

The Controversy between Edward Said and Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm :

A Critical Study on Orientalism

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I hereby declare that, in line with the Faculty of Arts' code of conduct for research integrity, the work submitted here is my own original work and that any additional sources of information have been duly cited.

Preface

First of all a general word of praise is in order. I want to express my gratitude and respect to a number of persons who have supported me throughout the process of writing this dissertation. First of all I want to thank my promotor, professor Giovanna Lelli. I have greatly benefitted from her Arabic lessons and her approach of teaching the subject matters we dealt with in our classes has been a great source of inspiration for me in forming my own ideas. In addition to this, I want to extend my thanks to the entire staff of our faculty, including all professors, teaching assistants, and administrative personnel. Your combined efforts give this faculty its great quality. I also want to express my thanks to Stijn van Nieuwenhuysse and Ronak Faraj Majeed who worked at the University of Ghent where I first started my studies. Their enthusiasm for the Arabic language and dedication towards the students should not go unnoticed. I also want to thank Dr. Georges Corm, whose writings are of great inspiration for me and whose effort of corresponding with me by mail I truly appreciate.

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Without all of you, this wouldn't have been possible.

المجادلة بين إدوارد سعيد وصادق جلال العظم : بحث نقدي حول قضية الاستشراق

في عام ١٩٧٨ كتب الكاتب الفلسطيني المشهور إدوارد سعيد كتابه الأكثر أهمية بعنوان "الاستشراق". في هذا الكتاب يتناول الدكتور سعيد موضوع الدراسات الاستشراقية في الغرب وقام بنقداً جدياً عليها. أشار سعيد في كتابه إلى الصور النمطية والمفاهيم العنصرية التي كانت واسعة الانتشار في دراسات المستشرقين. أكد أنها السبب الرئيسي لهيمنة الغرب على الشرق. أثار هذا النص مناقشات ومجادلات كثيرة ومستمرة منذ نشره حتى الآن ومن أهمها هي التعليقات التي طرحها الفيلسوف السوري صادق جلال العظم.

كتب العظم نص ثاني بعنوان "الاستشراق والاستشراق معكوساً" حيث يطور بعض نقاط النقد على منشورة سعيد المشهورة حيث ينتقد فقط بعض العناصر الإشكالية في كتاب "الاستشراق" وخصوصاً المنهجية التي استخدمها سعيد فيه. في هذا الصدد يتهم صادق العظم سعيد انه يهمل العالم الفعلي ويركز على عالم الكتب والأفكار فقط. في تفسير سعيد يكاد يسبب ظاهرة الاستشراق حركة الاستعمار لكن في وجهة نظر العظم الاستشراق فقط واحد من نتائج الاستعمار. قال لا يوجد سر للاستشراق بل دول صاعدة تتوسع وتستعمر وتهيمن. يعتقد أن سعيد قد وضع العلاقة بين الاستشراق والاستعمار واقفاً على رأسه.

السؤال الرئيسي الذي أريد الإجابة عليه في هذه الرسالة العلمية هو لماذا لا يزال نشاهد استمرار هذه المواقف العنصرية والنمطية إزاء منطقة الشرق الأوسط بعد أربعين سنة من نشر كتاب الاستشراق؟ إن أطروحتي تتكون من عنصرين وهي كالتالي

أولاً، المشكلة تتعلق بتحول فكري وثقافي عام في جميع أنحاء العالم. منذ بداية الثمانينات شهدنا زيادة التركيز على قضايا الهوية والثقافة في دوائر فكرية وسياسية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ظهرت ظاهرة جديدة نستطيع تسميتها بعودة الدين. النتيجة هي أن جميع الصراعات السياسية المعاصرة يتم تحليلها من خلال إطار فكري سطحي يفسر كل شيء من خلال رؤية مفترضة لصراع للثقافات لا مفر منه. أريد أن أقوم هذا المنهج الذي يرجع إلى أفكار المستشرقين القديمة. سأقوم بهذا من خلال تقديم تحليل الظروف التي أدت إلى هذا الوضع. لذلك سوف أركز على الصلة المهمة بين التطورات السياسية والفكرية.

ثانياً، متابعة أفكار العظم تتعلق بالنقد على المنهجية التي استخدم سعيد في كتابه. سعيد كان متأثراً كثيراً بأفكار الفلسفة ما بعد الحداثة التي تركز على حد بعيد على قوة اللغة والخطاب في تشكيل أحداث العالم. من ناحية أخرى كان العظم متأثراً بالمنهجية الماركسية في تحليله التي تركز على عوامل اقتصادية وصراعات سياسية كمحرك في تحريك الأحداث. أعتقد أن سعيد أدرك إشكالية الاستشراق بشكل ممتاز ولكن بسبب منهجيته فشل في تقديم حلاً مناسباً للمشكلة. فقّرت أن أقارن عناصر نصوص المؤلفين من أجل تحقيق توليفة أفضل أفكارهم. في هذا الصدد لقد استخدمت النسخة الأصلية من كتاب العظم الذي ظهر بالعربي ولم تكن ترجمته كاملاً حتى الآن. قمت بترجماتي الخاصة للمقاطع الأكثر ملائمة وأهمية وأيضاً سوف أطبق هذه الاستنتاجات لعصرنا.

أخيراً وصف العظم مفهوم جديد ظهر بين بعض المفكرين الإسلاميين يسميه الاستشراق معكوساً. تتميز رؤيتهم للعالم بنفس الأفكار الجوهرية والنمطية فيما يتعلق بالحوار بين الثقافات. في هذا الصدد لا تعيد هذا الطيار الفكري بعيداً عن نظريات المستشرقين الأوروبيين. يؤمنون بنفس المعارضة الكاملة بين طبيعة الشرق الثابتة وطبيعة الغرب الثابتة ويعارضون أي تفاعل بين الثقافتين لأن الشرق شرق والغرب غرب. ينسخون الانقسام الوطيد بين الثقافتين والفرق الوحيد هو أن الشرق الإسلامي الآن متفوق على ثقافة الغرب. يؤكدون إن ما ينطبق على أوروبا لا يمكن بأي حال أن ينطبق على غير أوروبا.

في الختام أريد أن أقدم مساهمة متواضعة في المناقشة المستمرة حول موضوع الحوار بين الثقافات. نعيش في عالم معولم والاتصال بين الأشخاص ذوي العادات والمعتقدات المختلفة سيزداد فقط. في نفس الوقت يبدو لي أن التركيز السائد والدائم على ما ينقسم الناس بين ثقافة وثقافة أخرى لا يفيد في تخفيف التوترات والنزاعات. أقدم فكرة العمومية كطريقة مناسبة للمستقبل. يعني الاعتقاد بأن نفس الأفكار والحقوق يمكن تطبيقها في جميع أنحاء العالم بغض النظر عن تراث الفرد أو ثقافته. يعني الاحترام للتنوع الثقافي في طريقة شاملة وليست حصرية. يعني الاعتقاد بأننا إنسانية واحدة وإن هناك أكثر ما يوحدنا مما يفرقنا.

Abstract

The Controversy between Edward Said and Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm : a critical study

In 1978 the famous Palestinian writer Edward Said wrote his most important book under the title *Orientalism*. Said wrote a profound criticism on the subject of Oriental Studies in the West, he pointed out the widespread stereotypes and racist concepts in the studies of the orientalists and asserted this was the main reason for the West's domination of the East. Since its publication up to this day the text has provoked many controversies and discussions and amongst the most important comments is the one proposed by the Syrian philosopher Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm.

Al-‘Aẓm wrote a second text called *Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism*, where he develops some points of criticism on Said's famous publication. He only criticized some problematic aspects of *Orientalism*, related to the methodology that Said used in this book. Al-‘Aẓm accuses Said that he neglects the real world and only focusses on the world of ideas and books. In Said's analysis it is almost as if the phenomenon of Orientalism has caused colonialism, but according to al-‘Aẓm, Orientalism is just one of the results of colonialism. He said there is no secret to Orientalism but emerging states expanding, colonizing, and dominating. He thought that Said placed the relation between Orientalism and colonialism on its head.

The main question I want to answer in this dissertation is why we are still witnessing the persistence of these racist and stereotypical attitudes towards the Middle East over forty years after the publication of *Orientalism*? My thesis consists of two elements.

First of all, the problem is related to a general shift in culture and thinking that transpired globally. Since the beginning of the eighties, we have seen a greater focus on matters of identity and culture in intellectual and political circles. In addition to this, a new phenomenon emerged we can call the return of the religious. The result of this is that all contemporary political conflicts are analyzed through a superficial framework that explains everything through a vision of a supposed inevitable clash of the cultures. I want to resist this approach, which is based on the old ideas of the orientalists and will do this by providing an analysis of the circumstances that have led to this situation. In this respect I will focus on the

important link between political and intellectual evolutions.

The second aspect is related to a criticism of Said's methodology, following al-'Azm's ideas. Said was greatly influenced by ideas of postmodern philosophy, which to a great extent focus on the power of language and discourse in shaping world events. On the other hand, al-'Azm was influenced by a Marxist methodology in his analysis, which focusses on economic factors and political conflicts as the motor behind events. I think Said understood the problem of Orientalism in an excellent way but because of his methodology failed to provide a suitable solution to the problem. Therefore I have decided to compare elements of both authors' texts in order to reach a synthesis of their best ideas. In this regard I have made use of the original edition of al-'Azm's book which appeared in Arabic and has not been fully translated so far. Therefore I have made use of personal translations of the most important and relevant elements and aim to apply the conclusions to our time.

In addition to this al-'Azm described a new phenomenon that emerged among some Islamic thinkers we can call Reverse Orientalism. Their worldview is characterized by the same essentialist and stereotypical ideas about intercultural dialogue. In this respect this intellectual current is comparable to the theories of the European orientalists. They believe in the same complete opposition between the fixed natures of the East and the West and oppose any interaction between the two cultures because the East is the East and the West is the West. They reproduce the deep division between two cultures and the only difference now is that the East is superior to the West. They assert that what applies to Europe cannot under any circumstances be applied to the rest of the world.

