

# *Toward a Non-Essentialist Pedagogy of “Islam”*<sup>1</sup>

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*There are no insulated cultures or civilizations. Any attempt made to separate them into the water-tight compartments alleged by Huntington does damage to their variety, their diversity, their sheer complexity of elements, their radical hybridity. The more insistent we are on the separation of cultures and civilizations, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and others. The notion of an exclusionary civilization is, to my way of thinking, an impossible one. The real question, then, is whether in the end we want to work for civilizations that are separate or whether we should be taking the more integrative, but perhaps more difficult, path, which is to try to see them as making one vast whole whose exact contours are impossible for one person to grasp, but whose certain existence we can intuit and feel.*

—Edward Said (2000: 587)

This quote by the late Edward Said, I believe, captures well the problem with much of what we teach about Islam. We conceptualize the Islamic world as if it were a separate, clearly identifiable civilization that we can teach on its own without a systematic analysis of the larger world within which it is both integrated and incorporated. Rather, in the spirit of Said I would argue that populations are not formed in isolation, that their connections with other populations and with the larger currents of world history require our attention. To ignore these connections is to treat societies and cultures like “billiard balls,” to use a term Eric Wolf coined in his masterful book, *Europe and the People without History* (1982).

Since the nineteenth century many of us have assumed the distinct existence of societies, civilizations, and nations as units that possess strict and rigid boundaries in which each unit is to be viewed separately.<sup>2</sup> Arnold Toynbee popularized this vision of history, according to which each civilization has its own ethos, its famous characters, its authentic *Geist*. Rejecting this view, we need to focus our attention instead on the interdependence and the continual reactions occurring between various populations rather than separating them into watertight compartments.

Teaching the world in this “billiard balls” manner is what I call, following the work of others, a *National Geographic* or, if you prefer, an ornamentalized, museum-like representation of the world.<sup>3</sup> The teacher presents a method of thinking that resembles any school atlas with yellow, green, pink, orange, and blue countries composing a truly global map with no vague or “fuzzy spaces” and no “bleeding boundaries” (Gellner, 1983: 139). This nationalized order of things is presented to the student uncritically as the normal and naturalized order of difference. For it is self-evident that “real” nations are fixed in space and “recognizable” on a map (Anthony Smith, 1986: 1). One country cannot at the same time be another country. The world of nations is thus “conceived as a discrete spatial partitioning of territory;

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2. A more detailed analysis of this can be found in Khaldoun Samman (2001), “The Limits of the Classical Comparative Method,” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center*, Vol. XXIV, no.4, 533-73.

3. See Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993), *Reading National Geographic*.

it is territorialized in the segmentary fashion of the multicolored school atlas.”<sup>1</sup> The unity of cultures and populations as watertight containers, units which could then be classified into a limited number of species and compared to one another, produces a world view that, I believe, undermines the critical thinking skills we as teachers encourage our students to develop.

This “essentialist” view of the world, what Edward Said in part identifies in his study of Orientalism, is an ideological invention of our present modern world-system. How else would it have been possible to explain Europe’s rise to supremacy without first devising and inventing an approach that makes that supremacy presentable? Essentialism was the only way of explaining the rise of Europe in terms of some unique trait that Europe, and only Europe, possessed. It was a method affording its architects the means of asserting that “we” possess these qualifying features and “they” do not.<sup>2</sup> As a result inequalities and violence could be explained in terms of the innate features projected onto a particular group. *Teaching this view of reality to our students makes the world of inequality and conflict appear to stem from characteristics innate to a specific civilization, class, race, or gender.* It eliminates by its very logic the capacity to explore systematically the connections between the wealth and development of one group and the misery and impoverishment of another. And, it is these “connections” and the idea of a unifying and interconnected history that allows students to understand the larger systemic and historical processes as a fundamental part of our human history. Thus, as William Roseberry (1992) argues, we could write a history of what happened “there” and what happened “here” without the slightest reference to the way those two seemingly separate histories are intricately tied to one another. In other words, it is an approach that fits exceptionally well with those who are trying to blame the victim and leave untouched all those others who hold real power.

