the place to discuss the many interesting and provocative things he has had to say about Muslim societies.<sup>21</sup> Here I am primarily interested in focussing on how he locates the Islamist movement in a world historical context. His basic approach is laid out in his Muslim Society (1981). From the writings of the fourteenth century North African historian, Ibn Khaldun, Gellner derives what he refers to as a "pendulum swing theory of Islam." It is essentially a theory of the tribal state, in which segmentary pastoral tribes are opposed to but also dependent upon the city and scripturalist puritanical townsmen rival rural superstitious pastoralists. Such states are thus defined by an eternal circulation of elites, a rotation within a fixed structure. An alternative model also exists: it is the slave soldier state of the Ottoman empire. Gellner argues that Islam constituted an alternative route to modernity, in which scripturalism and legalism are seen as traits paralleling Weber's puritan ethic.<sup>22</sup> Gellner's model gives us an Islam capable of economic development, but condemned to political stagnation, one in which there is no civil society, nor possibility of revolution — only the eternal circulation of elites.

While the model is coherent, it begs the question of whether Islam constitutes a valid analytical category. Part of the dilemma of Weberian approaches, even sophisticated ones like Gellner's, is that they traffic in essences, and making only glancing contact with history. There are empirical problems as well: a major one is that Gellner mistakenly sees contemporary political Islam as a variant of the Salafiyya Islamic modernism that was one of the roots of nationalism in North Africa in the interwar period.<sup>23</sup> A world of difference separates a figure such as the Algerian Ibn Badis from the contemporary FIS activists in that embattled state!<sup>24</sup> Muslim societies in fact have the full range of possibilities for human action of any other world society.

## **Framing the Present Time (II)**

In the 1980s there was further slippage from social analysis. In the super-heated ideological climate of the Reagan/Bush years and the accelerating globalization of the world economy, the "new orientalism" emerged with a new object of study: Islam. Intersecting with an increased ideologization of relations between the Middle East and the West, this "back to the future" enterprise rehabilitated old orientalist tropes about Islam, Muslims, and non-Westerners generally. Media hype about a "crescent of crisis" arcing through the Middle East, as

well as Gulf War I (between Iran and Iraq) and conflicts in Lebanon and Libya helped shape a new intellectual climate. Further, the European and American publics were weaned of their sympathy for progressive nationalism by a fear campaign which created the new category of "the Islamic terrorist," a useful supplement to that old standby, the Arab terrorist. Finally, a massive clandestine effort to support the Afghan mujahidin showed that the West too (with massive Saudi help and a de facto alliance with Iran) could play Islamist politics.

Under the circumstances, it would be surprising indeed if the ideologically supercharged public atmosphere of the 1980s did not have important consequences for the kind of scholarship being done on Islamic societies. Over night, Islamic culture became highly toxic as a subject of intellectual investigation. One way of understanding what happened to Middle East studies in the 1980s is to say, using the language of Pierre Bourdieu, that these changes inscribe the massive invasion of the intellectual field by the political field. In more familiar terms used by Said, it was an assertion of Orientalism (the discourse of power) over orientalism (the discipline).

In historically contextualizing this period, it is important to note that while many of the same global processes were impinging on all world societies, some had a particularly sharp impact on the Middle East. This is particularly the case of the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, with whom the Middle East shared 1400 miles of common border. The demise of the Soviet regime removed a major opponent of U.S. influence in the region and supporter of progressive nationalist regimes. It also removed the Soviet model of development (undermined by the rapid globalization of the world economy). Following the 1991 Gulf War the U.S. obtained unchallenged hegemony over the region.

Additional far-reaching and dramatic social changes had a major impact on the region in the 1980s. These include huge increases in population coupled with a massive movement from the countryside to the cities, which has swamped the ability of the state to provide needed services. Dramatic changes in the age structure of the population such that 50% or more are under the age of 23 have brought about a crisis of social reproduction. The globalization of the world economy and low world oil prices since the late 1980s have caused most oil producers in the region to scale back substantially on their ambitious development plans. I.M.F. structural readjustment packages have been imposed on most of the states in the area, greatly limiting their flexibility, and making more evident the dependency of incumbent regimes on Western (chiefly U.S.) power.