In conclusion, I want to provide a modest contribution to the ongoing discussion on the subject of intercultural dialogue. We live in a globalized world where the interaction between people with different customs and belief systems will only increase. At the same time, it seems to me that the prevailing and permanent focus on what divides people between one culture and another does not help to ease tensions and conflicts. I present the idea of universalism as a suitable way for the future. This means the belief that the same ideas and rights can be applied all over the world regardless of an individual's heritage or culture. It means respect for cultural diversity in a way that is inclusive and not exclusive. It means the belief we are one humanity and that there is more which unites us than there is dividing us.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	i
تلخيص.....	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One : The Political and Intellectual Context	6
1.1 The Rise of Islamism and its Geopolitical Context	8
1.2 The Cultural Turn in Western Academia	15
Chapter Two : Edward Said	20
2.1 Biography.....	20
2.2 Works	22
2.3 Influences	24
2.3.1 Auerbach and the Humanist tradition.....	24
2.3.2 Foucault	25
2.3.3 Gramsci.....	27
Chapter Three : Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Azm	31
3.1 Biography.....	31
3.2 Works	33
3.2.1 Self Criticism after the Defeat	33
3.2.2 Critique of Religious Thought	34
Chapter Four : <i>Orientalism</i> and its Critique	38
4.1 Orientalism by Edward Said	38
4.2 Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Azm’s reply.....	41
4.2.1 A Lack of Consistency	42
4.2.2 The philosophical and historical genealogy of Orientalism	45
4.2.3 A Problem Without a Solution ?.....	52
4.3 Said and Marx.....	54
Chapter Five : What is Reverse Orientalism.....	59
5.1 Reverse Orientalism in the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr	61
5.2 Marxism as a Western Intrusion ?.....	65
5.3 Postcolonial Studies and Secularism	68
Conclusion	78
Bibliography.....	84

Introduction

In 1978 Edward Said wrote his monumental study called *Orientalism*. In this work he exposed and criticized the often racist and one-dimensional depictions he encountered in Western depictions of the Orient and more specifically of Islam. First of all, Said claims that a general picture emerges in both academic and literary depictions of the Orient. This general picture is based on the myth of a fundamental difference between the East and the West resulting in the superiority of the West. Furthermore, Said claimed that the scholars working on the Orient, who claimed they were only driven by a neutral quest for objective knowledge, were as a matter of fact complicit in the project of European colonialism and the subjugating of the East by the West. After its publication *Orientalism* raised a storm of reactions and continues to be a controversial book up to this day. The reactions ranged from being sympathetic to outright hostile. For my dissertation I have chosen to focus on one review in specific. This is *Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse, or al-Istishrāq wa al-Istishrāq M'akūsan* by the Syrian philosopher Ṣādiq Jalāl al-'Aẓm. While being generally sympathetic to Said's main premise, al-'Aẓm developed several points of criticism which I believe are very pertinent and serve as a good addition to accompany Said's original critique. In summary, al-'Aẓm claims that Said himself also essentialized the West by presenting it as a monolithic entity. In this way Said inadvertently ended up reinforcing the false dichotomy between East and West that he set out to expose. Furthermore, al-'Aẓm analyzes a new intellectual trend where the classical Orientalist idea of an unbridgeable chasm between the East and the West ended up being internalized and reproduced in several Islamic milieus, but this time giving the verdict of superiority to the Islamic Orient. He will refer to this phenomenon as 'Reverse Orientalism'.

In this dissertation I will use the controversy between Said and al-'Aẓm as a general guideline. More than forty years have passed since the publication of *Orientalism*, yet the phenomenon which Said justly decried seems stronger than ever. In both the mass media and academic circles we are still often faced with superficial analyses that present Islam as the sole determining factor when dealing with complex situations relating to the Middle East. One of the main concerns of this dissertation is to attempt to find an adequate explanation for why this seems to be the case. Furthermore, I intend to investigate to what extent the ideas of

both Said and al-'Azm are still valid today, how we can apply their observations to our current era.

My two main sources are Said's *Orientalism* and al-'Azm's *al-Istishrāq wa al-Istishrāq M'akūsan*. For the latter one, I have made use of the original Arabic version which appeared in 1981. This work has only been partially translated, an abridged English version of the original text has been included in Alexander Lyon Macfie's collection *Orientalism: A Reader*. Therefore I have decided to use the unabridged Arabic version and will provide my own translations of the original source material. This decision also serves to illustrate the relevance of my dissertation. Since I am convinced of the originality and validity of al-'Azm's arguments, I believe that to provide greater access to his work in English is beneficial for the ongoing debate about how cultures perceive each other and how we can achieve mutual understanding in this globalized world. I intend to distill and present the main arguments of both works and hope to supplement this with my own insights regarding their validity for our own time. By counterposing the arguments between Said and al-'Azm in a dialectical fashion I hope to achieve a synthesis which combines the strongest elements of both. Furthermore, I will strengthen my own analysis by making use of a thorough analysis of the respective philosophical frameworks of both Said and al-'Azm. Edward Said was a professor of literature who was strongly influenced by post-structuralist thought while al-'Azm bases his ideas on his belief in the liberatory potential of both Enlightenment philosophy and Marxism. Since a great deal of their disagreements are fundamentally rooted in their opposing epistemological frameworks, I have deemed it necessary to devote extensive attention to exactly how and why they came to their conclusions and what were their main philosophical influences.

Furthermore, I want to emphasize it is impossible to isolate the work of any writer or philosopher from the political and sociological context in which it was written. Philosophy or theory does not arise in a vacuum and is always influenced by the current *zeitgeist* and the ruling political climate. It is exactly one of al-'Azm's main points of criticism towards Said that he gets lost in the textual and neglects to examine 'real world' factors such as politics and economy in examining Orientalism as a phenomenon. Where Said would almost come to the conclusion that the academic branch of Orientalism was a constitutive factor in paving the way for European colonialism, al-'Azm argues that it is the other way around and claims that Orientalism is nothing more but a consequence of the European project of colonialism and

imperialism. In this sense I have decided to follow al-'Azm's approach. This dissertation will start with a thorough overview of the socio-political context in which *Orientalism* was written. In addition to this I will trace how the worldwide political climate has changed throughout the following decades and how exactly this has influenced ensuing changing trends in philosophy and discourse. Since I am convinced of the usefulness of a methodology which gives priority to the analysis of political and economic factors I have decided to apply this method in my own dissertation to illustrate its suitability.

In the first chapter I will examine the political and intellectual context in which *Orientalism* was written. One of the great evolutions that transpired after the book's publication in 1978 is the rise of Islamism as we know it today. I contextualize this evolution in the double context of Cold War politics and a global phenomenon we can refer to as 'the return of the religious', signaling a worldwide resurgence of the confluence between religion and politics. In this manner I aim to dispel the often repeated myths of an Islamic exceptionalism that tries to explain these developments with recourse to Islamic theology. On the other hand the global West has also witnessed a trend that is marked by a retreat from universalism towards a greater preoccupation with particularism, identity, and culture. My conclusion is that the current climate of persisting Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism can only be adequately explained by placing it in its proper context of the global cultural and political shifts that have transpired. In the second chapter I will deal with the biography of Edward Said, his main works besides *Orientalism*, and his main philosophical influences. As I have stated that it is impossible to isolate the work of an author from its broader context, I believe it is also impossible to isolate it from their personal context. We need to examine external influences at both the macro- and the micro-level. How has Said's positionality at the heart of US academia influenced his ideas, how does *Orientalism* relate to the rest of his literary output, who and what were his main intellectual influences. Chapter three will follow the same general outset applied to the work of Şādiq Jalāl al-'Azm. In chapter four we arrive at *Orientalism* itself, now we are prepared to properly contextualize it against its socio-political and philosophical background. First I will present Said's main ideas in this book, paying close attention to the implications of his methodological framework. Following this I present al-'Azm's criticisms. Finally I have devoted a section of this chapter to the relation between Edward Said and Karl Marx as I am convinced it is exactly here were the methodological

problems of *Orientalism* are most clearly manifested. The fifth and last chapter deals with the phenomenon of Reverse Orientalism, as conceptualized by al-'Azm. I begin with summarizing the main elements of Reverse Orientalism. Following this, I will transpose this framework on the work of some contemporary thinkers. Firstly, we shall examine whether the label of Reverse Orientalism is applicable to the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Secondly I will compare the elements of Reverse Orientalism with some common attitudes I have noticed appearing in the field of study called postcolonial studies.

The main hypothesis of this work can be summarized as follows. Edward Said was mostly correct in his analysis and diagnosis of the problems he addressed in *Orientalism*. I do agree that a great deal of Orientalist studies was, and still is up to this day, rife with implicit assumptions about the superiority of the West and its fundamental difference with the Orient. Furthermore it is one of Said's greatest merits to debunk the claim of neutrality behind which many scholars hide. Yet, *Orientalism* is not without its own problems as I intend to illustrate. My main contention is that while Said was effective in unveiling certain problematics present in Orientalist studies, he failed in determining the precise origin and nature of this problematic. More importantly he was not successful in proposing a decent solution to this problem. I assert these defects in his analysis mainly stem from his methodology which is based on literary criticism and post-structuralist philosophy. Furthermore, I realize that Said was averse to any essentialism of any kind. Yet, on the other hand, his imprecise use of the term "the West" and his neglect in researching the history of Western philosophy might have served as ammunition for those people who conflate everything they dislike with "the West" as we often hear in contemporary Islamist milieus. In this regard I propose we can read al-'Azm's reply as a useful correction to some of the more problematic aspects of *Orientalism*. As I have previously stated, al-'Azm agreed with the book's main message and mostly disagreed with the methodological approach. Finally a note on what this dissertation is not about. Among the several points of criticism raised against *Orientalism* was the argument that not all Orientalist scholarship was dismissive towards the people of the Orient. Many scholars, such as Maxime Rodinson, Louis Massignon, and Henry Corbin for example were driven by true respect and admiration for Islam and the Orient. However, while I am aware of these discussions, this falls outside the scope of my dissertation. I would refer to Robert Irwin's *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its*

Discontents for a study that highlights the more positive aspects of Orientalism as an academic pursuit.¹ To make matters clear, when I make use of the term Orientalism in this dissertation, I refer to the kind of shallow narratives that Said criticized. I am aware that the entire branch of Orientalism is of course not reducible to this, but it serves as a delineation of the definition in order to achieve clarity and preciseness in this paper.

¹ Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2006).

Chapter One : The Political and Intellectual Context

Said's publication of *Orientalism* dates from 1978. Since then the book has raised numerous discussions and continues to do so up to this day. One would expect that after Said's groundbreaking criticisms the amount of essentializing and orientalizing depictions of the Middle East would have decreased, yet the opposite seems to be true. Both in the fields of academia and mass media, the obsession with Islam as main explanatory factor for events in the region still is very present. One of the main questions of this paper is why exactly the mechanics of Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism still seem very much alive today. In order to answer this question we need to take a close look at how the political and ideological landscape evolved since the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978.

First of all we need to examine the worldwide state of affairs preceding the publication of *Orientalism*. The end of the Second World War marked the beginning of a new era in the Middle East. In the fifties we witnessed a sequence of nationalist revolutions which established most of the modern states we know today. This went hand in hand with the spread of ideologies such as Pan-Arabism and Arabic Socialism. On the other hand the founding of Israel in 1948 would provoke a series of conflicts which are still not solved today. At the same time we witnessed the beginning of the Cold War. The effects of this global power struggle would also heavily influence politics in the region. The world was divided in two blocks with competing ideologies. On the one hand there was the United States and its allies in Western Europe defending capitalism and on the other hand the Soviet Union with its satellite states defending communism. Both great powers tried to gain as much influence as possible in the strategically important Middle East. In addition to this, the discovery of vast oil reserves in the region would only provoke more intervention from foreign nations.² In this respect we also need to refer to the Bandung conference of 1955. This was a meeting between leaders of formerly colonized nations. The goals were to set up cooperation between these nations and try to steer a political course that was independent of both the USA and the USSR and was opposed to all forms of colonialism and more recent manifestations of imperialism and neocolonialism. This eventually led to the forming of the Non Aligned Movement which still exists today.