To clarify my argument, take a different issue that I teach about in my sociology class, namely, that of socio-economic inequality in the United States. It’s a long drawn out debate that I used to have as a sociology graduate student, and now as a professor, about who is to blame for the plight of the poor in the United States. The debate goes something like this: I meet a poor, working class male who works at Wal-Mart and earns a minimum wage. Does he earn low wages because he is enveloped by a culture of poverty and is prevented from acquiring the proper cultural traits needed to become a Bill Gates? Or is he enveloped by a system of exploitation that ultimately requires a minimum-wage class to reproduce the wealth of a Bill Gates?

Being a self-identified socialist at the time, my response was to accuse those who sided with the former argument of “blaming the victim” whereas I preferred to look at the larger system to explain the circumstances of this Wal-Mart employee. Today many of my students use the same discourse as that of my former colleagues by saying that such a perspective blames society for all the ills of what they view as the shortcomings of this particular working-class male. “He could have been more successful if he had worked harder, received more education, saved money, and started a business ... “

But after September 11<sup>th</sup> I am once again finding myself in this debate, but this time it concerns “the Muslim world.” The poor, minimum-wage worker has been replaced by a distant other: the Muslim/Arab/Palestinian. Where once we debated Oscar Lewis’s “Culture of Poverty” thesis, we are now spending long hours over Samuel Huntington’s and Bernard Lewis’s “clash of civilizations” thesis. But looking back at the old debates, I can’t help but see their similarities. The argument that my students and colleagues leveled against the working poor revolved around the idea that we need to focus our attention on what’s happening “within” a given region, culture, gender, or class, and that behind the reasons why some are wealthier than others lie cultural and individual differences. So forget the structural patterns of inequality *between* classes, races, or genders. The real blame resides somewhere deep within the soul of the failed group or individual. Therefore, the argument by the famous social scientist Oscar Lewis that leftists blame the larger society for everything when obviously the problem stems from the fact that this Wal-Mart worker has learned from his family negative traits that led him to his poor, miserable life.

A similar discourse towards the working poor is now being replicated by students and colleagues when it comes to the present eruption of violence and conflict between the United States and Israel, on the one side, and that of some portions of the Arab and Islamic world, on the other. That is, for this generation, the discourse of dysfunctionality has been further extended to include the “Middle Easterner,” a character-type that could only be understood through the lens of “cultural environment” and/or religious (read: Islamic) influences.

Take for instance two writers that I have observed being used uncritically by many instructors across multiple dis-

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1. The analogy of a school atlas is in Liisa Malkki (1992: 26).

2. For a similar analysis of this sort, see the excellent book by J.M. Blaut (1993), *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*.

ciplines, colleges and universities, that of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. These two writers argue with a logic similar to those I described above that Muslims have learned to hate the West because Islam represents a cultural universe that is by its essence anti-modern and anti-Western. Muslims, they argue, have learned from their seventh century predecessors in Mecca traits and mentalities that are intrinsically anti-modernist. Their answer to the question “Why do they hate us?” is posited in terms of the “Islamic mind,” located deep in doctrinal ideas, and represents a “return” to “the classical Islamic view”<sup>1</sup> in which “the duty of God’s soldiers is to dispatch God’s enemies as quickly as possible to the place where God will chastise them—that is to say, the afterlife.”