Any one of these changes alone might be expected to pose a major challenge to the states in the region. All of them hitting at once in a very different global economic context from that of the oil boom years virtually guaranteed the prolonged crisis now affecting the region. When one notes the political stalemate that prevails (most of the states in the Middle East are ruled by the same coalition, and often the same individuals that were in power in 1975), it should be no wonder that many countries are experiencing political upheaval.

Faced with this situation, the established regimes have relied upon co-optation and increasingly autocratic procedures to remain in power. Throw in the evident bankruptcy (both political and moral) of secular nationalist states and it becomes easy to understand the reasons for Islamist challenges. (Ironically, incumbent regimes now facing threats from internal Islamist opposition groups once encouraged these same groups as a way of weakening the power of their Left oppositions. Still more ironically, such a threat has now become a card that incumbent regimes can play to exact higher levels of U.S. aid.) In sum, it is no wonder there is a challenge. But why is it taking an Islamist form?

## Conclusion

For the analysts whose work we have examined here, the response is clear: the Islamist movement represents the upwelling of a civilizational essence. Weberian typologies, no matter how elaborate or cunningly devised, all come back to the same reductionist point. By collapsing the histories of Islamic societies to the history of the state, a state in which it is culture (read religion) which is the central organizing principle, they can largely dispense with other explanatory devices than religion. For the theorists, Islamic fundamentalism has a genealogy, but its history is only the repetition of well established patterns. Islamic polities lack a civil society: from this it follows that their politics can only be a politics of domination. In the absence of intermediary bodies, there is no hope for democracy in the region.

There is a larger point here: the inability of social scientists either to situate historically the emergence of Islamism or to theorize it suggests a fundamental flaw in the Enlightenment conception of religion. As we have seen, nationalism is already encoded within the orientalist project. It is time to add that fundamentalism is as well — as the excluded other implicit in nationalist discourse. By positioning religion as the anti-Enlightenment, that which must be gotten beyond for progress to occur, nationalists like other followers of the Enlightenment summon into existence the very thing they so wish to deny. By conceptualizing religion as a repository for all that is anti-modern, the Enlightenment encapsulated fundamentalism and essentialized believing religionists of whatever sect. But conceiving of the relationship between modernity and religion in terms of a totalizing opposition, locks us all into a Weberian iron cage from which there is no exit. It is but a step to the Orient/Occident dualisms of classical orientalism, and all the rest of the now well known apparatus of cultural sorting and stereotyping described in Edward Said's Orientalism.

Is fundamentalism anti-modern? The question as put it will now be seen is seriously flawed. For it is clear that fundamentalisms of whatever kind are fully modern as well. This becomes clear in Sami Zubaida's important book, Islam, the People and the State.<sup>25</sup> By accepting the nation-state model, as well as constitutions, republics and democracy, he argues, the Iranian republic is thoroughly modern. While the Iranian ulama may historically have adopted an oppositional stance

toward the Qajar monarchy, it never sought to reshape political norms (and was thus not "revolutionary").<sup>26</sup> Moreover, a close examination of the Khomeini's doctrine of "valayat-i faqih" ("the guardianship of the jurist") reveals it to be a modern origin, rather than being a traditional political idea. Islamist movements, Zubaida concludes, are best understood as "a populist nationalism with 'Islam' as the identifying emblem of the common people against the 'alien' social spheres in their own country which had excluded and subordinated them."<sup>27</sup> In sum, there is very little about present day Islamist belief or practices that would be recognized by a Muslim of an earlier time.

In a recent book, Talal Asad suggests that the concept of religion as it emerged in Western thought has a history which ties it into particular knowledge and power relations which must be problematized if we are to move beyond it.<sup>28</sup> If we would understand the Islamic case then, we need first to understand that the concept of religion in Western thought emerged as a category in the context of the collision between would-be state-builders and local elites who articulated their opposition in religious terms. For the elites, the experience of the wars of religion, the English Civil War and the French revolution proved that religion was the major ideological opponent of the state-building project. As a result of this experience, 'religion' as a category in Western thought was already bracketed as a black box from which nebulous and powerful forces might explode, scattering the best-laid plans of rulers.