² Georges Corm, *A History of the Middle East: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, trans. Hala Khawam (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2010), 115-117.

As I have said before, we can never separate the work of a thinker from the political context in which he lived. In the case of Edward Said, we can state that this also influenced him in multiple ways. First of all his personal history explains his great commitment to the Palestinian cause. On the other hand I argue that some of the most common issues and criticisms relating to *Orientalism* can be explained by the fact it is a book written in the United States during the Cold War. Although the seventies are generally seen as a period of détente under Nixon and Carter, there were certainly great limits to what could be said and what could not be said in academic circles. Said could express opinions critical of US imperialism, but only to a certain extent. Furthermore, anything close to Marxism or communism was seen as deeply suspicious. I think this is one of the factors which can explain his tendency towards analyzing problems in terms of discourse and textual analysis. Take for example the following passage from *Orientalism* which is situated at the conclusion of the book.

“The Arab World today is an intellectual, political, and cultural satellite of the United States. This is not in itself something to be lamented; the specific form of the satellite relationship, however, is.”³

This passage appears when Said analyzes the current state of affairs in contemporary Middle Eastern Studies in the United States and its close relationship to US foreign policy. His main assertion is that orientalist attitudes are still very widespread among the ranks of government advisers, specialists, and policy makers. His subsequent conclusion is that if only the ideas of these specialists would change, the United States’ policy regarding the Arab World could take a turn for the better. If they started to spread a more honest picture of the region, then the relationship would evolve to be a more benevolent one.⁴ What is rather striking here is that Said does not seem to condemn the satellite relationship between the United States and the Arab World in itself. This seems to be a rather disappointing stance for someone who is considered as one of the more vocal critics of US imperialism. Furthermore, this analysis of the United States’ entrenchment in the Middle East does not take structural elements into account such as the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War and the need for a steady supply of oil to keep the economy running. I would suggest that thinkers like Samir

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 322.

⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 320-324.

Amin or Immanuel Wallerstein give a more useful analysis regarding the reasons and implications of unequal development of different parts of the world. We conclude this topic with a rather insightful and ironic comment by al-'Azm regarding this passage.

" هنا يبدو لي ان الدائرة قد اكتملت، لأن ادوارد اختتم كتابه على الطريقة الاستشراقية الكلاسيكية النموذجية عندما لم يجد ما يبعث على الأسى أبدا في علاقة التبعية الفكرية والثقافية والسياسية السائدة بين الشرق والغرب وعندما قدم نصيحته الى صانعي السياسة الامريكية وخبرائهم واختصاصييهم حول أفضل الاساليب لتمتين الاسس التي يمكن أن تستند اليها التوظيفات الامريكية في الشرق الأوسط وأفضل الطرق لتحسين شروط علاقة التبعية المذكورة وذلك بتحرير انفسهم من أو هام الاستشراق الضارة وتجربياته البائسة، وعندما نسي أو تنسى أنه لو قام هؤلاء الخبراء والاختصاصيون واسيادهم باتباع نصيحته سيجد الشرق عندئذ في الامبريالية الامريكية عدوا اعظم هولاء مما يجد الان.⁵

"It seems as if we have come full circle, because Edward ended his book in the typical and classical Orientalist manner when he didn't find anything particularly loathsome in the prevailing intellectual, cultural, and political relation of dependency between the East and the West. He offered his advice to the US policy makers, their experts and their specialists about the best ways to solidify the foundations upon which the United States' edifice in the Middle East is based. He offered the best ways of improving the aforementioned dependency relation and this by liberating themselves from the harmful illusions of Orientalism and its miserable abstractions. But at the same time he forgot or forgets that if these experts and specialists and their masters followed his advice, the East will find an even greater enemy in American imperialism than it finds now."

1.1 The Rise of Islamism and its Geopolitical Context

As we have mentioned before, ideologies such as socialism and nationalism enjoyed great popularity in the Arab world until the seventies. Now we shall turn our attention to the events that have led to the deterioration of these secular systems of thought and their replacement with a resurging importance of religion in politics. This evolution occurred as a result of both internal and external factors in several nations. Worldwide politics were marked by the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both great powers tried to gain as much influence as possible in the strategically important Middle East. The containment of Soviet communism was one of the main pillars of US foreign policy after

⁵ Ṣādiq Jalāl al-'Azm, *Al-Istishrāq wal-Istishrāq M'akūsan* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadātha, 1981), 25.

the end of the Second World War. This began with the announcement of the Truman doctrine in 1947.⁶ It does not need to surprise us in this respect that the United States was suspicious towards the popularity of these left-leaning ideologies in several Arab states. Therefore the rising Islamist movements who were also fiercely anti-communist were seen as a useful ally in this global struggle for ideological hegemony. Finally we need to stress that the resurgence of religious politics did not limit itself to the Islamic world but was part of a wider global trend. In this respect we can refer to the growing importance of Jewish identity in Israeli politics or the increasing influence of Evangelical Christian pressure groups in the United States. In the same vein, we can refer to the phenomenon of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, in India. This ideology influenced radical movements such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sang and is linked with the current ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party.⁷ On the other hand, the rise of Islamist movements is often framed in terms of Islamic theology as if the religion of Islam itself was the sole responsible factor in explaining these events. The idea of the exceptional status of Islam among world religions is a recurring trope which we often see in both Orientalist and Islamist narratives. I argue this is a reductionist view which does not hold adequate explanatory value. For example, it seems absurd enough to try to understand the collusion between the Catholic Church and the regime of Franco in Spain by reading the Bible, yet it seems acceptable to trace the roots of militant Islamism to the Qur'ān. Therefore, in the following paragraphs I will attempt to trace the political and economic factors that have occurred worldwide to interpret the rise of Islamism.

First of all we have to look back to the disastrous war of 1967. The defeat of the Arab armies sent shockwaves through the entire region. As Şadiq Jalāl al-'Aẓm rightly pointed out, there was a general tendency in society to shift the blame somewhere else instead of taking a look in the mirror to face the responsibility for the defeat. One of the many culprits that received blame for the defeat was exactly this style of Arab nationalism that was closely associated with the regime of Gamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir, who saw the loss as a personal embarrassment and abdicated soon after. His successor, Anwar al-Sādāt would already show a more welcoming attitude towards the combination of religion and politics. One of the first signs of the growing importance of Islam in the political arena is his relative tolerance for the Muslim

⁶ Beverly Milton Edwards and Peter Hinchcliffe, *Conflicts in the Middle East since 1945*, 3d ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 37.

⁷ John McLeod, *The History of India*, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 209.

Brotherhood. Sādāt estimated the return of this movement could function as a useful counterweight for the influence of leftist opposition to his regime.⁸ Regarding the economy, Sādāt is well known for instituting his *infitāh* policy, opening the doors for both foreign and domestic private investment and ending the government's predominance in the public sector. Another of Sādāt's main policy switches was his move away from the USSR towards the United States. We are dealing with a double evolution here. The reorientation of foreign politics and economic policy towards an alignment with the global West combined with the propagation of Islamist politics in order to quench leftist voices in internal affairs. Georges Corm also notices a new intellectual trend originating here where several former secular and radical thinkers will evolve towards placing a much greater emphasis on the Islamic identity as a replacement for the national identity.⁹ Some of the thinkers he mentions are Hassan Hanafi, Adel Hussein, and Tarik al-Bichri.¹⁰ The tragic fate of Sadat at the hands of militants from the extremist *Takfīr wa Hijra* in 1981 would serve as a warning call of what these Islamist forces could bring into being once unleashed.

The next evolution will take place in Saudi Arabia. This kingdom adopted the very strict *Wahhabbi* doctrine in its constitution since its creation in 1932 and has been one of the closest partners of the United States in the region besides Israel. The country's foreign policy remained fairly isolated until the seventies but great changes occurred after the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, also called the Yom-Kippur war. After the war, all the members of the OAPEC or Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries decided to proclaim an embargo against the nations that supported Israel during the war. As a result, the global price of oil rose from three to eleven dollars a barrel.¹¹ This obviously greatly benefitted Saudi-Arabia, the largest oil producer of the region. The country was now able to take a more assertive role on the international stage thanks to the great amounts of money flowing in. This had a double result. On the one hand the rest of the world turned a blind eye towards Saudi Arabia's fundamentalist branch of internal politics because of the global dependency on oil exports. On the other hand the country also started exporting their very conservative branch of *Wahhabbi* Islam worldwide under the guise of all kinds of cultural development and

⁸ Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "An Islamic Alternative in Egypt: The Muslim Brotherhood and Sadat," *Arab Studies Quarterly* Vol 4, no 1. (Spring 1982): 76.

⁹ Georges Corm, *Pensée et politique dans le monde arabe*, (Paris: La Découverte, 2015), 198.

¹⁰ Corm, *Pensée et politique*, 224.

¹¹ Corm, *A History of the Middle East*, 123.

cooperation initiatives. In this respect it is useful to refer to the creation of the OIC or Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 1969. The motto of this organization is *“To safeguard the interests and ensure the progress and well-being of Muslims”*. They present themselves as an international organization dedicated to promote the safety and wellbeing of Muslims worldwide.¹² In contrast with the aforementioned Non Aligned Movement, this is yet another example of the worldwide shift that has occurred where groups identify themselves in terms of religion or identity rather than in terms of political goals or other common economic interests. Furthermore we can also see this as another initiative to promote an Islamic narrative in order to silence leftist voices. Georges Corm analyses this very well, therefore I decided to quote the following passage completely.

“In order to fight the expansion of communism in the region more effectively, the United States encouraged Saudi Arabia to mobilize Islam to contain the Soviet influence. These efforts came to fruition in 1969 with the establishment of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Mecca. Owing to Saudi Arabia’s financial power acquired since 1973, the OIC became a redoubtable rival to the virulently anti-American Nonalignment Movement, and to the Arab League, another anti-imperialist tribune. Saudi-Arabia, alongside the Pakistani Islamic military dictatorship, was to shape the pillars of this organization. The stated goals of the OIC were to fight Marxist atheism, assert Islamic values, and promote solidarity among Muslim states. The Conference created several organisms designed to enforce solidarity (in economy, finance, and culture). Virtually everywhere, fundamentalist movements received substantial aid; and the appeal of generous Saudi subsidies, in addition to those of Kuwait and Qatar, led some countries to liquidate their socialist systems and to replace them with Islamic regimes devoted to cracking down on atheist communism.”¹³

The next major event which contributed to the rise of Islamism and the waning of secularism was the Iranian popular revolution of 1978. Although this event is commonly referred to as the “Islamic” revolution, I consciously made the decision not to use this term since I believe this misrepresents the factors that have led to the uprising. The revolution was made

¹² History, *Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*. https://www.oic-oci.org/page/?p_id=52&p_ref=26&lan=en Retrieved 13-04-2019.

¹³ Corm, *A History of the Middle East*, 127-128.

possible by the cooperation of a broad coalition of movements in the Iranian society. Therefore I have decided that the term popular revolution is more suitable. First I shall try to explain the factors which made the Iranian state so fragile and susceptible for a general revolution.