As Ali Mirsepassi argues, “the venturing of the ‘clash of civilization’ thesis depends upon the assertion that the hatred felt by Muslims has relatively little to do with any violation on the part of the West, and a great deal more to do with an ancient and almost supernatural form of enmity” (Mirsepassi: 2000: 44). Hence, while, for Oscar Lewis, the Wal-Mart employee has learned negative qualities like “immediate gratification” in his childhood and is now in his adult life reproducing these qualities—what Oscar Lewis popularized as the “culture of poverty”—for Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, Muslims have learned seventh century cultural baggage that is at odds with “Western civilization.” Replace poor working class with Muslim and the poverty of culture with that of Jihad and you have a strategic discourse for presenting the people at the lower end of the socioeconomic order as the sole producers of crime, violence, and terror. It’s a polite version of the many daily television programs of *Cops* and other similar shows that depict people of color and the white poor as insanely out of control and lacking in self discipline. Is it surprising therefore that many of our students may hold the view that what has gone wrong in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries stems from a genetic defect in the cultural DNA structure of Muslims? To teach these types of works in our classrooms uncritically is intellectually hollow and uninteresting. To teach any civilization at this level is not only ethically wrong; it is a careless, misrepresentation of a vast and complicated world that needs a more critical and sophisticated pedagogical approach than the one offered by an essentialized and simplified view of reality.

I’m not asking for the dismissal of these works, but rather a critical usage of them. Indeed I use the works of both of these writers as well as many others of similar perspective extensively in my course, “*Islam and the West*.” But we read such works along with other writers who deal with the actual back-and-forth trafficking of cultural and religious ideas, of the shifting terrain of power between the “West” and “Islam,” economically, politically, and militarily, and so forth. My motive in introducing the Wal-Mart employee here is simply to remind us that, even as we realize the limits of an Oscar Lewis type of explanation of the plight of the American working poor, we get confused when we turn our attention to explaining the rise of Islamic militancy. From this exposure many of my students come to learn that these simplifications are essentialist constructs, produced to legitimize people like Bill Gates or, even worse, the extension of American empire.

The reason I am engaging in this polemical style of argumentation is due to the fact that all too often I am confronted daily with extremely Orientalist-like explanations when Islam is at issue, and not just by the Huntingtons of the world but by self proclaimed progressives as well, *including many in the halls of academia itself*. Just imagine if I made the argument that the Wal-Mart minimum-wage worker is where he is in life because his cultural universe is tainted with a dysfunctional-like quality that is holding him back. Many of us today would immediately know that this position upholds the Bill Gates of the world. Yet when it comes to the Islamic world, it is not uncommon to hear from those same people that such a civilization contains deep within its soul an essential propensity to pull out its sword and do battle in the name of Jihad.

Look at, for example, Benjamin Barber’s otherwise useful study, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1996). I use Barber’s chapter on Islam in my class to demonstrate the limits of a more sophisticated version of the Huntington/Lewis perspective. My students recognize that Barber does an excellent job of demonstrating the mutual dependence between global corporate capitalism, on the one hand, and communalist and fundamentalist movements in many parts of the world, on the other. But we also usually discuss its major flaw, namely, that when he comes to Islam, the tone of his argument reverts to a classic Orientalist line: the Islamic world is different from Europe insofar as it fails to separate the two spheres of religion and politics. What’s his proof?: the Quran and seventh-century Medina. Luckily, after reading the historical literature, students quickly recognize the problem with a perspective that eliminates thirteen centuries from its analysis when discussing the last couple of decades, an analysis that seems to be in no need to look at the past century when in fact the state of Islam (its political body) was so dismembered that an individual living in 1850 would not

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1. This summary is taken from Ali Mirsepassi (2000), *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*, University of Cambridge: Cambridge, 41—43. His discussion of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington on pages 40 through 52 provides one of the clearest refutations of both of these writers I have read and is highly recommended for classroom use.

be able to recognize the same Islamic state some 70 years later, no matter how much he read the Quran, and no matter how much he prayed to Allah, and no matter how much he repeated the call to Holy War then or now. Abraham, Moses, Muhammad, Ishmael, and Isaac may all still dance in his dreams at night, but the fact that U.S. warships, Israeli helicopters, Bay Watch, Arnold Schwarzenegger films, Colin Powell, and McDonalds are located a stone's throw away from his most sacred religious site in Mecca means that that dance is going to be to a very different tune. Hence the idea of engaging in Holy War may feel and look like it was learned from reading scriptures in the *madrassa*, but in actuality it is the result of confronting a world in which your livelihood is in the hands of a superpower, and by that I don't mean Allah but the USA.