The kind of sociology of Islam that emerged is therefore shaped to the deeply problematic history of the encounter in the West between religion and the state.<sup>29</sup> The struggle between the French revolution and the Church (between the Terror and Christianity) decisively shaped the ways in which religion was perceived. Religious opponents of the state-centered liberal project were perceived as fanatical adherents of a superstitious creed, who stood in the path of progress. When European colonial powers extended their rule into the Islamic Mediterranean world in the nineteenth century, this prior history helped shape the character of the resulting encounter, definitively categorizing Islamic resistance to the colonial state as illegitimate and anti-modern. Following the decline of elite nationalisms in the 1970s, opposition to the postcolonial state would take the form of fundamentalism.

It is now time to rethink Said's central insight -- that European knowledge of the Islamic other sprang from a desire to facilitate colonial domination, and by extension the post-Enlightenment state's efforts to quantify, map and control. First, we can note that the knowledge/power relations involved were basic to the liberal project as it emerged in Europe, and not necessarily an expression of forms of colonial knowledge. Then there's the question of power. For if Said gives us orientalism as a discourse of power, he fails to endow it with a politics. If power is located everywhere,

then it is nowhere, and an ahistorical pessimism is justified. Crucially, critics of orientalism have no explanation for nationalism and the end of empire.

The way out lies in reconceiving the Enlightenment project and in relocating nationalism in the complex genealogy of modernity. While the Enlightenment had a repressive Foucauldian, knowledge/power strand we can now see, it is important to recognize that it also had a progressive and revolutionary strand, and was thus the bearer of a promise of human liberation based upon the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the abolition of slavery, and the idea of human rights.<sup>30</sup> The interaction of these two strands of Enlightenment thought and politics did much to shape the political and social as well as cultural struggles of post-revolutionary Europe. Anti-colonial nationalism (and thus Islamism) is the child of this dual heritage as well.

## FOOTNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> See my [Orientalism Observed: France and the Sociology of Islam, 1798-1962](#) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, in preparation).
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Malley, [The Call From Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution and the Turn to Islam](#) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- <sup>3</sup> [Li madha takhkharr al-muslimun wa li madha taqaddam ghayrahum? Why are Muslims Backward While Others Are Advanced?](#)] 3rd ed. (Cairo, 1358/1939). On Arslan see William L. Cleveland, [Islam Against the West: Shakib Arslan and the Campaign for Islamic Nationalism](#) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).
- <sup>4</sup> On pre-1908 Ottoman social movements see Donald Quataert, [Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881-1908](#) (New York: New York University Press, 1983). On the Persian Constitutional Revolution, see Janet Afary, [The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy & the Origins of Feminism](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) and Nikki R. Keddie [Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran](#) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). On the Moroccan abortive revolution of 1908, see my [Prelude to Protectorate in Morocco: Precolonial Protest and Resistance, 1860-1912](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). For an overview of Middle Eastern patterns of collective action, see my essays "Changing Patterns of Peasant Protest in the Middle East, 1750-1950," in John Waterbury and Farhad Kazemi (eds.) [Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East](#) (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991) and "Towards a History of Urban Collective Action in the Middle East: Continuities and Change, 1750-1980," in

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Kenneth Brown, et al (eds.) Etat, ville et Mouvements sociaux au Maghreb et au Moyen Orient (Paris: Harmattan, 1989), 42-56.

<sup>5</sup> The canonical text is George Antonius, The Arab Awakening (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1946). Reprinted many times.

<sup>6</sup> On Amir Khaled, see Ahmed Koulakssis and Gilbert meynier, L'Emire Khaled Premier Zaim? Identité algérienne et colonialisme francais (Paris: Harmattan, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Arab nationalism is still studied primarily in its ideological dimension, with little attention to the connections between the congeries of earlier social movements and later nationalism. For some examples, see Rashid Khalidi, Lisa Anderson, Muhammad Muslih and Reeva S. Simon (ed.s) The Origins of Arab Nationalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) and James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (eds.) Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). For an important exception, see James Gelvin, "The Social Origins of Popular Nationalism in Syria," International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 26 (1994), 645-662.