In the previous decades Iran was ruled by the Shahs of the Pahlavi dynasty. The rule of Reza Shah (1925-1941) and his son Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) was characterized by their autocratic and pro-Western attitudes. This was only interrupted by a short interlude when Mohammad Mossadeq was prime minister from 1951 to 1953. Mossadeq wanted to steer a more independent course and nationalized the entire Iranian oil supplies which was previously exploited by the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. This action led to his ousting through a coup orchestrated by the CIA who placed Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi back into power.¹⁴ Mehrzad Boroujerdi describes Iran under the Shah as a typical rentier state.¹⁵ This means the economy relies heavily on foreign revenue, in this case the profits made of oil exportation. These types of states are often associated with low taxation rates, a weak civil society, and a low level of democracy. The state receives its legitimacy through its power to spend money, support the internal economy and its capability to provide services for the population. This situation has both positive sides and drawbacks. On the one hand, the Iranian economy saw a spectacular growth during the Shah's reign due to the rising global demand for oil. The Gross National Product of Iran grew at a staggering rate of 8 percent per year from 1962 to 1970, 14 percent in 1972-1973, and 30 percent in 1973-1974.¹⁶ This situation resulted in a great but artificial and unequal injection of money into Iranian society. The state spent money where it saw fit and concentrated its investments in metropolitan areas, which led to a great migration movement away from the countryside into the great cities. Any economy which is solely reliant on only one resource is therefore also dependent on it and fragile in case the supply stops. This was also the case for Iran when the demand for oil started dropping between 1975 and 1977. As a result the economy faced a sudden and almost complete collapse. At the same time, we are dealing with a state that suffered a lack of legitimacy. The regime's identification with the pre-Islamic past of Persia and its pro-

¹⁴ Corm, *A History of the Middle East*, 113.

¹⁵ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 25.

¹⁶ Boroujerdi, 26.

Western attitudes alienated a great part of the population. The combination of the perceived distance between the rulers and the population, the rentier nature of the state, the repressive and autocratic ruling style, and a sudden economic collapse led to an explosive situation. These are the factors which caused general unrest and paved the way for the revolution of 1978. It is important to stress that the success of this revolution was only made possible due to the fact it arose across the entire spectrum of Iranian society. It consisted of powerful bazaar merchants, students, the middle classes, segments of the religious establishment, unions, and several leftist movements. Each of these groups had their specific gripes with the regime and after months of intense protests, the ruthless methods of the SAVAK were no match anymore for this combined outburst of civil rage. It is only after the Shah was toppled that Khomeini returned to Iran to claim leadership of what was now called the “Islamic revolution”. We can compare the situation with the Russian revolution of 1917 which was also instigated by several groups and where the Bolsheviks only came out on top towards the end. George Corm notes how the conservative religious elements soon sought to consolidate their own power fearing the popularity of leftist movements such as the Tūdeh party or the Mojahedīn-e Khalq.¹⁷ They did this by parroting the anti-imperialist discourse of the leftist movements and at the same time attacking their ideologies by discrediting the supposedly “Western” origins of doctrines such as Marxism. This is of course another prime example of Reverse Orientalism. One example of these rather superficial readings of Western philosophy is Ali Shariati’s *Marxism and other Western Fallacies*.¹⁸ Shariati died before the new government was installed but his work remains influential until this day. On the other hand, the Western media was very much enchanted by the charismatic figure of Khomeini and all too willing to adopt the narrative of a “religious” or “spiritual” revolution. In this respect we can refer to Foucault’s series of articles on the Iranian revolution in which he expressed enthusiasm for what he perceived as a “spiritual revolution”.¹⁹ On the other hand, Foucault received critical responses from Iranian leftists such as Atoussa H. or the famous Orientalist Maxime Rodinson, on what they perceived as his naïve and romanticizing approach to the revolution. The entire collection of his articles and the aforementioned responses can be found in Janet Afary’s and Kevin Anderson’s study

¹⁷ Corm, *A History of the Middle East*, 128.

¹⁸ Ali Shariati, *Marxism and other Western Fallacies*, (Berkeley, Mizan Press, 1980).

¹⁹ Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 31.

*Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, Gender and the Seductions of Islamism.*²⁰

Afghanistan was the last nation in the Islamic world where local events would reverberate throughout the entire world. It has known a very turbulent political history during the 20th century and has been ruled as an emirate, a kingdom, and a republic in less than 100 years. In the seventies the country witnessed several coups and broke down in civil war between competing communist and Islamist factions. As a border country of the Soviet Union which served a strategically important function, the Soviet leadership under Brezhnev and Andropov followed these developments with great suspicion. In 1979 the Soviet Union decided to invade Afghanistan in order to install a puppet regime subservient to Moscow.²¹ The Soviet army soon found itself embroiled in a military quagmire and was unprepared to face the resistance of the several insurgent groups. This resistance first consisted of several homegrown Afghani groups, most of them fighting under the banner of Islam but there was a great variety in their ideologies. As the war was progressing a great number of Arab *mujahedīn* also started to flow in to engage in a *jihad* against the Soviet aggressor. In this respect we need to turn our attention once again to the broader geopolitical elements of this conflict. Analysts in the United States were also following closely what was happening in Afghanistan and thought about how this conflict could weaken their arch-rival. In this context Operation Cyclone was started in 1979 under the Carter administration. Operation Cyclone was a joint operation between the CIA and the Pakistani intelligence agency called ISI or Inter-Services Intelligence. Together they organized a money pipeline to fund the rebels and organized training camps for the *mujahedīn* in Pakistan. It has been contended by Beverley Milton-Edwards and many other researchers that the United States purposefully promoted the interests of the most extremist fringes amongst these groups.²² It was in these training camps and *madrassas* in Pakistan that a new form of extremely violent and transnational Islamism originated and infamous figures such as Osama bin Laden and Gulbuddin Hekmaytar would rise to prominence in *jihadi* circles. Furthermore, we need to realize that this calamitous series of events had a tremendously negative influence on the ideological standing of the Soviet Union and therefore communism in general in the Islamic world.

²⁰ Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 179.

²¹ Keith Roberts, *The World since 1945: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 159-160.

²² Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Islamic Fundamentalism since 1945* (London: Routledge, 2005), 75-76.

1.2 The Cultural Turn in Western Academia

In the preceding pages I have described how, since the end of the seventies when *Orientalism* was published, secular and leftist movements were pushed onto the defensive. This transpired all across the greater Middle East in the context of the ideological struggle pertaining to the Cold War. Comparable developments were simultaneously taking place in the West, where old fashioned Marxism was starting to face a large-scale ideological counter-offensive. Politically speaking we can identify the start of this period with the governments of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States. Under both their administrations we witnessed a sharp turn towards economical neoliberalism and an escalation of Cold War rivalry. Likewise, there occurred an intellectual backlash against Marxism. To examine this we need to focus our attention on France. On the one hand the so called “*nouveaux philosophes*” started to gain popularity and enjoyed a great deal of media attention. This is a generation of thinkers, many of whom were formerly associated with the radical left, who started vehemently denouncing Marxism in the public arena. Bernard Henry Lévy is one of the most prominent examples associated with this style of thought.²³ On the other side of the political spectrum, a more progressive attack on Marxism was launched which was epitomized by the philosophical postmodernism of Lyotard and Foucault. While these intellectuals are still commonly associated with the left, they manifest a theoretical move departing from classical socialism and Marxism. Where the previous generation of leftist public intellectuals such as Sartre and Althusser still committed themselves to the defense of Marxism, this would prove to be a thing of the past in the next generations. In this manner we saw a birth of a New Left which is decidedly anti-communist and anti-Soviet. Aijaz Ahmad describes this evolution as follows.

“The critique of capitalist society shifted from any strict sense of class politics to the theories of alienation, sexual repression, cultural revolt, minority rights, student radicalism, localized revolts and so on. The shifts from class to culture were becoming a generalized phenomenon among the youth movements that began to grow during the 1960s, especially among the white middle classes, and the problems of capitalism itself were viewed much more in terms of faulty distribution and social alienation than

²³ Achcar, 29.

in terms of exploitation at the point of production.”²⁴

I realize it is necessary to be very careful in using the term postmodernism. This has become a very loaded term which is often caricatured and misrepresented. In addition to this several thinkers who are commonly associated with this movement such as Foucault and Derrida even dismissed this label for themselves. It is not within the reach of this paper to provide a complete genealogy of this complex phenomenon but there are some common themes which recur in the works associated with postmodernism such as the distrust of grand narratives and the rejection of the possibility of emancipatory projects for humanity. What concerns us the most for this paper are the political implications of postmodern philosophy. I quote Ahmad again because he gives a concise and perceiving summary of these implications.

“The most far-reaching consequence of postmodernism in practical politics has been what I have called the atomization of politics, the displacement of class politics by an amorphous entity called ‘culture’, the further displacement of the politics of Equality by the politics of Identity, the fracture of the unity of the exploited and the oppressed into countless little oppositional claims, so that resistance seems to be everywhere but nowhere in particular.”²⁵

Another commentator, Harrison Fluss, aptly described the same development as follows.

“Feminism, antiracism, socialism, and anticolonialism rank among the most radical fruits of Enlightenment thought, but these ideals could not guarantee human emancipation on their own. By mid-century, an impatient and demoralized Left increasingly threw the Enlightenment baby out with the bourgeois bathwater. Thinkers blamed universalism, determinism, and what appeared as a deadening mechanical worldview for the mass slaughter of two world wars, the atrocities of the Holocaust, the horror of the atomic bomb, and the misery of industrial capitalism. Thus began what Georg Lukàcs called the marrying of “Left ethics with Right Epistemology,” a project that tried to derive progressive politics and notions like freedom, equality, and solidarity from a more traditional view of existence akin to the

²⁴ Aijaz Ahmad, “On Post Modernism”, *The Marxist*, XXVII no. 1 (January-March 2011): 10.

²⁵ Ahmad, “On Post Modernism”, 23.

Counter-Enlightenment. Understanding trends in today's academic Left requires recognizing this crucial shift. Much of this contemporary thought reinstates an enchanted view of the world that is inherently pluralistic. Drawing on figures like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Left thinkers learned to be suspicious of the rationality that once belonged to them.”²⁶

I have repeatedly stated that intellectual shifts like these do not occur in a vacuum, there is always a certain interaction with developments taking place in the real world. In this respect it is very interesting to take a look at a specific research paper written in 1985 by an anonymous CIA agent that was recently made public under the Freedom of Information Act. In this paper, the agency examines these new developments in French theory against the larger background question about how this can be manipulated to serve the United States foreign policy against the Soviet Union. The following excerpts are illuminating.

“There is new climate of intellectual opinion in France, a spirit of anti-Marxism and anti-Sovietism that will make it difficult for anyone to mobilize significant intellectual opposition to US policies. Nor will French intellectuals be likely to lend their weight, as they did before, to other West European colleagues who have become hostile to the United States on broad issues like disarmament. Although American policies are never immune to criticism in France, it is clearly the Soviet Union that is now on the defensive with New Left intellectuals, and is likely to remain there at least in the medium term.”