As intellectuals and teachers of the Muslim world, we need to use a historical-relational reading of Islam, a method Edward Said (1993: 18) identifies as the *contrapuntal imagination*: "the ways in which a ... post-imperial intellectual attitude might expand the overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies." The way I try to teach "Islam" is to introduce it from a perspective that enlarges our categories of time and space. Exposed to grand history of this sort, what we may call the big picture, students can begin to appreciate the fact that most of what has traditionally passed as "Islamic civilization" has been radically transformed in the nineteenth century into a peripheral region of the modern capitalist world-system. Understanding this great transformation of power and wealth, I believe, helps the student grasp the social forces at work in the production of Islamist movements and the reasons for some of the anti-Western streak in the Muslim world. That is, no matter where the student looks, they learn that what was once part of the core of the "ancient world system(s)"<sup>1</sup> with the Islamic world at its center has been swallowed up whole in the nineteenth century, relegating the Mughal and Ottoman empires to the margins of this new, Western-centric world.<sup>2</sup> It is this process, I contend, that has made Islam by definition "anti-modern" and anti-Western, for "the Islamic world" now resides at the losing end of this system, subordinated to European and American power, whereas previously it stood far ahead. Its status affects not only the political economy of "the Islamic world" but also all aspects of life, including gender, class, identity, and race.

Here students are usually surprised to learn that much of the conflicts that look religious in character, stemming from time-immemorial, are actually a product of a very recent development. As the Islamic *Umma* became disjointed both materially and politically in the nineteenth century, a drastic transformation in the structure, philosophy, and identity of the non-Muslim *millets* (ethnic and religious communities) broke up into smaller groups in which ethnic and religious affinity became outwardly the basis of identity. Modernity, in a sense, attacked the region's central nervous system and spread throughout the body like a cancer, and in the process leaving no organ untouched. It restructured every aspect of the Islamic world, from its class make-up and trade patterns to its formal political structure and religious, gender, and ethnic identities. What is unique about the modern colonial enterprise is that invasion doesn't limit itself to slicing up territory and redistributing it to a new ruler, as was the case in the ancient world of conquest. Instead, it swallows it whole, and upon digestion breaks down the properties into a completely new social specimen. Dar al-Islam, as a result of this decapitation, was slowly and surely being hacked to pieces and in its place we begin to see the rise of Greek, Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, ... nationalists.<sup>3</sup>

Nowhere do my students learn to appreciate the limits of a "time-immemorial" and, by extension, "it's all about religion" perspective more than when it comes to the issue of the Palestinian and Israeli conflict. After reading about the facts on the ground, the history of Jewish settlements, the mass demolition of Palestinian homes, the massive creation of Palestinian refugee camps, the production of an Apartheid system of Bantustans under Israeli occupation, students quickly catch on that the violence they are seeing on nightly television programs have much more to do with the fact that there is a massive campaign of ethnic cleansing than some Quranic passages or the preaching of Jihad. Indeed, they learn that far from it being a religious, time-immemorial conflict, it is the product of the present state of things, of two nationalist movements seeking the same real estate, one with the power to destroy a people while the other becoming all so desperate to take the next breath of air.<sup>4</sup>

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1. On the centrality of the Islamic world to the ancient world see the fine work of Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250—1350*, New York: Oxford University Press. For a shorter version of this piece useful for classroom use, see her essay, "The World System in the Thirteenth Century," in Michael Adas (ed.) (1993), *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 75-102.

2. I use sections of a very readable book by L.S. Stavrianos (1981) entitled *Global Rift: The Third World Comes of Age*, particularly the section entitled "The Middle East Enters the Third World," pp. 205-229.

