

## ORIENTALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN ISLAM

Bryan S. Turner

While the problems of understanding, comparison and translation are critical issues in philosophy, language and social conscience, they arise in a particularly acute fashion in sociology. In addition to the technical difficulties of bias, distortion and misrepresentation in the methodology of the social sciences, there are the more profound questions of relativism, ethnocentrism and ideology which call into question the whole basis of comparative analysis. It is difficult to imagine what would count as valid sociology without the comparative method and yet there are numerous methodological and philosophical difficulties which often appear to invalidate comparative sociology. There is major disagreement over the issue of whether, following the position adopted by Max Weber, a 'value-free sociology' is either possible or desirable.<sup>1</sup>

In more recent years, social scientists have become increasingly sensitive to the fact that, in addition to these technical and philosophical issues, the structure of power politics is profoundly influential in shaping the content and direction of social science research. In short, the existence of exploitative colonial relationships between societies has been of major significance for the theoretical development of anthropology and sociology. The role of imperial politics has been especially decisive in the constitution of Western images of Islam and the analysis of 'oriental societies'.<sup>2</sup>

In the conventional, liberal perspective, there is the assumption not only that power and knowledge are antithetical, but that valid knowledge requires the suppression of power. Within the liberal history of ideas, the emergence of science out of ideology and common sense beliefs is thus conjoined with the growth of individual freedom and with the decline of arbitrary political terror. This view of the contradiction of reason and power has been recently challenged by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who argues that the growth of bureaucratic control over populations after the eighteenth century required more systematic forms of knowledge in the form of criminology, penology, psychiatry and medicine. The exercise of power in society thus presup-

poses new forms of scientific discourse through which deviant groups are defined and controlled. Against the liberal tradition, we are, through an analysis of the Western rationalist tradition, forced to admit

that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, not any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.<sup>3</sup>

The growth of scientific discourse does not, therefore, inaugurate a period of individual freedoms, but rather forms the basis of more extensive forms of institutionalized power through an alliance of the prison and penology, the asylum and psychiatry, the hospital and clinical medicine, the school and pedagogy. Discourse creates difference through classification, tabulation and comparison. The categories of 'criminal', 'insane', and 'deviant' are the manifestations of a scientific discourse by which the normal and sane exercise power along a systematic dividing of sameness and difference. The exercise of power over subordinates cannot consequently be reduced simply to a question of attitudes and motives on the part of individuals, since power is embedded in the very language by which we describe and understand the world. Valid comparisons between deviants and normal individuals, between the sane and insane, between the sick and healthy cannot be achieved by simply reforming attitudes and motives, since these distinctions themselves presuppose a discourse in which conceptual differences are expressions of power relations.

The analysis of knowledge/power in the work of Michel Foucault provides the basis for Edward Said's massive study of Orientalism as a discourse of difference in which the apparently neutral Occident/Orient contrast is an expression of power relationships.<sup>4</sup> Orientalism is a discourse which represents the exotic, erotic, strange Orient as a comprehensible, intelligible phenomenon within a network of categories, tables and concepts by which the Orient is simultaneously defined and controlled. To know is to subordinate.

The Orientalist discourse was thus a remarkably persistent framework of analysis which, expressed through theology, literature, philology and sociology, not only expressed an imperial relationship but actually constituted a field of political power. Orientalism created a typology of characters, organized around the contrast between the rational Westerner and the lazy Oriental. The task of Orientalism was

to reduce the endless complexity of the East into a definite order of types, characters and constitutions. The chrestomathy, representing the exotic Orient in a systematic table of accessible information, was thus a typical cultural product of Occidental dominance.

In Said's analysis of Orientalism, the crucial 'fact' about the Orientalist discourse was that we know and talk about Orientals, while they neither comprehend themselves nor talk about us. In this language of difference, there were no equivalent discourses of Occidentalism. The society from which comparisons are to be made has a privileged possession of a set of essential features — rationality, progress, democratic institutions, economic development — in terms of which other societies are deficient. These features account for the particular character of Western society and explain the defects of alternative social formations. As an accounting system, Orientalism set out to explain the progressive features of the Occident and the social stationariness of the Orient.<sup>5</sup> One of the formative questions of classical sociology — why did industrial capitalism first emerge in the West? — is consequently an essential feature of an accounting system which hinges upon a basic East/West contrast. Within the broad sweep of this Occidental/Oriental contrast, Islam has always represented a political and cultural problem for Western accounting systems.