“Mitterand's policy failures and short-lived alliance with the communists may have accelerated disaffection with his government, but leftist intellectuals have been distancing themselves from socialism – both the party and the ideology – at least since the early 1970s. Led by a group of young renegades from communist ranks who billed themselves as New Philosophers, many New Left intellectuals have rejected Marxism and developed a deep-rooted antipathy toward the Soviet Union. Anti-Sovietism, in fact, has become the touchstone of legitimacy in leftist circles, weakening the traditional anti-Americanism of the leftist intellectuals and allowing

²⁶ Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim, “Aliens, Antisemitism, and Academia,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 20 March 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/jason-reza-jorjani-stony-brook-alt-right-arktos-continental-philosophy-modernity-enlightenment/>.

American culture – and even political and economic policies – to find new vogue.”²⁷

Although they represent different philosophical positions, both Bernard-Henri Lévi and Michel Foucault are explicitly named in this paper as thinkers exemplifying this turn. It is very telling that the same agency that has been responsible for worldwide assassination attempts and government coups against leftist governments also manifests such a great interest in philosophy. This confirms our thesis that theory is not separated from the outside world and can even be instrumentalized as a weapon to further one’s political goals. Of course a great deal of the criticism towards the USSR was justified, the human rights abuses were plenty and this must never be forgotten. On the other hand, it has become clear that some of the forces driving these criticisms were being manipulated behind the scenes in order to promote a political agenda that benefits the foreign policy of the United States. This new wave of philosophy is still perceived as leftist but has departed from a decidedly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist stance. The aforementioned CIA report only focusses on the situation in France, but this trend would reach the United States in English translations of Foucault and Derrida and their peers by the end of the seventies and would soon gain great influence in Anglophone academic circles. It would be naïve to think this was all an elaborate scheme of some intelligence agency but on the other hand it is not surprising that this kind of theory was received well in the political climate of the United States. It is a style of philosophy which still retains an aura of “*radical chique*” and is perceived as profound and critical, but at the same time refrains from openly criticizing the most brutal aspects of US foreign policy and has given up on the dream of attaining a radical social transformation of society. In this respect we return to Said, for whom Foucault was such a great influence. By no means would I suggest that Edward Said was actively manipulated by the CIA, my criticisms of his work do not prevent me from acknowledging he was a great and independent scholar. My point is rather that his work signifies as an example of a greater shift that has transpired in the style of progressive politics. Furthermore, keeping the immense influence of *Orientalism* in mind, his use of a Foucauldian discourse analysis in this book would have the effect of further popularizing the work and methods of this French thinker amongst the ranks of Anglophone universities in the various departments of Middle Eastern faculties or postcolonial studies faculties. Yet again, I don’t mean to disparage the

²⁷ Directory of Intelligence, *France: Defection of Leftist Intellectuals*, December 1985, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86S00588R000300380001-5.PDF> , v.

work of Michel Foucault as a whole, I believe he was a very original and interesting thinker. I only lament the fact that his thinking has acquired such a great influence in questions which require political and economic analysis. Discourse analysis may have its merits philosophically speaking, but it does not provide strategies for resisting imperialism. A great deal of contemporary theory seems to have given up the dream of creating a better world and denounces any ambitious project for human emancipation as just another naïve meta-narrative. I personally firmly believe it is one of the main responsibilities of philosophy to denounce injustice wherever it manifests and to seek to provide pathways in building a more just and equal world for all.

Chapter Two : Edward Said

In this chapter I will present the biography of Edward Said, his most important works, and his main philosophical influences. Before we can move on to *Orientalism*, it is necessary to get a good grasp of Said's life trajectory and his general body of work. Only in this way we can correctly contextualize *Orientalism* against the backdrop of his personal life and his broader academic output. In the same way we can't isolate a book from its societal and political context, we cannot isolate it from Said as a person and in relation with the rest of his writings.

2.1 Biography

Edward Said was born on the first of November 1935 in what was then called Mandatory Palestine and was held under political and military control of the United Kingdom. His mother was called Hilda Said and was of Lebanese descent. His father, Wadie Said, served as a soldier in the First World War for the United States in a formation called the American Expeditionary Forces. He would spend the rest of his life as a successful businessman. As a result of his military service the entire Said family received the status of United States citizens. This would enable Edward to settle in the United States later in his life. Furthermore, both his parents were Protestant Christians, implying a certain cultural affinity with the Anglophone world.²⁸ So when we talk about the inventory of traces left upon Edward Said as an Oriental subject, as he termed it himself in *Orientalism*, it is worth mentioning the fact this impact began even before his birth.²⁹

Said would spend a great part of his youth travelling between Jerusalem and Cairo. He received his premier education at prestigious institutions such as St. George's School in Jerusalem and Victoria College in Alexandria. In 1951, at the age of sixteen, the young Edward was expelled for troublesome behavior upon which his parents decided to send him to a boarding school in the United States.³⁰ Here it becomes apparent that the theme of exile runs as an important thread through his life and works. At the macro level through the collective experience of the Palestinian people who were driven from their homes as well as

²⁸ Conor McCarty, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edward Said* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.

²⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 25.

³⁰ McCarty, 4.

at the micro level through his personal life experiences. Said would soon prove to be an exceptional student. He received his bachelor degree in the Arts from Princeton in 1957. Subsequently he moved to Harvard University where he obtained his doctorate in 1964. His professional career began in 1963 when he started a teaching job at Columbia University. He would remain associated with Columbia University for the rest of his career and was appointed as Professor of English and Comparative Literature in 1977.³¹

Throughout his life, Said would show a strong commitment to the Palestinian cause. The Arab defeat in the war of 1967 came as a great shock and would provoke him to step in the open as a public intellectual. He mostly focused on countering the stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims that were spread in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli wars. Moreover, Said would also act as a spokesperson for the Palestine Liberation Organization. This resulted in his appointment as an independent member of the Palestine National Council 1977. However, as the years went by this relation took a turn for the worse. In 1991 he renounced his membership to protest the signing of the Oslo Accords which he viewed as illegitimate.³²

In 2003, Said passed away at the age of 67 after a long struggle with leukemia. The picture that emerges after looking at the life of this great intellectual is one of a multi-layered personality. When we examine the factors that influenced his own positionality as a scholar a certain contradiction appears. On the one hand we have Edward Said as the exiled Palestinian intellectual who was very committed to the struggle of his people and human emancipation in general. On the other hand we have to take his position at the center of the United States intellectual apparatus into account. I argue this position worked as a double edged sword. By virtue of his location at elite universities such as Princeton he received an aura of respectability and was able to reach a wider audience than most thinkers in the Arab world. But at the same time this environment also prevented him from saying certain things or venturing into certain areas which were deemed too radical or controversial. For example, I suggest Said's dismissal of Marxist analysis is to be linked with his own positionality in United States academia and the political context of the ongoing Cold War. Said is often viewed as a great Palestinian intellectual. I hereby want to propose that viewing him as both a Palestinian *and* American thinker is a helpful step in understanding his work.

³¹ Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 183.

³² Lockman, 183.

2.2 Works

Although *Orientalism* is Said's most influential work we should not make the mistake of isolating it from the rest of his oeuvre. Therefore, I will present some of his other most important books in order to fully appreciate his ideas and positions. For the sake of brevity I have chosen three works in chronological order, each representing a certain aspect of his thought and intellectual development.

The first book we shall discuss is aptly titled *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. This was Said's first main publication and was written in 1975. The study mostly exemplifies Said as a literary critic. The book deals with the concept of "beginning" and its relation with literature. Besides this, one of the main themes is how the author of a text relates with the outside world and vice versa. Furthermore, Said also discusses the evolution of the modern novel. In conclusion, he sees the modern novel as a *beginning*, as a potential space for criticism which creates possibilities to effect change in culture and the outside world. Some of his main influences here are Foucault, Nietzsche, Vico, and Lévi-Strauss. These influences will remain of great importance for his later work.³³

Moving on, we have *The Question of Palestine*, published in 1979. This book is to be seen as part of a trilogy, following *Orientalism* and *Covering Islam*. The reason this publication interests us is because we are dealing here with the most outspoken political side of Said. The publication also coincides with his transition to a more public intellectual. On the one hand he deconstructs the ruling narrative about Zionism. He demonstrates how the doctrines of Zionism are not neutral but are in fact firmly connected with the oppression and removal of the Palestinian people. On the other hand Said offers a counter narrative from the point of view of the Palestinians themselves. He offers a stage for the people whose voices have been mostly neglected in this debate. Although this is his most political book, Said's typical focus on the textual is also present here. At times he seems to be more interested in the idea of Zionism rather than its practice. For example, he demonstrates some of his arguments with reference to novels such as those of George Eliot, where he detects an implicit bias favoring Zionist ideas.³⁴

³³ McCarty, 58-68.

³⁴ McCarty, 85-92.

Finally, there is *Culture and Imperialism*, written in 1993 and marking the later stage of Said's thought. He expands on the ideas first presented in *Orientalism* about how knowledge production and power are closely linked but extrapolates this view to the wider production of European literature in the 19th and 20th century and its connection with imperialism and colonialism. According to Said, this area of cultural production is one of the main foundations which enabled the practice of imperialism. In order to make the *practice* of imperialism possible, one should examine how literature prepared minds for the *idea* of imperialism. Said employs a method of analysis here he calls contrapuntal reading, borrowing this term from musical theory. By this he means on the one hand exposing the implicit bias of the dominant discourse and on the other hand providing a stage for the counterpoint, the discourse which has been ignored or oppressed. In this manner Said exposed the imperialist elements which were all too often overlooked in the works of great English writers such as Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens or Jane Austen.³⁵

This brief overview should give us a more coherent view of Said's complete body of work. His focus on textual analysis manifests clearly in each of his books. It is one of his greatest achievements to uncover how cultural productions such as literature are not neutral fields of inquiry and how exactly the entanglement of knowledge and politics manifested itself in Middle Eastern studies. Said managed to hold up a mirror to Western academia, thereby exposing a mirror image which had often been ignored, be it willingly or unconsciously. As ingenious his analysis was I do want to place a certain caveat here. I propose there is a certain degree of one-sidedness present to Said's approach as a result of his strong reliance on discourse theory and textual analysis. This results in his neglect towards more material factors producing imperialism such as politics and economy. For example, after performing a word search in *Orientalism* it appears that the term "capitalism" only appears twice throughout the entire book.³⁶ Furthermore, I hypothesize that as a result of his great influence in contemporary Middle Eastern Studies this preoccupation has seeped into the entire field of study, thereby producing a disproportional focus on the cultural realm. As mentioned before in the introduction, it is one of the goals of this study to make an argument for the usefulness of more materialist analysis. I do not suggest discourse analysis is without its proper merit, I merely suggest to equilibrate what I currently perceive as a

³⁵ McCarty, 107-122.