3. For a theoretically sophisticated account of how the incorporation of the Ottoman Empire into the capitalist world-economy affected the social structure of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Caglar Keyder (1987), *State and Class In Turkey: A Study in Capitalist Development*. I find the first chapter of Keyder's book especially useful for classroom use. See also the fine selections of essays on specific nationalisms in the Middle East in Fatma Muge Gocek (2002), *Social Constructions of Nationalism in the Middle East*, State University of New York Press: New York.

Moreover, it is essential that the student learns that it is the systemic inequality of modernity, *on a global scale*, that has produced the violence and conflict that we have come to know so well today, not some religious essence of the Muslim world that we can locate in the Quran or seventh-century Arabia or the life of some prophet. The cause is rather a system that has produced global inequalities on a scale that we have never seen before.<sup>1</sup> The roots of “Islamic rage,” to use a phrase coined by Bernard Lewis, turn out to be a world that we all share, East/West, Muslim/Christian, Arab/Jew, male/female. Otherwise, if you see all the issues involving the Islamic world as stemming from a religious system, you will fall into an Orientalist explanation, for what is “within” the system may be partly the result of unequal power relations that stretch far beyond the so-called culture or religion or group you are scrutinizing. It may even include the activities and policies of states, militaries, and economic elites *on this side of the border*. This is the lesson students learn when they are exposed to an anti-essentialist, and, more significantly, big picture view of the world.

Another exercise I like to do in my class is to demonstrate how history can be used a-historically, deployed for political and ideological reasons rather than for the production of knowledge. Here I use the example of Bernard Lewis’s analysis of Islam and slavery (1990). Some of us may be well aware of these debates, but one of them has led to a cluster of political claims. Many of us know that slavery was transformed radically in the sixteenth century when it became linked to race and brought in to the new plantation system.<sup>2</sup> To lump all slavery throughout history into one and the same phenomenon is not only to go against the craft of historical research; it is a political act of deception as well. This is precisely, I argue, the intention of Bernard Lewis. He wants us to see slavery from a “time immemorial” perspective. Why? Because by doing so he can supply ammunition to those who say, “Stop blaming Europe for slavery. The Arabs, even the Africans themselves, practiced slavery centuries before the Europeans.” In making this a-historical claim, he believes he can wash Europe’s hands clean from its role in instituting a modern and Western form of labor control.

But the issue that pops up the most with my students and peers is the almost knee-jerk reaction of resisting the big picture for a smaller, localized perspective, one which looks at Islam “from within,” internal to the Islamic world and uncontaminated by the larger world. This is linked to the earlier issue we discussed, namely, that we need to look at the internal and local level rather than blame everything on external and global factors. To these students I’d provide the following counter-argument. Yes, we need to consider the way “local and internal dynamics” become relevant, especially the way they are appropriated historically. But what part of local and external history are we talking about? Do we argue that what happened in seventh-century Arabia is by definition the “local dynamics” of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001? When a Palestinian’s home is destroyed by Israeli U.S.-made helicopters and four of his children are walking around with no arms, prompting him to carry a green flag bearing citations from the Quran, should we interpret this as “Islamic cultural baggage,” or is it related to a struggle for existence? By engaging in this kind of debate with students, it places them in the position to be more careful to construct arguments in specific social and historical contexts rather than attributing some abstract thing to “Islamic culture.”

When it is all said and done, class discussion revolves around deconstructing the following: The problem is that, like the culture-of-poverty proponents of the past, people like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington conflate religious movements of the present as possessing some time-immemorial essence of a dysfunctional culture. Thus has history been presented? No, I am afraid that is not history, but a Bernard Lewis type of argument: “Islam has always been militant and, by extension, the West has nothing to do with the chaos of the region.” Just as with the culture-of-poverty thesis, the Bill Gates of the world have once again washed their hands clean. But, fortunately, through the proper exposure to alternative ideas, many of the students will discover the ideological underpinnings of such constructs.