<sup>8</sup> On the influence of Leon Cahun, see Bernard Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 156. On the influence of de Gobineau, see Mostafa Vaziri, Iran as Imagined Nation : the Construction of National Identity (New York, NY : Paragon House, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> For two examples, see Marvin Zonis, "He Took All the Credit, Now He Gets the Blame," New York Times (January 14, 1997) and James Bill, "Iran and the Crisis of 1978," Foreign Affairs Quarterly 57 (Winter 1978-79). See their earlier works: Marvin Zonis, The Political Elite of Iran (Princeton: princeton University press, 1971) and James Bill, The Politics of Iran: Groups, Clases and Modernization (Colombus Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1972).

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<sup>10</sup> The only two Iran experts to see the significance of the Islamic challenge to the Shah's regime were Hamid Algar and Nikki Keddie. See the former's "The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth Century Iran," in N.R. Keddie (ed.) Scholars Saints and Sufis Muslim Religious Institutions since 1500 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 231-255, and Keddie's "Iran de l'indépendance religieuse à l'opposition politique," Le Monde Diplomatique (Aout 1977), 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Roots of Revolution.

<sup>12</sup> See among a large and important literature Ervand Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Farhad Kazemi, Poverty and Revolution in Iran (New York: New York University Press, 1980) and Homa Katouzian, The Political Economy of Iran (New York: New York University Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> Among the most important works on Sh'ism and revolution in Iran are: Shahrough Akhavi, Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran (New York: State University of New York Press, 1980); Michael M. J. Fischer, Iran From Religious Dispute to Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) and N.R. Keddie (ed.) Religion and Politics in Iran (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Skocpol's alleged neglect of culture is also the theme of an important exchange with William Sewell in The Journal of Modern History 57 (1985), 57-96.

<sup>15</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, World Politics 38,3 (April 1986). It was subsequently reprinted as the conclusion to his The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Turban, 204-206.

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- <sup>17</sup> For one view, see my "Islam and Social Movements: Methodological Reflections," in E. Burke, III and I. M. Lapidus (eds.) Islam, Politics and Social Movements (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 17-35.
- <sup>18</sup> John Esposito, The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality? (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- <sup>19</sup> See his Islam: The Straight Path (Oxford, 1988); Voices of Resurgent Islam (Oxford, 1983); and Islam and Politics, 3rd edition. (Syracuse, 1991).
- <sup>20</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1988).
- <sup>21</sup> See for example, Sami Zubaida, "Is There a Muslim Society: Ernest Gellner's Sociology of Islam," Economy & Society 24:2 (May 1995).
- <sup>22</sup> He further develops these reflections in his recent Postmodernism, Reason and Religion (London, 1992). For more on his theory of world history, see his Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History (London, 1988).
- <sup>23</sup> Jamil Abun-Nasr, "The Salafiyya Movement In Morocco: The Religious Bases of the Moroccan Nationalist Movement (1963)," in Immanuel Wallerstein (ed.) Social Change: The Colonial Situation, 489-502.
- <sup>24</sup> On Ibn Badis, see Ali Merad, Le Réformisme musulman en Algérie de 1925 à 1940 (Paris: Mouton, 1967).
- <sup>25</sup> Sami Zubaida, Islam, the People and the State (London: I. Tauris, 1989).
- <sup>26</sup> See Hamid Algar, "The Oppositional Role of the Iranian Ulama."
- <sup>27</sup> Zubaida, Islam, 33.
- <sup>28</sup> Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993).
- <sup>29</sup> Fanny Colonna, "Islam in the French Sociology of Religion," Economy & Society 24, 2 (May 1995), 225-244. See also the same author's Les Versets de

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**l'Invincibilité** (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> For further discussions of these issues, see my **Orientalism Observed: France and the Sociology of Islam, 1798-1962** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, in preparation).