³⁶ Said, *Orientalism*.

matter of imbalance in methodology. Picking up on ideas that Said developed himself, I present a contrapuntal reading of *Orientalism*, benefitting from the works of his more astute critics such as al-'Azam and Ahmad.

2.3 Influences

In the next pages I will offer an analysis of Said's greatest intellectual influences. He is often pigeonholed in one school of thought or the other, yet I argue this is a reductionist view which does not help us in understanding how he formed his ideas. I propose it is most useful to view Said as an original thinker with a great tendency towards eclecticism. This matter of eclecticism can help us in understanding the more contradictory aspects of *Orientalism*. In the following paragraphs I have selected a couple of thinkers who were of great importance for Said and how he creatively worked with their ideas.

2.3.1 Auerbach and the Humanist tradition

If we want to fully understand *Orientalism*, we have to take a step back and read it as a response to the book *Mimesis* by Eric Auerbach, one of the greatest philologists of the 20th century. Auerbach was a German writer of Jewish descent and had to flee the country in 1935 as result of the rise of National Socialism. He spent the war years in exile in Istanbul where he wrote his magnum opus *Mimesis*. The full title of this influential work, which was first published shortly after the second world war in 1946, is *Mimesis : The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. The title explains a lot, it is a reading of the high canon of Western literature and explains how exactly this canon formed what we currently understand in the West as our common culture and how it influenced our self-understanding.³⁷ Said made a distinction between the humanist aspirations of *Mimesis*, which he admired, and the divisive nature of Orientalism as an academic discipline. Where *Mimesis* sought to emphasize the universal and common aspirations of humanity, most Orientalist works only serve to divide humanity according to a hierarchic ranking.³⁸ Based on this, it is easy to imagine *Orientalism* as a contrapuntal reading of the Western literary tradition. It is important to emphasize that while exposing its dark sides, Said remains very much influenced by this humanist tradition. Furthermore it's not surprising that Said, who was also very much

³⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 258.

³⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 261.

affected by exile in his life, found great resonance in the life and work of Auerbach.³⁹ In addition to this, we cannot ignore that it was precisely in this tradition of literary humanism that Auerbach represented that Edward Said received his first academic education.⁴⁰

2.3.2 Foucault

The French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault was one of the most influential thinkers of the late 20th century, his theories have left an undeniable impression on the entire academic field of the humanities thereafter. His main interest was the concept of power, more specifically the relationship between knowledge and power. Among his most influential publications are *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), and *The History of Sexuality* (1976). A main theme throughout all of his works is how concepts such as “mental illness” or “normative sexuality” are not merely neutral scientific categories but are the outcome of social and political power struggles. It are precisely the ones in power who decide what is “normal” and what is “deviant” and in their turn use these concepts to impose discipline upon society.⁴¹ Furthermore, Foucault launched a frontal attack upon the classic Enlightenment era belief that human beings are able to achieve objective knowledge of reality as it is. According to Foucault, we are only capable of attaining certain representations of the world and these will always be subjective to a certain extent. The way in which these representations are formed is not an arbitrary process but very much a product of power relations. It is important to emphasize that he did not see these representations as a mere distortion of reality, he went as far as to claim that these different and competing “regimes of truth” are in fact what produces our reality in itself.⁴² We shall highlight a small portion of his writing to illustrate how Foucault approached the idea of truth.

“The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it

³⁹ McCarty, 21-22.

⁴⁰ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 162.

⁴¹ Gary Cutting and Johanna Oksala, “Michel Foucault”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/foucault/>>.

⁴² Lockman, 185 – 186.

is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A régime of truth. The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself. Hence the importance of Nietzsche.”⁴³

How exactly does Foucault relate to the thought of Edward Said? He explains the influence himself in *Orientalism*.

“I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault’s notion of a discourse to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.”⁴⁴

Here we have the explicit statement that Foucault’s method of discourse analysis is the main methodological tool upon which Said’s study is based. It is one thing to be aware of this influence but we have to ask the question what are the implications of Foucault’s shadow in Said’s work. Aijaz Ahmad, an Indian literary critic with an interest in Marxist thought and the dynamics between colonialism, post-colonialism and imperialism, gives us some interesting points to think about. First of all he perceives Foucault’s theory as *“inseparable from Nietzschean anti-humanism and anti-realist theories of representation”* and therefore

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131-133.

⁴⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

completely dismisses it.⁴⁵ Although this statement might be somewhat severe and reductionist, it does hold value to warn us about some of the darker repercussions of Foucault's thought. Secondly, Ahmad's remarks on the double influence of Auerbach and Foucault are also valuable. We do see a certain paradox arising here in the thought of Said. On the one hand there is Auerbach's influence which leads Said to coin Orientalism as a phenomenon going back to Aeschylus. On the other hand we see his prevalent use of Foucauldian terms. Ahmad argues that if Said were to fully accept the Foucauldian framework the idea of an Orientalism going all the way back to ancient Greece and having a connection to modern times is preposterous. He blames Said for refusing to choose between the two.⁴⁶ One could argue however, why is it exactly necessary to choose between them. Ahmad's analysis of main influences seems quite correct, but at this point I do not agree with the severe conclusion he makes. It is quite natural and common for thinkers to have been influenced by several frameworks and this is not necessary problematic. I do agree that the influence of both Auerbach and Foucault leads to some contradictory results. Yet I argue that this double influence can also be interpreted in a more positive way where we have Auerbach working as a counterbalance to the more sinister aspects of Foucault's thought. This keeps Said firmly committed to the humanist project of human emancipation and definitely not some kind of relativist or nihilist as some of his more superficial critics make him out to be.

2.3.3 Gramsci

Let us now turn to the next great influence for Said which is Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was one the greatest thinkers in the tradition of Western Marxism in the 20th century. I use the term Western Marxism here to refer to all currents of Marxist thinking which were independent from the official doctrines adopted by the Soviet Union, which were characterized by a more rigid adherence to the views of Lenin. Gramsci was a founding member of the Italian communist party and was imprisoned in 1926 by the fascist government of Mussolini. It was during this period in imprisonment he developed most of his ideas, collected in his *Prison Notebooks*. This is a collection of essays where he presented his most important ideas such as the working of ideology, cultural hegemony, and the role of the

⁴⁵ Ahmad, *In Theory*, 164.

⁴⁶ Ahmad, *In Theory*, 165.

intellectual in society. One of Gramsci's main preoccupations was the question about why the working class did not rise up and kept acting in contradiction with their own class interests. Gramsci suspected that it did not suffice to try to explain this merely by the coercive power of the state. One should also take into account the influence of culture. Through their control of the entire cultural apparatus in society, the ruling classes are able to reproduce their own values and ideology in the minds of the working class. The masses internalize the values of their oppressors, thereby being made acquiescent towards the ruling system. This mechanism is what Gramsci coined as cultural hegemony. To escape from this predicament, one should refer to the development of a counter-hegemony which could properly reflect the interests of the working class itself. Gramsci sees this as the task of the intellectuals. He distinguishes between the traditional intellectual who defends the status quo and the organic intellectual who performs a role in the class struggle by elaborating and articulating ideas which are more in accordance with the interest of the working class.⁴⁷ Let us take a look at how Gramsci defines these concepts himself.

“The relationship between intellectuals and the world of production is not immediate, as is the case for fundamental social groups; it is ‘mediated’, in different levels, by the whole social fabric, and by the complex of the superstructure of which the intellectuals are in fact the ‘officials’. One could measure the ‘organic position’ of the different intellectual strata, their more or less close connection with a social class, fixing a gradation of functions and of the superstructure from bottom to top (from the structural base upwards). For the moment we can fix two great ‘floors’ of the superstructure: that which can be called ‘civil society’, i.e. all the organizations which are commonly called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society of the State’, which corresponds to the function of ‘hegemony’ which the ruling class exercises over the whole of society and to that of ‘direct rule’ or of command which is expressed in the State and in ‘juridical’ government. Intellectuals are the ‘officers’ of the ruling class for the exercise of the subordinate functions of social hegemony and political government, i.e. (1) of the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the direction imprinted on social life by the fundamental ruling class, a consent which comes into existence ‘historically’ from the ‘prestige’ (and hence from

⁴⁷ McCarty, 35-36.

the trust) accruing to the ruling class from its position and its function in the world of production; (2) of the apparatus of State coercion, which 'legally' ensures the discipline of those groups which do not 'consent' either actively or passively, but is constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis in command and direction when spontaneous consent diminishes."⁴⁸

Said also explicitly refers to the ideas of Gramsci in the introduction of *Orientalism* when he explains the closely intertwined relationship between political society and civil society. He builds on Gramsci to explain how certain matters which appear on the surface as mere cultural affairs can be employed for political gain, maintaining the status quo, and manufacturing consent. He then transposes this theory on the relationship between Europe and the Orient, which shows Said as a creative and intelligent thinker.

"It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far. Orientalism is never far from what Denis Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures."⁴⁹

On the other hand, his take on the role of the intellectual is also quite revealing. Where for Gramsci the intellectual is the mouthpiece for their class, Said will translate this function in geographical terms in the same way he did in his interpretation of cultural hegemony. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said makes the analogy between the Gramscian organic intellectual and the subaltern writers of the Third World. These intellectuals can function as the mouthpieces of the silenced voices of colonized peoples speaking back at the hegemonic discourse of Western culture.⁵⁰ Yet what is striking here is the lack of any reference to the broader political framework and the absence of any class analysis. In *The Text, the World, the*

⁴⁸ Antonio Gramsci, "On Hegemony and Direct Rule," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A.L. Macfie (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 39-40.

⁴⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

⁵⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 50-54.

Critic, when talking about Gramsci, he claims the following.

“One could even go so far to say that culture – elaboration – is what gives the state something to govern,..., Culture is productive, Gramsci says, and this – much more than the monopoly of coercion of the state – is what makes a national Western society strong, difficult for the revolutionary to conquer.”⁵¹

Typical of his very textual approach, Said seems to focus only on the cultural aspect of Gramsci's theories and neglects the political aspect. In the words of E. San Juan Jr. : *“Said converts Gramsci into a philosophical idealist, in effect Said has made Gramsci a disciple of Croce and Hegel”.*⁵² I tend to agree with this analysis. We mustn't forget that Gramsci was a political activist who faced severe persecution for his commitment to the communist struggle. The version Said presents us is a domesticated Gramsci, divested of the revolutionary aspects of his thought. I propose this can be explained by two main reasons. First of all, we see the influence of Foucault and Auerbach, pushing Said to the realm of the textual and the discourse. The second reason I relate to the aforementioned element of Said's own position at the heart of the United States academia. This implicates there were certain things he could say and certain he could not say. For example, any positive appraisal of Marxism was deemed to be anathema in the political climate of the Cold War. Therefore we see how Said presents us this rather pacified version of Gramsci divested of the revolutionary implications of his political project.

⁵¹ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 171.