Unlike Hinduism or Confucianism, Islam has major religious and historical ties with Judaism and Christianity; categorizing Islam as an 'Oriental religion' raises major difficulties for an Orientalist discourse. While the issue of prophetic uniqueness is a contentious one, there are strong arguments to suggest that Islam can, along with Judaism and Christianity, be regarded as a variant of the Abrahamic faith.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Islam has been a major cultural force inside Europe and provided the dominant culture of many Mediterranean societies. While Islam is not ambiguously Oriental, Christianity is not in any simple fashion an Occidental religion. Christianity as a Semitic, Abrahamic faith by origin could be regarded as an 'Oriental religion' and Islam, as an essential dimension of the culture of Spain, Sicily and Eastern Europe, could be counted as Occidental. The problem of defining Islam has always possessed a certain urgency for the discourse of Orientalism; thus in Christian circles it was necessary to categorize Islam as either parasitic upon Christian culture or a sectarian offshoot of the Christian faith.

The point of Foucault's analysis of discourse is to suggest that the same rules governing the distribution of statements within a discourse may be common to a wide variety of apparently separate disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the Orientalist problematic is not peculiar to Christian theology, but is a discourse which underlines economics, politics and sociology. If the basic issue behind Christian theology was the uniqueness of the Christian revelation with respect to Islam, the central question behind comparative sociology was the uniqueness of the West in relation to the alleged stagnation of the East. In an earlier publication I have suggested that sociology attempted to account for the apparent absence of capitalism in Islamic societies by conceptualizing Islam as a series of gaps.<sup>8</sup> Western sociology characteristically argued that Islamic society lacked those autonomous institutions of bourgeois society which ultimately broke the tenacious hold of feudalism over the Occident. According to this view, Islamic society lacked independent cities, an autonomous bourgeois class, rational bureaucracy, legal reliability, personal property and that cluster of rights which embody bourgeois culture. Without these institutional and cultural elements, there was nothing in Islamic civilization to challenge the dead hand of pre-capitalist tradition. The Orientalist view of Asiatic society can be encapsulated in the notion that the social structure of the Oriental world was characterized by the absence of a civil society, that is, by the absence of a network of institutions mediating between the individual and the state. It was this social absence which created the conditions for Oriental Despotism in which the individual was permanently exposed to the arbitrary rule of the despot. The absence of civil society simultaneously explained the failure of capitalist development outside Europe and the absence of democracy.

#### *The Concept of Civil Society*

There is in Western political philosophy a set of basic categories, which can be traced back to Aristotle, for distinguishing between government in terms of monarchy, democracy or despotism. While it is possible to approach these categories numerically, that is, by the one, few or many, one central element to the problem of government is the relationship between the state and the individual. Typically, for example, the notion of 'despotism' involves a spatial metaphor of the social system in which there is an institutional gap between the private indi-

individual and the public state. In despotism, the individual is fully exposed to the gaze of the despotic ruler because there are no intervening social institutions lying between the ruler and the ruled. The individual is completely displayed before the passion, caprice and will of the despot and there are, as it were, no social groups or institutions behind which the ruled may hide. The distance between the despot and the subject may be considerable, but that social space is not filled up with a rich growth of social groupings which could encapsulate the individual and within which separate interests could develop in opposition to the unified will of the despot. By way of a preliminary definition, we may argue that despotism presupposes a society in which 'civil society' is either absent or underdeveloped. A 'civil society' is that prolific network of institutions — church, family, tribe, guild, association and community — which lies between the state and the individual and which simultaneously connects the individual to authority and protects the individual from total political control. The notion of 'civil society' is not only fundamental to the definition of political life in European societies, but also a point of contrast between Occident and Orient.

In the Scottish Enlightenment tradition, the emergence of civil society was regarded as a major indication of social progress from the state of nature to civilization. The theory of civil society was part of the master dichotomy of nature/civilization, since it was within civil society that the individual was eventually clothed in juridical rights of property, possessions and security. In Hegel's social philosophy, civil society mediates between the family and the state; it is constituted by the economic intercourse between individuals. The Hegelian conceptualization of 'civil society' in terms of economic relationships was the germ of much confusion in subsequent Marxist analysis in that it became difficult to locate civil society unambiguously in metaphor of economic base and superstructures. For Marx,

Civil Society embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces. It embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of a given stage and, in so far, transcends the State and nation, though, on the other hand again, it must assert itself in its foreign relations as nationality and inwardly must organise itself as a State.<sup>9</sup>

Since Marx was primarily interested in the theoretical analysis of the

capitalist mode of production, it has subsequently been difficult for Marxists to determine the precise relationship between civil society/state, on the one hand, and to analyze such sociological concepts as 'family', 'church', 'community', or 'tribe', on the other. One solution, of course, is to treat this area of social life as explicable in purely economic terms; the primary divisions within society are those between classes, which in turn are explained by the mode of production.<sup>10</sup>