Don’t get me wrong; civilizations and texts like the Quran are of historical import and have a great impact on people’s lives. They are, after all, human products and we should continue using the Quran in our classes. But civilizations change over time and contain within them political and cultural contradictions that make an absurdity of any general-

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4. There are many excellent sources to use in class on this issue, but my favorite is Stephen Zunes (2002) book, *Tinderbox: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Roots of Terrorism*, especially his chapter on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

1. Due to the power of the discourse of progress among the most privileged sectors of the world, this statement is a surprise to many. According to the report presented by UNDP, inequalities have increased in the modern world, *not decreased*, between nations. 30 years ago there was a 30-to-1 difference between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% of humanity. Now, it’s 60-to-1. UNDP reported that assets of the world’s 358 billionaires exceeded the combined incomes of 45% of the entire world’s population! Past sultans and Monarchs, with all the palaces they acquired and the cruelty that they may have practiced over their subjects, could never have possibly dreamed of acquiring so much of the world’s resources that these 358 individuals today possess. For an excellent essay on the issue of Progress, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism*, Verso Press, especially the chapter critiquing our notions of progress.

2. For the radical restructuring of slavery under the plantation system in the emerging new world-system of the sixteenth century, see the fine work of Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto*.

izations about some internal essence. The same is true of an important text like the Quran. So it is imperative that *when teaching our students the Quran we also include the specific context in which it is read*, and by whom, demonstrating that, indeed, such changes significantly alter the meanings it provides. For instance, A peasant in Malaysia, as James Scott has persuasively argued in his *Weapons of the Weak* (1987), trying to hold on to his or her plot of land is going to pull out a reading that is radically different from that culled by the large landowner who is trying to dispossess him or her of that same land.

Recalling anecdotes in class of things you observed and heard are also useful to use in making this non-essentialist pedagogy come to life. One that I like very much is when a friend of mine recently told me that “Marxism is a political philosophy that encourages its adherents to see the world in terms of class warfare, so why can’t we see the Quran playing the same important role when it comes to civilizational warfare?” This is a good analogy to the issue at hand that I have used in class with success. If I understand him correctly, we could summarize Islamic militancy as follows: “Islam, as practiced by bin Laden and the Taliban, is a political philosophy that encourages its adherents to see the world in terms of religious (civilizational) warfare.” Good, but then let me ask the following: Does a Chiapas peasant decide to join the Zapatista resistance because he or she has read Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*? Maybe some have read it, but I would think that most joined the class struggle because they knew quite well that the system was exploiting them. The political philosophy of Marxism may have moved some of the organizers. But the events that led to widespread resistance were arguably due to earthly issues like the right to live in dignity. Hence, with or without a *Manifesto*, class struggle is the product of being faced with issues of land, work, a living wage, respect, human rights, and democracy ... Reading Marx may make you sharper politically (depending on your interpretation of Marx), but the “culture” or “religion” of Marxism doesn’t move whole populations to take up arms in and of itself.

Similarly, militant Islam, like Marxism in this example, is also situated in a political, social, and, especially, and historical context. What moves “Muslims” or the peasants of Chiapas is neither texts nor simply an abstract cultural or religious identity. Political movements are not caused by traditions of bad behavior or backward, medieval beliefs. In both cases people decide to resist because of felt injustice, not abstract mentalities like some floating concept of “jihad.” The fact that Karl Marx positioned class struggle as a central category for movements to organize around does not determine the “agency” of exploited groups in Mexico. By extension, the fact that the Quran includes passages (as do almost all scriptures<sup>1</sup>) containing parables which can be interpreted to suggest taking up arms when the faith is confronted by a serious threat from another group does not automatically produce the act of joining an Islamic wave of anti-American movements.