⁵² E. San Juan Jr., “The Limits of Postcolonial Criticism: The Discourse of Edward Said,” *Solidarity*, 1998, <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/77/p1781/>

Chapter Three : Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm

3.1 Biography

Sādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm (1934 - 2016) was one of Syria’s most prominent philosophers and critical voices. He has been a controversial figure throughout his entire career. As a result of his predilection to attack taboos he has repeatedly faced criticism and persecution from both the political and religious establishment. His work is characterized by his personal commitment to values such as secularism, universalism, and the defense of free speech and human rights. Besides this, al-‘Aẓm emphasized the emancipatory potential of science and he was a defender of the project of modernity as understood in Enlightenment terms. Furthermore, he was also influenced by Marxist thought although this never resulted in a rigid adherence to these doctrines.

Sādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm was a descendant of the prominent al-‘Aẓm household, a family of wealthy landowners that gained great influence in the 18th century when Greater Syria was occupied by the Ottoman Empire. He began his studies in Lebanon at the American University of Beirut where he attained his bachelor degree in philosophy in 1957. After this, he moved to the United States to pursue a doctorate degree in modern European philosophy at Yale University. In 1961 he finished his dissertation about the famous Enlightenment thinker from the 17th century, Emmanuel Kant. The ideas of Kant would remain to carry great weight on al-‘Aẓm’s thought. This is clearly reflected in his preoccupation with critical thinking and self-criticism. We might even detect a reference to Kant’s famous *critiques* in the titles of his own publications such as *Self Criticism after the Defeat* and *Critique of Religious Thought*.⁵³

In opposition to Edward Said, al-‘Aẓm decided not to stay in the United States after obtaining his doctorate degree and returned to Lebanon in 1963 where he started teaching as a university professor at the American University of Beirut. As was the case for many others, the tragic events of 1967 would prove to be a great shock for al-‘Aẓm. Here we do see a parallel with Said, both thinkers were driven to abandon their purely intellectual endeavors and felt compelled to take a stand in the public debate as more socially committed intellectuals. Describing his own position al-‘Aẓm says:

⁵³ Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm, *De Tragedie van de Duivel: Op weg naar een liberale islam*, ed. and trans. Ronald Kon (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 2004) 7-8.

“I mentioned earlier that if someone had predicted before the defeat in 1967 that one day I would be producing the type of writing which I later did produce, I would have thought him mad. In other words, before the defeat of June, I used to lean towards distancing my intellectual activities from current events and insisting on the near total independence of thought, even to the extent of favoring abstract ideas. But after the disaster of the defeat, I found myself pulled towards the other end of the equation and moving closer to the realities of the street in political terms, but without necessarily joining it.”⁵⁴

This quote clearly illustrates the importance of external factors in the work of intellectuals. It is important to keep in mind that no philosopher works in a vacuum but that their writing is always influenced by events and developments taking place in the real world.

In the seventies he would move to Syria where he instructed philosophy and sociology at the University of Damascus. Al-‘Az̧m would raise his controversial voice again in 1988 when the Salman Rushdie affair erupted. He was one of the few writers in the Arab world that publicly defended the writer of *The Satanic Verses*, claiming that the right to free speech is an absolute necessity for any society to thrive. Furthermore he also criticized writers in the West for their lack of commitment in defending Rushdie.⁵⁵ In this period we see the focus of his thought evolving from leftist politics towards and occupation with rationalism and a cosmopolitan worldview. In 2004 he received the prestigious Erasmus Prize due to his commitment to free speech and human rights. In 2012 the rising war in Syria forced him to permanently relocate to Germany. He was an outspoken critic of the government of Bashar al-Assad and defended the initial uprising. Georges Corm is quite critical regarding al-‘Az̧m’s position on the Syrian conflict, claiming that he presented the war as a simple dichotomy between an oppressive government against an oppressed population. In this way he ignored the geopolitical elements of the war and the extremist attitudes of large segments of the rebel factions.⁵⁶ In 2016, al-‘Az̧m passed away in Berlin after a long struggle with cancer. He died at the age of 82 years in the hospital during an operation to remove his brain tumor.

⁵⁴ Šādiq Jalāl al-‘Az̧m, “An interview with Sadik al-Azm,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 119.

⁵⁵ Elisabeth Suzanne Kasab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 96.

⁵⁶ Corm, *Pensée et Politique*, 203.

3.2 Works

In the following paragraphs, we will take a closer look at the two most important works that al-'Azm wrote besides *Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse*. The works in question are *Self Criticism after the Defeat* (1968) and *Critique of Religious Thought* (1969). This will help us to get a better picture of al-'Azm's thinking. Furthermore, we will try to ascertain which elements of these books can be relevant for our times.

3.2.1 Self Criticism after the Defeat

In his book *Self Criticism after the Defeat*, or *al-Naqd al-Dhāti ba'd al-Hazīma* published in 1968, he tries to analyze the reasons which lead to the decisive defeat of the Arab armies in the war against Israel. As the title suggests, this is a rather severe piece of self-criticism. Al-'Azm connects the main reasons for this defeat with certain ways of thinking which were, and still are, quite prevalent in Arab societies. His arguments can be summarized as follows. First of all, he questions the implications of the defeat by drawing a parallel with the Japanese-Russian war of 1904. In this case Russia also suffered a heavy and unexpected defeat against an enemy they seriously underestimated. This induced Russian thinkers to seriously reflect about their own weakness and how to overcome this which in turn paved the way for the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. However, al-'Azm posits, this did not occur in Arab societies where Arab intellectuals neglected the opportunity for self-reflection and internal critique. This leads us to the second point, deflection of the blame. He criticizes the Arab mentality which only sought for external reasons to explain the defeat. Most of the reactions explained the defeat in terms of either a punishment from God, or as a result of the imperialist collusion between Israel and the West. In both cases there is little to no room for agency regarding the Arab nations themselves. Al-'Azm sees these reactions as a refusal to come to terms with reality. Finally, he proposes the practice of self-criticism as a way out of this predicament. Only by analyzing what exactly went wrong and by adapting to this situation can the Arab nations rise from their defeat.⁵⁷

How is the message of *Self Criticism after the Defeat* still relevant in our time? It is safe to say that the political situation for most Arab countries has severely deteriorated in comparison with the sixties. The region has witnessed a series of detrimental wars, the United States

⁵⁷ Kasab, 91-92.

invasions of Iraq have ruined this once stable and relatively prosperous country, and the military capacities of Israel have only increased. On the other hand there still is a wide proliferation of conspiracy theories and a steady retreat in religious obscurantism present to explain this situation of crisis. I propose that al-'Azm's brand of radical self-criticism could provide some useful lessons for today. For example, the moralistic attitudes which merely denounce the ongoing imperialist and colonial behavior of Israel and its Western allies are not very useful by themselves. As al-'Azm says; one should not be surprised that an imperialist entity behaves in an imperialist manner.⁵⁸ We can only move forward when we analyze the precise nature of this imbalance of power and from thereon propose strategies concerning how to deal with this situation. On the other hand a dose of self-criticism could also be healthy for Western departments of Middle Eastern Studies. After the publication of *Orientalism* there has arisen a certain self-congratulatory attitude in academic circles where some scholars seem quite satisfied criticizing Western perceptions of the Middle East or Islam. At the same time I detect less willingness towards analyzing how the expansion of capitalism and ongoing practices of imperialism play a role in the current destabilization of the region. To put it in another way, it is less threatening for the status quo to talk about discourse analysis than to address imperialism.

3.2.2 Critique of Religious Thought

His next book, *Critique of Religious Thought or Naqd al-Fikr al-Dīnī* (1969) would prove to be even more controversial. This book raised great amounts of public discussion and would even result in al-'Azm's imprisonment. The Lebanese government charged him with provoking tensions between the different religious communities of Lebanon. At that time, al-'Azm first fled to Syria but soon returned to Lebanon to accept the verdict. He spent a year in prison and was released when the court decided to drop the charges against him due to lack of evidence. On the other hand, he would permanently lose his tenure at the American University of Beirut as a result of these events.⁵⁹ The book itself consists of a collection of essays and articles that had previously been published in different places. Throughout all the essays, al-'Azm develops a materialist critique of metaphysical thinking and of the importance of religion in society. His conclusion is that the political and religious authorities

⁵⁸ Kasab, 93.

⁵⁹ Corm, *Pensée et politique*, 202.

themselves are responsible for provoking religious strife. His main contention is that the religious establishment manipulates the importance of religion in order to entrench their own positions of power and to keep the general population docile. Al-‘Azm employs a rather strict conceptual dichotomy between modernity and tradition where he associates modernity with progression and scientific thinking and denounces the forces of traditional religious thought which hold back emancipation.⁶⁰ One could criticize al-‘Azm that this binary position is somewhat superficial. He seems to disregard the liberating potential religious thought can have. For example, we see this manifested in the Liberation Theology coming from Latin-America. Furthermore, thinkers of the *Nahḍa* period such as al-Taḥṭāwī and many others prove there does not have to be a contradiction between religious thinking and a firm commitment to modernity.

On the other hand we should praise this staunch defense of secularism and modernity when we take a look at our contemporary era. In the decades that have passed since its publication some profound changes have taken place in the worldwide public discourse. Secularism and modernity are facing an assault from multiple fronts and we are witnessing a global resurgence of religious discourse. The Islamic world has been facing a great wave of religious revivalism since the end of the seventies. Although there is great diversity in the ideas of all Islamist movements and thinkers, they all share the slogan that “Islam is the solution” and have a tendency to dismiss secularism as just another “Western import” which is not suitable for their societies. Furthermore, the tragic fates of both Maḥmūd Moḥammed Ṭaha and Farag Foda should illustrate why we must keep defending the idea of a secular society where one is free to criticize any aspect of a religion without having to fear for one’s life.

Likewise, in the global West we have seen comparable developments. There has arisen a new paradigm where religion is seen as the determining factor behind world events. We can connect this new discourse with the end of the Cold War. The West found itself in need for a new antagonist after the collapse of the USSR. Samuel Huntington’s article *The Clash of the Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1992, was immensely influential in this respect. In this essay he divides the world in clear cut civilizational blocks and predicts that culture will take the place of ideology as the main driver of conflict in the world. In addition to this he describes the “Islamic Civilization” as

⁶⁰ Kasab, 97.

main antagonist for the “Western Civilization”.⁶¹ It goes without saying this paradigm is very reductionist and is rooted in the same pattern of essentialist thinking which views cultures as immutable monolithic entities that Said denounced in *Orientalism*. Sadly enough this trend has expanded into the public and academic discourse. Complex problems which are always the result of a variety of historically contingent factors are often explained away with a narrow focus on religion and culture in explaining world events. In this respect it is also worth noticing the appearance and proliferation of the term “Judeo-Christian” values or civilizations when talking about the Global West. On the surface level it is just another example of the essentialist approach to cultures but further scrutiny reveals a more sinister aspect. This term also serves to justify the close alliance between the United States and Israel. The reference to a supposedly shared set of values between Israel and the United States serves to obscure the political aspects of this alliance. It draws attention away from the fact these nations share the same geopolitical interests in the Middle East.