The difficulties of locating civil society in relation to the economy and the state are exemplified by some recent debates over Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the concept.<sup>11</sup>

In a famous passage, Gramsci commented that,

Between the economic structure and the state with its legislation and its coercion stands civil society.<sup>12</sup>

In Gramsci's writing, civil society is the area within which ideological hegemony and political consent are engineered, and it therefore contrasts with the state, which is the site of political force and coercion. Such a conception complicates the more conventional Marxist dichotomy of base/superstructure, but there is much dissensus over exactly where Gramsci places his theoretical emphasis.<sup>13</sup> While there is much disagreement over the extent of hegemonic consent in modern capitalism, it is interesting to note that Gramsci's conceptualization of 'civil society' was important for his view that political strategies were relevant in relation to the extent of coercion and consent in society.<sup>14</sup> Gramsci made a basic distinction between the West, in which there is widespread consensus based on civil society, and the East, where the state dominates society and where coercion is more important than consensus. Speaking specifically of Russia, Gramsci argued that

the state was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between state and civil society, and when the state trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The state was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks . . .<sup>15</sup>

Where civil society is relatively underdeveloped in relationship to the state, political coercion of individuals is the basis of class rule rather than ideological consent which characterizes the bourgeois institutions of Western capitalism.

Liberal political theory, while clearly fundamentally different in outlook and conclusions, has often approached the East/West, coercion/consent contrasts in somewhat similar terms, especially in terms of the notion of constitutional checks and balances. In *The Spirit of the Laws* written in 1748, Montesquieu distinguished between republics, monarchies and despotisms in terms of their guiding principles which were respectively virtue, honor and fear.<sup>16</sup> The main differences between monarchy and despotism were that (1) while monarchy is based on the inequality of social strata, in despotism there is an equality of slavery where the mass of the population is subject to the ruler's arbitrary will; (2) in monarchy, the ruler follows customs and laws, whereas a despot dominates according to his own inclination (3) in despotism there are no intermediary social institutions linking the individual to the state. In an earlier work, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, Montesquieu had been particularly concerned with the problems of centralization in the Roman empire and with the transformation of republics into monarchies.<sup>17</sup> Montesquieu, who was profoundly influenced by Locke and British constitutional history, came to see the divisions of powers and constitutional checks on centralized authority as the principal guarantee of political rights. His *Persian Letters*<sup>18</sup> permitted him to write a critical review of French society through the eyes of Oriental observers; it has subsequently not been clear whether Montesquieu's definition of and objections to the despotism of the East were, in fact, directed against the French polity, especially against the absolute monarchy.<sup>19</sup>

Emile Durkheim, whose Latin dissertation on Montesquieu and Rousseau was published in 1892, came to see the problem of modern political life not in the effects of the division of labor on common sentiments but in the absence of regulating institutions between the individual and the state. The decline of the church, the weakness of the family, the loss of communal ties and the underdevelopment of occupational and professional associations had dissolved those important social relations which shielded the individual from the state. Unlike Herbert Spencer, however, Durkheim did not believe that the extension of state functions in contemporary society necessarily resulted in political absolutism. Durkheim, in 'Two laws of penal evolution', defined absolutism in the following terms:

what makes the central power more or less absolute is the more or less radical absence of any countervailing forces, regularly organized with a view toward moderating it. We can, therefore, foresee that what gives birth to a power of this sort is the more or less complete concentration of all society's controlling functions in one and the same hand.<sup>20</sup>

While Durkheim does not specifically employ the term, in the light of his reference to the importance of 'countervailing forces', it is not illegitimate or inappropriate to suggest that Durkheim's argument is that the weakness of civil society lying between the individual and the state is a condition for political absolutism.

This French tradition in the political sociology of absolutism from Montesquieu to Durkheim cannot be properly understood without some consideration of the debate which arose in France over the nature of enlightened government. What we now refer to as 'enlightened despotism' or 'enlightened absolutism' first arose as an intellectual and political issue in France in the 1760's partly as the result of the doctrines of the Physiocrats.<sup>21</sup> The terms favored by the Physiocrats were 'Despotisme eclaire' and 'Despotisme legal,' so, for example, T. G. Raynal provided a definition of good government as '*Le gouvernement le plus heureux seroit celui d'un despot juste et eclaire*' in his history of trade with the West and East Indies. In their economic doctrines, the Physiocrats adhered to *laissez-faire* policies to free the economy and the individual from the unnatural fetters which constrained efficiency and economic output. However, society was not free from such artificial constraints and it was necessary for radical changes to be brought about by 'Despotisme eclaire.' The Physiocrats took for granted that such a despotism would be in the hands of an hereditary monarchy which would rationally sweep aside the artificial clutter of the past to restore the natural order of individual freedom. The despot had the duty to force people to be free by a rational policy of education and social reform.