Students who lean to the left are not immune from this essentialist discourse, so a portion of the class needs to deal with the way Marxists and other such movements have traditionally dealt with religious movements, especially of the Islamic variant.<sup>2</sup> The more orthodox Marxist might tend to see religious identity as “pre-capitalist,” belonging to a primitive, fourteenth-century feudal mentality that has not evolved and changed to catch-up with the modern mode of global capital production. Islam, then, is a social structure frozen in time, preindustrial, where “most people still work in agriculture or in handicraft production.” Hence, the lack of a vibrant capitalist class and a vanguard proletariat to move the system forward, both of which, according to some Marxists, are crucial for modernity, forms the explanation of “what went wrong” and why Islam was unable to adopt itself to “modernity, industrialization, and representative democracy.”<sup>3</sup>

This assertion strikes me, however, as being off the mark. As far as I know, humankind has not yet invented H.G.

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1. A good example of this violence in Christian and Jewish Scriptures can be found in Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (1998).

2. For a classic account of some of the limits of a Marxist perspective when it comes to the Islamic world, see Bryan S. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*.

3. Lauren Langman and Douglas Morris, “The Roots of Terror,” in Michael J. Thompson (2003), *Islam and the West: Critical Perspectives on Modernity*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: United Kingdom, 49-74. The schizophrenic mode of analysis of this essay brings up many interesting questions for class discussion. Langman and Morris are struggling to devise a radical revision for the roots of terrorism and the rise of Islamic movements, including by mentioning the need for a “larger social-historical context” and the rise and fall of global hegemonies. But in the end, the entire edifice of their argument is directly taken from Bernard Lewis’s book, *Islam and the West*, including this quote which they are in full agreement: “The highly advanced Islamic pursuits of science, medicine, and philosophy ceased to develop [after the collapse of the Almohad Empire]. ‘Independent inquiry virtually came to an end, and science was for the most part reduced to a veneration of a corpus of approved knowledge’” (p.61). They continue down this path by arguing that “Asian ‘tigers’ have prospered, as has Israel—while Islamic countries have remained poor, backward, and stagnant,” leaving us with the intentional impression that it has something to do with the cultural ethic of Islamic culture. The left here meets Bernard Lewis in its most crudest form. It reminds me very much of the argument leveled against African Americans: “Jews, Koreans, and Chinese made it, so what’s wrong with you? Is it the dysfunctional, matriarchal family system now run by single parent families?”

Wells' time machine. Do the holders of this opinion mean to say that Khomeini and bin Laden, by placing themselves in opposition to liberal modernist discourse, are actually reincarnations of a pre-sixteenth century feudal mentality? I respectfully disagree. I believe such characters to be quite at home here in our period. The only stunt they have to perform is to learn a few techniques from other, more "progressive" characters who have accepted the mantle of state power. Khomeini indeed acted like most other figures who have acquired state power and, if you look closely at the Iranian revolution, you will find it to be not unlike any other modern revolution: After coming to power all nationalist and socialist revolutions oppressed their workers, forced their women into submission, and produced surplus for their ruling classes.<sup>1</sup> Some were, of course, more efficient in one or the other fields of oppression, but they were all playing to the same tune. Also, like all modern revolutions, Iran's aimed to run a tight national ship, one that reflected an ordered and hierarchical society only a modern state can possibly produce. Khomeini learned this lesson from observing other "worldly" revolutions and adopted his form of Islam to function well within the apparatus of social control that we call the modern state.<sup>2</sup> Some may call this pre capitalist or feudal if they so desire, but a disciplinary system of this sort, with its tight hold over every aspect of society, was not available to the Abbasid caliphate or the Mamlukes, nor for that matter to the Almohads. No, they had to depend on that awkward, inefficient tributary system with all of its infra-structural complications.