The debate about the virtues of forms of government was generated not only by absolutism in the late eighteenth century but also by the rise of colonialism in the nineteenth. Colonial administrators were forced to decide upon schemes of imperial control for the new dependencies. Raynal's use of the notion of legal despotism is interesting in the context of a discussion of colonies. Utilitarian discussions of political organization in Britain were similarly set in the context of criticisms of British

government by an hereditary aristocracy and in terms of colonial administration in India. The utilitarians were concerned both with the problem of the working class and parliamentary government in Britain and with the government of Indian natives.<sup>22</sup> Thus, James Mill's *The History of British India* was particularly concerned with the question of native despotism and government reform. He observed that,

Among the Hindus, according to the Asiatic model, the government was monarchical, and, with the usual exception of religion and its ministers, absolute. No idea of any system of rule, different from the will of a single person, appears to have entered the minds of them, or their legislators.<sup>23</sup>

For Mill, there was a social hiatus between the traditional, all-embracing life of the Indian village and the outer, public world of kingdoms. The constant break-up of the latter contrasted with the social isolation and stagnation of the former. The principal political solution to this static despotism was a dose of 'Despotisme eclaire,' that is, strong central government, benevolent laws, modernized administration and a redistribution of land rights. In many respects, John Stuart Mill followed his father's line of argument both about political reform in Britain and colonial government. J.S. Mill's basic fear was focused on the effects of majority rule in popular democracies on the life and conscience of the educated and sensitive individual. This fear had been greatly confirmed by the more pessimistic aspects of Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of American political institutions in *Democracy in America*, which Mill read in 1835.<sup>24</sup> According to de Tocqueville, majority rule on the basis of universal franchise could result in a sterile consensus which was inimicable to individuality and individual rights. The only check to the despotism of the majority would be the existence of strong voluntary associations (that is, civil society) protecting the individual from majority control and protecting diversity of interests and culture. Without safeguards, democracy would produce in Britain the same sterility which tradition had brought about in Asia, namely social stagnation. Mill's fears were consequently:

not of great liberty, but too ready submission; not of anarchy, but of servility; not of too rapid change, but of Chinese stationariness.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of colonial rule, however, the choice was between two types of despotism, native or imperial. Native despotism was always arbitrary and ineffectual, while the enlightened despotism of 'more civilized

people' over their dominions was firm, regular and effective in promoting social reform and political advancement.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) were contemporaries. In formulating their views on Asiatic society, they were influenced by similar contemporary events and by a similar range of documentary evidence. It is not entirely surprising, therefore, to find that they also shared some common assumptions about Asiatic society, despite very different evaluations and expectations of British rule in India. While Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production was primarily formulated in terms of economic structures and processes (or the absence of them), the Asiatic mode is also a version of the conventional political notion of 'Oriental despotism.' In Marx's journalistic writing, Oriental society was characterized by ceaseless political changes in ruling dynasties and by total economic immobility. Dynastic circulation brought about no structural change because the ownership of the land remained in the hands of the overlord. Like James Mill, Marx also emphasized the stationary nature of village life, based on self-sufficiency. No civil society existed between the individual and the despot, between the village and the state, because autonomous cities and social classes were absent from the social system.

While Weber acknowledged a debt to Marx's analysis of Indian village life in his *The Religion of India*,<sup>28</sup> Weber's various elaborations of political forms — patriarchalism, patrimonialism — concentrate more on the problem of military organization than on the economic bases of political life. In fact, it is possible to see Weber's sociology as the analysis of the interconnections between the ownership of the means of production and the ownership of the means of violence. He thus established an abstract continuum between a situation where independent knights own their own weapons and provide military services for a lord, and another context in which the means of violence are centralized under the control of a patrimonial lord. Empirically, Weber recognized that these 'pure types' rarely occurred in such simplified forms, but the contrast was important in Weber's analysis of the tensions between centralizing and de-centralizing processes in political empires.

In feudalism, where knights have hereditary rights to lands and provide their own weapons, there are strong political pressures towards localism and the emergence of autonomous petty-kingdoms. The crucial political struggles in feudalism are thus within the dominant class,

not between lords and serfs, because the crucial question is the preservation of the feudal king's political control over other landlords who seek extensive feudal immunities from their lord. In patrimonialism, one method of controlling aristocratic cavalries based on feudal or prebendal rights to land is to recruit slave or mercenary armies. Such armies have little or no attachment to civil society — they are typically foreigners, bachelors or eunuchs and detribalized. Hence, slave armies have no local interests in civil society and are, formally at least, totally dependent on the patrimonial lord. As Weber points out, patrimonialism can only survive if the patrimonial lord enjoys a stable fiscal liquidity or access to other resources by which to pay off his armies. Patrimonial empires suffer from two perennial crises: (1) revolts by slave armies and (2) instability of political succession. While Weber does not use the feudal/prebendal distinction as a necessary criterion for distinguishing the West from the East, he does regard patrimonial instability — or 'sultanism' — as a major problem of Oriental society, especially of Turkey.