So why is Islam the unifying theme of resistance, our students may ask? This is an important question that we should do our best to answer. Obviously there is something about Islam that needs to be explained here. I can't speak for the entire Islamic world, but clearly the reason that Islam, rather than Marxism, is evoked by bin Laden and the Taliban is that people can identify with the former as their own while the latter is seen as just another Western import. But many political organizers before the Iranian revolution have used European political philosophies, including Marxism and nationalism. Indeed, many before 1979 used a secularized form of religious symbolism (Islamic modernism). These older bin Ladens, however, viewed the world as divided into two spheres. "Our private sphere (traditions, spirituality, women, food, family, sex ...) belongs to the self," they might have said, and "our public sphere (work, government, science, men) belongs to the universal themes of the enlightenment." There were a few variations on this theme when Turkey, Israel, and Greece, in order to eject themselves out of the Orient and inject themselves into the Occident, sometimes lumped parts of the private sphere (sex, food, toiletry, women, hygiene, and tradition) together with the public sphere. What is changing today is the fact that the new bin Ladens of the world have tied both of these categories together: No distinction between private and public is needed, for Islam is a total unity of life, so they say. Everything from governance and science to the minutest everyday practices of childrearing and the body needs to be Islamized.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Islamists are rejecting one of the central tenets of modern discourse: the separation of the private and public spheres.

The Huntingtons of the world may see this lack of separation as a validation of their "clash of civilizations" thesis (Huntington, 1993). I disagree. It is, I believe, related to the changes taking place globally. The institutions that made it possible for the two spheres approach under the post-nineteenth-century system are coming unraveled, weakening the modernist hold on power and strengthening the power of those who advocate merging the two spheres. Hence, it is neither Islam that is "causing" this development, nor the fact that such a premise is as completely at odds with "Western concepts of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, and the separation of church and state" as Samuel Huntington contends it is. Instead, the U.S. and Israel, being in reality on the defensive end of this new world order, though posing as leaders of the "modernist" world in a sea of barbarism, have repulsed the barbarians to such an extent that the posers are viewed for what they really are: farcical. Modernity does not look all that attractive from the other end of a gun or a missile cruiser. Who after all appreciates a bulldozer equipped with a gun aimed at themselves and their family, forcing them to give up their homes, their olive trees, their oil?

In conclusion, I propose the following: While essentialists teach students to think in binaries, teach your students to think in relational terms. Teach them that societies, far from having separate histories, are intertwined and that we

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1. Ervand Abrahamian (1999) makes similar arguments in his analysis of torture in Iran, comparing the Iranian experience to that of Maoist China, Stalinist Russia and the religious inquisitions of early modern Europe, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations In Modern Iran*, University of California Press: Berkeley.

2. For a more detailed analysis of the disciplinary effect of the modern state, see James C. Scott (1998), *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes To Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London. For the Middle East, see Timothy Mitchell (1991), *Colonising Egypt*, University of California Press: Berkeley.

3. For understanding how gender practices found in Iran, Egypt, and other Islamic countries are a product of modernity, see Lila Abu-Lughod (1993), *Remaking Feminism*. For an excellent account of "the discourse of the veil," see Leila Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*.

must acquire a contrapuntal imagination to capture such a reality. Instead of teaching them Western Civilization and Islamic Civilization, one being “our” history while the other is “their” history, teach them to think of civilizations as transformative, reflexive, and fluid entities. On earth there is no Mars and Venus. There are only winners and losers, and even they are both engaged in each other’s lives. As Derek Sayer (1989: 19) reminds us in his discussion of Karl Marx’s categories of wage labor and capital, “Each is what it is only by virtue of its relation to the other, and must be conceptualized accordingly.” Likewise, as we teach civilizations, we need to appreciate the common historical threads linking these radically different civilizations, nations, and cultures to recognize that their stories are best told together. Such a reappraisal “is obliging us to re-read,” as Stuart Hall maintains (1996: 257), “the very binary form in which the colonial encounter has for so long itself been represented. It obliges us to re-read the binaries as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries for ever.”

I believe that this historical-relational pedagogy offers us the opportunity to “decolonize” knowledge itself and to teach our students to think both critically and creatively about the world in which we live. It is our best bet for producing the critical mass required for processing our essentialist-saturated media and classrooms.

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