The debate about Oriental empires in European social thought found its classic expression in the twentieth century in Karl Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism*.<sup>29</sup> Characteristically subtitled 'a comparative study of total power,' Wittfogel presented an essentially technological account of Oriental empires. The climatic aridity of Oriental regions gave rise to the need for extensive hydraulic systems which, in turn, could be organized only on the basis of centralized political power. The difficulties of hydraulic management could be solved only on the basis of bureaucratization, general slavery and centralized authority. The hydraulic state was forced to obliterate all countervailing social groups within society which could threaten its total power. These 'nongovernmental forces' included kin groups, independent religious organizations, autonomous military groups and owners of alternative forms of property.<sup>30</sup> Oriental despotism thus represented the triumph of the state over society and Wittfogel saw the absence of 'civil society' in hydraulic empires as a necessary basis for total power. In Europe, absolutism was always faced by countervailing forces in civil society:

the absence of formal constitutional checks does not necessarily imply the absence of societal forces whose interests and intentions the government must respect. In most countries of post-feudal Europe the absolutist regimes were restricted not so much by official constitutions as by the

actual strength of the landed nobility, the Church and the towns. In absolutist Europe all these nongovernmental forces were politically organized and articulated. They thus differed profoundly from the representatives of landed property, religion or urban professions in hydraulic society.<sup>29</sup>

To summarize, the political problem of Oriental society is the absence of a civil society which will counterbalance the power of the state over the isolated individual.

Although the notion of the absence of civil society in Oriental Despotism was formulated by reference to Asia as a whole, it has played a particularly prominent role in the analysis of Islamic societies; it is an essential feature of the Orientalist discourse. Furthermore, the theme of the missing civil society cut across political and intellectual divisions in the West, providing a common framework for Marxists and sociologists. Marx and Engels in their articles for the *New York Daily Tribune* observed that the absence of private property in land and the centralization of state power precluded the emergence of a strong bourgeois class. The dominance of the bureaucracy and the instability of urban society meant that

the first basic condition of bourgeois acquisition is lacking, the security of the person and the property of the trader.<sup>30</sup>

A similar position was adopted by Max Weber in *The Sociology of Religion* where he suggested that the effect of Islamic expansion had been to convert Islam into a "national Arabic warrior religion;" the result was that the dominant ethos of Islam

is inherently contemptuous of bourgeois-commercial utilitarianism and considers it as sordid greediness and as the life force specifically hostile to it.<sup>31</sup>

In Western sociological accounts of Islamic societies, it has been argued that, because of the absence of a 'spirit of capitalism' in the middle class, trade in most Islamic societies was dominated historically by minorities (Greeks, Jews, Armenians and Slavs.) Recent sociological studies of Islam have continued this tradition by suggesting that the absence of the entrepreneurial spirit and achievement motivation is linked to the underdeveloped nature of the middle class in Islam.<sup>32</sup>

The absence of a civil society in Islam and the weakness of bourgeois culture in relation to the state apparatus have been associated, in the

Orientalist problematic, not only with the backwardness of economic development, but also with political despotism. There is a common viewpoint among political scientists that there is no established tradition of legitimate opposition to arbitrary governments in Islam because the notions of political rights and social contract had no institutional support in an independent middle class.<sup>33</sup> However, the Orientalist theme of the absence of a civil society extends well beyond the area of economics and politics. The scientific and artistic culture of Islam is treated as the monopoly of the imperial court which, within the 'city camp,' patronized the emergency of a rational culture in opposition to the religion of the masses. The union of science and industry which was characteristic of the English Protestant middle classes in the nineteenth century was noticeably absent in Islamic culture. Thus, Ernest Renan, in a forthright commentary on Islam and science, suggested that, "the Mussulman has the most profound disdain for instruction, for science, for everything that constitutes the European spirit."<sup>34</sup>

For Renan, science could only flourish in Islam in association with heresy. While Renan's highly prejudicial attitudes are rarely articulated in an overt fashion in contemporary Oriental scholarship, the same arguments concerning elitist patronage of arts and sciences in the absence of a middle class are constantly repeated. This perspective is normally conjoined with the notion that science in Islam was merely parasitic on Greek culture and that Islam was simply a vehicle transmitting Greek philosophy to the Renaissance in Europe.<sup>35</sup> The deficiencies of Islamic society, politics, economics and culture are, in Orientalism, located in the problem of an absent civil society.

#### *Alternatives to Orientalism*

In the period following the second World War, Orientalism has shown many symptoms of internal crisis and collapse,<sup>36</sup> but the alternatives to Orientalism have been difficult to secure, since Orientalism retains substantial intellectual and institutional supports. Orientalism is a self-validating and closed discourse which is highly resistant to internal and external criticism. Various attempts at reconstruction have been presented in, for example, *Review of Middle East Studies* and by the *Middle East Research and Information Project* (MERIP). One problem in the transformation of existing paradigms is that Marxist alternatives have

themselves found it difficult to break with the Orientalist perspective which was present in the analyses of Marx and Engels.<sup>37</sup>

Although there have been major changes in Marxist conceptualization of such basic notions as 'the mode of production,' much of the theoretical apparatus of contemporary Marxism is irrelevant in the analysis of Islamic societies. Those Marxists who have adopted the epistemological position of writers like Louis Althusser are, in any case, committed to the view that empirical studies of the Orient will not be sufficient to dislodge the Orientalist perspective without a radical shift in epistemology and theoretical frameworks. An entirely new paradigm is required, but in the present theoretical climate there is little to suggest the presence of radical alternatives. While Edward Saïd has presented a major critique of the Oriental discourse, the conceptual basis on which that critique is founded, namely the work of Michel Foucault, does not lend itself unambiguously to the task of reformulating perspectives. A pessimistic reading of Foucault would suggest that the alternative to an Oriental discourse would simply be another discourse which would incorporate yet another expression of power. In Foucault's analysis there is no discourse-free alternative since extensions of knowledge coincide with a field of power. We are thus constrained to

the patient construction of discourses about discourses, and to the task of hearing what has already been said.\*

At one level, therefore, Saïd is forced to offer the hope that "spiritual detachment and generosity"<sup>38</sup> which will be sufficient to generate a new vision of the Middle East which has jettisoned the ideological premises of Orientalism.

There may, however, exist one line of development which would be compatible with Saïd's employment of Foucault's perspective on discourse and which would present a route out of Orientalism. By its very nature, language is organized around the basic dichotomy of sameness and difference; the principal feature of the Orientalist discourse has been to emphasize difference in order to account for the 'uniqueness of the West.' In the case of Islam and Christianity, however, there is a strong warrant to focus on those features which unite rather than divide them, or at least to examine those ambiguous areas of cultural overlap between them. Historically, both religions emerged, however antago-

nistically, out of a common Semitic-Abrahamic religious stock. They have been involved in mutual processes of diffusion, exchange and colonization.

In this sense, as I have already suggested, it is permissible to refer to Islam as an Occidental religion in Spain, Malta, Yugoslavia and the Balkans and to Christianity as an Oriental religion of North Africa, the Fertile Crescent and Asia. This obvious point has the merit of exposing the fundamental ambiguity of the notion of 'the Orient' within the Orientalist discourse. In addition to these mutual contacts in history and geography, Islam and Christianity have, for historically contingent reasons, come to share common frameworks in science, philosophy and culture. Despite these areas of mutual contact, the general drift of Orientalism has been to articulate difference, division and separation. One important illustration of these discursive separations can be found in conventional histories of Western philosophy.

Islam and Christianity are both grounded in prophetic revelation and were not initially concerned with the philosophical articulation of orthodox theology. Both religions were confronted by the existence of a highly developed system of secular logic and rhetoric which was the legacy of Greek culture. Aristotelianism became the philosophical framework into which the theologies of Islam and Christianity were poured. Eventually the formulation of Christian beliefs came to depend heavily on the work of Islamic scholars, especially Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Al-Kindi and Ar-Razi. Here, consequently, is an area of mutual development in which medieval Christianity was parasitic on the philosophical developments which had been achieved in Islam. However, the Orientalist response to this situation has been to claim that Islam simply mediated Hellenism, which subsequently found its 'true home' in the universities of medieval Europe. Thus, we find writers like Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* following the tradition of Renan and O'Leary in simply denying that Islam made any significant contribution to European philosophy.<sup>39</sup> The attraction of connecting Western philosophy with Hellenism is obvious; it provides the link between Western culture and the democratic traditions of Greek society. Greek rhetoric grew out of public debate in the political sphere where systematic forms of argument were at a premium. On this basis, it is possible to contrast the closed world of Oriental Despotism with the open world of Greek democracy and



rhetorical speech. One difficulty with this equation of Hellenism and political democracy is that it remains largely silent with respect to the slave economy of classical Greece. The majority of the Greek population was excluded from the world of logic and rhetoric by virtue of their slave status.

The philosophical and scientific legacy of Greek civilization passed to Europe through the prism of Islamic Spain, but here again Orientalism treats the impact of Islam on Spanish society as merely regression or, at best, repetition. In Wittfogel's view, the particular combination of population pressure and climatic conditions created the context within which Muslim colonialists in Spain created the despotic polity of hydraulic society. Under Islam, Spain

became a genuinely hydraulic society, ruled despotically by appointed officials and taxed by agromanagerial methods of acquisition. The Moorish army, which soon changed from a tribal to a 'mercenary' body, was definitely the tool of the state as were its counterparts in the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates.<sup>41</sup>

Prior to Islamic influence, Spain had, according to Wittfogel, been a de-centralized feudal society, but, with the introduction of the hydraulic economy, was rapidly transformed into a centralized, despotic state. In other words, within an Occidental setting, Islam still carried the essential features of an Oriental despotic culture. Similarly with the *reconquista*, Spain reverted to a feudal rather than despotic polity. The reestablishment of Christianity 'transformed a great hydraulic civilization into a late feudal society.'<sup>42</sup> Contemporary scholarship on Islamic Spain presents a very different picture, emphasizing the continuity of agricultural and irrigation techniques between Christianity and Islam. A complex and regulated irrigation system requires considerable economic investment over a long period. While the Spanish irrigation system was considerably improved under Muslim management, this was on the basis of a system which was already in operation from classical times. It is the continuity of technology and polity in Spain rather than the difference between Islamic and Christian management which is the important issue.<sup>43</sup>

The conservation of civil society and economy in Spain under Islam and Christianity thus pinpoints the Orientalist fascination with difference, a difference constituted by discourse rather than by history.

*Conclusion: The Individual and Civil Society*

The concept of 'civil society' forms the basis of Western political economy from the Scottish Enlightenment to the prison notebooks of Gramsci; while the concept has been frequently discussed in contemporary social science, the fact that it has also been a major part of the Orientalist contrast of East and West has been seriously neglected. In simple terms, the concept has been used as the basis of the notion that the Orient is, so to speak, all state and no society. The notion of 'civil society' cannot be divorced from an equally potent theme in Western philosophy, namely the centrality of autonomous individuals within the network of social institutions. Western political philosophy has hinged on the importance of civil society in preserving the freedom of the individual from arbitrary control by the state. The doctrines of individualism have been regarded as constitutive, if not of Western culture as such, then at least of contemporary industrial culture. It is difficult to conceive of the nexus of Western concepts of conscience, liberty, freedom or property without some basic principle of individualism and therefore individualism appears to lie at the foundations of Western society. The additional importance of individualism is that it serves to distinguish Occidental from Oriental culture, since the latter is treated as devoid of individual rights and of individuality. Individualism is the golden thread which weaves together the economic institutions of property, the religious institution of confession of conscience and the moral notion of personal autonomy; it serves to separate 'us' from 'them.' In Orientalism, the absence of civil society in Islam entailed the absence of the autonomous individual exercising conscience and rejecting arbitrary interventions by the state.

Underlying this liberal theory of the individual was, however, a profound anxiety about the problem of social order in the West. The individual conscience represented a threat to political stability, despite attempts to argue that the moral conscience would always conform with the legitimate political authority. In particular, bourgeois individualism — in the theories of Locke and Mill — was challenged by the mob, the mass and the working class which was excluded from citizenship by a franchise based on property. The debate about Oriental Despotism took place in the context of uncertainty about Enlightened Despotism and monarchy in Europe. The Orientalist discourse of the

absence of civil society in Islam was thus a reflection of basic political anxieties about the state of political freedom in the West. In this sense, the problem of Orientalism was not the Orient but the Occident. These problems and anxieties were consequently transformed onto the Orient which became, not a representation of the East, but a caricature of the West. Oriental Despotism was simply Western monarchy writ large. The crises and contradictions of contemporary Orientalism are, therefore, to be seen as part of a continuing crisis of Western capitalism transferred to a global context. The end of Orientalism requires a radical reformulation of perspectives and paradigms, but this reconstitution of knowledge can only take place in the context of major shifts in political relations between Orient and Occident; the transformation of discourse also requires a transformation of power.

---

 NOTES
 

---

1. Alvin Gouldner, "Anti-Minotaur: the Myth of Value-free Sociology," in *For Sociology*, ed., Alvin Gouldner (London: Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 1-26.
2. See Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West, the Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960) and R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).
3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, the Birth of the Prison*, trans. from the French by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).
4. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
5. Bryan S. Turner, "The Concept of Social Stationariness: Utilitarianism and Marxism," *Science and Society*, 38 (1974), pp. 3-18.
6. Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), in three volumes.
7. As discussed in Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
8. Bryan S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978).
9. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Russian Menace in Europe* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953), p. 76.
10. Nicholas Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. from French and edited by Timothy O'Hagen (London: NLB, Sheed and Ward, 1973).
11. For this discussion see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: NLB, 1974); N. Bobbio, "Gramsci and the Conception of Civil Society," in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) and John Urry, *The Anatomy of Capitalist Societies: The Economy, Civil Society and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1981).
12. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).
13. Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review*, No. 100 (1977), pp. 5-78.
14. Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980).
15. Gramsci, *Selections*, p. 238.
16. Charles Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. from French by Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Pub. Co., 1949).
17. Charles Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*, trans. from French by David Lowenthal (New York: Free Press, 1965).
18. Charles Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. from French by John Davidson (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1923).
19. In this regard see Louis Althusser, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Hegel and Marx* (London: NLB, 1972) and Anderson, *Lineages*.
20. Emile Durkheim, "Two Laws of Penal Evolution," in M. Traugott, ed., *Emile Durk-*

- ism on Institutional Analysis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 153-180.
21. Fritz Hartung, *Enlightened Despotism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).
  22. Turner, "The Concept of Social Stationariness," pp. 3-18.
  23. James Mill, *The History of British India* (London and New Delhi: Associated Publishing House, 1972), pp. 212-13.
  24. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed., Philip Bradley (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946).
  25. John Stuart Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1859 in two volumes), p. 56.
  26. Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, trans. from German and edited by Hans. H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1958).
  27. Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).
  28. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
  30. Marx and Engels, *The Russian Menace*, p. 40.
  31. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. from German by Ephraim Fischhoff, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Badminister Press, 1968).
  32. See especially Alfred Borne, *State and Economics in the Middle East* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960); Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1958) and David Clarence McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961).
  33. P.J. Vatikiotis, ed., *Revolution in the Middle East and Other Case Studies* (London and Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield).
  34. Ernest Renan, ed., "Islamism and Science," in *Poetry of the Celtic Race, and Other Studies* (London: W. Scott, 1896), p. 85.
  35. Lacy de O'Leary, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949).
  36. Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of Arab Intellectuals, Traditionalism or Historicism?* (Berkeley University of California Press, 1976).
  37. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*.
  38. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. from French by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), p. xvi.
  39. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 259.
  40. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945).
  41. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, p. 215.
  42. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
  43. Thomas F. Glick, *Irrigation and Society in Medieval Valencia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970) and N. Smith *Man and Water: A History of Hydro-Technology* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970).

## "ISLAM" AND ORIENTALISM

Gordon E. Pruett

In reviewing the writings of those Orientalists who, as non-Muslim scholars, are committed to interpreting the nature and role of Islam, we can see an impressive divergence on such questions as the sources of Islamic faith and belief, the influence of Hellenic culture, the importance of Sufism, the relationship between religion and culture, and the viability of Islam in the modern age. But from a Muslim perspective a more striking pair of conclusions emerges: that the Orientalists address each other rather than the Muslim community;<sup>1</sup> and that what they say of Islam is offensive and repugnant. In fact, debates among the Orientalists rest upon assumptions which are quite unacceptable to Muslims themselves. Islam is viewed by the Western Orientalists as, variously: a powerful enemy; an exotic and deviant growth of the Near East; a semi-inert, introverted mass; a failed civilization in need of restoration and revision; a mission field; and a fanatical, even suicidal, reaction against the trends of modern time. Some Orientalists are content to speculate on the fate of Islam on the basis of their identification of the driving forces within it; others, some conservative, others liberal, urge reform and revision in accordance with their notion of what the essential Islam may be said to be. None seems to feel that it will simply go away or, less simply, be destroyed. But it constitutes a problem which requires explanation, especially in the context of geopolitical concerns regarding the Third World, oil and petrodollars. Whether the assumptions and motivations of the Orientalist are theological, political, social, or economic, what he says is more or less distasteful to the Muslim, and suggestive of condescension and denigration.

I wish to focus on one highly significant aspect of the Orientalist tradition which I believe explains its attitudes and the intense resistance to it by the people about whom the Orientalist writes. This aspect is that of thinking about Islam as an historical movement and cultural development *only*, rather than as a dynamic effort to do what the very name of the tradition demands, to submit to God. The Orientalist and the Muslim share one assumption, at least — that the history of Muslims is a history of change, success, failure, ignorance, insight, courage, and