Roughly the same time some notable developments on the progressive side of the political spectrum took place that sparked a growing distrust towards rationality and the Enlightenment project. An important book in this respect was *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, which was originally published in 1947 by Frankfurter Schule philosophers Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In this book they develop a critique of the dark sides of the project of modernity. Their main contention is that concepts such as instrumental reason and positivism which are connected to a scientific worldview can also produce more sinister effects such as the rationalization of mass murder and totalitarianism. The English translation of this book only appeared in 1972 and would prove to exert great influence on the emerging New Left in the United States.⁶² In the same time period Michel Foucault was gaining a lot of popularity and his notorious deconstruction of the Enlightenment project as just one régime of truth amongst many others added to the rising tide of distrust towards Enlightenment values. This even led him to write a series of romanticizing articles about the 1978 revolution in Iran where he fell in the same trap of seeing religion as the prime mover of world events.

⁶¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of the Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

⁶² Lambert Zuidervaart, “Theodor W. Adorno”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/adorno/>>.

The above paragraphs serve to illustrate that we have come a long way since 1969 when *Critique of Religious Thought* was originally written. When we take all the evolutions that have transpired into account, I argue its message is still relevant today.

Chapter Four : *Orientalism* and its Critique

In this chapter I will be reviewing both Said's *Orientalism* and al-'Azm's critique together. First of all, we shall carefully examine the central message of *Orientalism*. Following this we shall look into al-'Azm's critique which he wrote in an article called *Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse* or *al-Istishrāq wa al-Istishrāq M'akūsan*. The article consists of two parts. In the first part al-'Azm replies to Said's book, this is what we will be focusing on here. In the second part al-'Azm develops a critique of a separate phenomenon which he calls Reverse Orientalism, which we shall examine in the next chapter.

4.1 *Orientalism* by Edward Said

First of all, we should take a look at how Said himself defines the problem of Orientalism. The first definition we receive is the following:

*"I shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe: it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles."*⁶³

Subsequently he makes the distinction between three different manifestations of Orientalism. The first one is *academic Orientalism*, by which he means the scientific study of anything related to what we understand as the Orient. The second definition is less innocent, here Said defines Orientalism as *"a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident"*.⁶⁴ With this definition Said exposed a great deal of assumptions that were implicitly present in the works

⁶³ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

⁶⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

of a great deal of European writers. This is also the definition which will interest us the most in the rest of this study. Building upon these first two concepts, Said arrives at his final definition of Orientalism which he understands as *“a Western style for domination, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”*⁶⁵. He explicitly states one should understand Orientalism as a *discourse*, in the terms of Michel Foucault. One of the main goals of his book was to dispel the widely held view that one could study the Orient objectively without the interference of the unequal power relations between the West and the Orient. Said posits : *“Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and actions imposed by Orientalism”*.⁶⁶

Next he elaborates on what exactly is the nature of this so-called Orient. Said clearly states there exists no such thing as an “Orient” by itself, likewise there exists no such thing as an “Occident” by itself. These are both cultural concepts that only gain meaning in relation to each other. This works both geographically as conceptually, in order for something to be Oriental it has to be situated against another point of reference, in this case the West. This is actually a very interesting thought about how meaning arises in a system of concepts which are all interlinked. We are reminded of the great linguistic scholar Ferdinand de Saussure and his theory of signs. According to Saussure, language is a system of signs. These signs consist of the arbitrary conjunction of a concept and an acoustic image. The interesting aspect is that these concepts receive meaning not from their relationship with the real world but from their relationship with each other and more importantly their difference from each other. For example, West can be negatively defined as “not-East” and only derives meaning from its relation with another concept.⁶⁷ This style of linguistic interpretation is called structuralism and would later gain great influence in the social sciences. It seems as if Said was also influenced by this idea when he defined the Orient and Occident as concepts that only make sense in relation to each other. But again, this approach does not need to surprise us that much if we take into account that Said was a professor of literature.

⁶⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

⁶⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

⁶⁷ John E. Joseph, “The linguistic sign,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed. Carol Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59.

The main issue for Said is to point attention to the power relations between the two, which are characterized by great dominance and cultural hegemony for the West. In other words, there is no room for a dialogue between equal partners. The Oriental subject finds itself in a position where it is not allowed to speak for itself but is only *represented* through the lens of its Western interlocutor. The result of this is that we are not merely dealing with a simple distortion of the Oriental reality, but rather with the *creation* of an Orient in the mind of the Western audience. The main concern for Said is how this mental image would then be exploited in order to further subjugate the Oriental subject and help with legitimizing the colonization of Oriental lands. *“Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment.”*⁶⁸

Moving on, Said discusses three aspects which greatly influenced the writing of *Orientalism*. First of all there is the matter of the distinction between pure and political knowledge.⁶⁹ The second one concerns the methodology he used and finally he presents us with some personal aspects which influenced him in the writing of this book. First of all he expands on the relationship between politics, power, and the production of knowledge. This means that no idea or theory arises in a vacuum and will always be influenced to a certain extent by external factors. Any writer is influenced by the ruling *zeitgeist* or the political climate in which they operate which will in turn influence their worldview and conclusions. For too long scholars in the humanities have held the view their work was value free and only driven by a lofty quest for knowledge. It is one of Said’s greatest contributions in the field of Cultural Studies to bring these often ignored relations to the surface.

*“Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world.”*⁷⁰

This is an interesting argument. Said posits that Orientalism also functions as a mechanism for the West to define itself. By using the Orient as a mirror image which embodies certain inherent qualities such as sensuality, passivity and mystery the West will differentiate itself

⁶⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 6.

⁶⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 9.

⁷⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

from this image by positing itself as dynamic, progress minded et cetera. We are reminded here of the Saussurian theory about how concepts receive meaning in negative relation with each other. This is an important dynamic which we will see resurfacing when discussing the question of Reverse Orientalism.

4.2 *Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm’s reply*

This article was originally published in Arabic in 1981. Up to this day only a partial translation in English has appeared in Alexander Lyon Macfie’s collection *Orientalism: a Reader*.⁷¹ This is more of a paraphrasing of the original article and omits certain elements of the content. Furthermore, I have discovered that there exists a Dutch translation which is based on the English one but this version suffers from translation errors, mostly because it is a translation of a translation.⁷² Therefore I have decided to make use of the original Arabic edition for the sake of its comprehensiveness and to avoid any translation errors.

In the beginning of al-‘Aẓm’s reply he will present us with a summary of the main message of *Orientalism*, where Said unveiled the connections between the academic study of the Orient and the interests of Western colonial powers. Indeed a great deal of these studies were loaded with assumptions about the supposed superiority of “the West” and characterized by negative and sometimes even racist attitudes about the people of the Orient. Al-‘Aẓm defines the set of assumptions operating behind this perspective as *the metaphysics of Orientalism*.⁷³ He posits the following as one of the main predicates about this way of thinking.

أنها تفسر الفوارق بين ثقافة وأخرى وبين شعب وآخر بردها الى طبائع ثابتة وليس الى صيرورات تاريخية متبدلة. على سبيل المثال ترى ميتافيزيقا الاستشراق ضمنا ان الخصائص التي تميز المجتمعات الغربية ولغاتها وثقافتها هي على ما هي عليه، في التحليل الأخير، لأنها تنساب من طبيعة غربية معينة متفوقة في جوهرها على باقي الطبائع وبخاصة على الطبيعة الشرقية.⁷⁴

It explains the differences between one culture and another or one people and the other by referring to fixed natures and not to differing historical processes. In the same way the metaphysics of Orientalism will see that the characteristics which

⁷¹ Alexander Lyon Macfie, Ed. *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

⁷² This version appears in a collection of al-‘Aẓm’s writings translated into Dutch. The collection in question is *De tragedie van de Duivel: Op weg naar een liberale islam* ed. Ronald Kon (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 2004).

⁷³ al-‘Aẓm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m’akūsan*, 7.

⁷⁴ al-‘Aẓm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m’akūsan*, 7.

differentiate Western societies, languages and cultures are what they are, in the last analysis, because they flow from a specific "Western nature" which is superior in her essence to all other essences and especially the "Eastern nature".

The main element of this analysis is that the Orientalist framework sees cultures in an essentialist way. This means the conviction that cultures possess an unchanging inner core of characteristics defining them which is resistant to any change. For example, an essentialist view of European cultures will trace an unbroken chain of essential attributes usually going back from ancient Greece to the current era. Likewise, an essentialist view of Islamic cultures will view the Qur'ān as one of the defining elements of the vast collection of cultures where Islam was the main religion going back from the seventh century until now. In both cases, there is no room for variation or evolution from this supposed fixed essence.

4.2.1 A Lack of Consistency

One of the first elements that al-'Azm criticizes is a certain lack of consistency in Said's analysis. Indeed we see a certain contradiction in the introduction of *Orientalism*. In the beginning Said identifies the phenomenon as a modern one, starting from the eighteenth century and firmly rooted in the budding expansionism of Europe. Yet in the same pages he also attributes the Orientalist tendency to objectify cultures of the East to writers such as Homer, Aeschylus and Dante.⁷⁵ Al-'Azm remarks the following :

اي أن ما بدا لنا اول الامر أنه ظاهرة اوروبية حديثة حقا في بداياتها وتطورها، استجابة لظروف واحتياجات مرحلة تاريخية معينة، ليست كذلك على الاطلاق، بل ترجع الى اصول سحيقة وعميقة في التاريخ الاوروبي والغربي.

*"What appeared to us that what first seemed to be a truly modern European phenomenon in its beginnings and development, answering to the circumstances and needs of a particular historical era, is not that at all. Rather it goes back to deep and profound roots in the history of Europe and the West."*⁷⁶

يبدو لي ان النتيجة المنتقبة البعيدة لهذا لاتجاه في تفسير ظاهرة الاستشراق هي العودة بنا من الباب الخلفي، الى اسطورة الطبائع الثابتة (التي يريد ادوارد تدميرها) بخصائصها الجوهرية التي لا تحول ولا تزول، والى ميتافيزيا الاستشراق (التي كتب ادوارد كتابه ليفضحها ويجهز عليها) بمقولتيها المطلقين : الشرق شرق والغرب غرب.

⁷⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

⁷⁶ Al-'Azm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 8.

“It seems to me that the logical result of this approach of analyzing the phenomenon of Orientalism brings us back full circle to the myth of fixed natures with essential characteristics that don’t evolve and don’t change which Edward wanted to destroy. It brings us back to the Metaphysics of Orientalism, which Edward wanted to expose in his book, with her absolutist utterances claiming that the East is the East and the West is the West.”⁷⁷

What we have here is the claim that Said fell in the same trap of essentialist thinking he aimed to expose. It is indeed curious he makes numerous references to classical writers who are part of the Western Canon. Do all these writers exhibit the same tendency towards orientalizing the Other? Is Orientalism a modern phenomenon or one that covers the entire European history? The following passage in *Orientalism* about Dante serves as a good example.

“The discriminations and refinements of Dante’s poetic grasp of Islam are an instance of the schematic, almost cosmological inevitability with which Islam and its designated representatives are creatures of Western geographical, historical, and above all, moral apprehension.”⁷⁸

Of course there is hostility towards Islam in Dante’s work, no one will deny this, but is this the same kind of hostility present in modern Orientalist works? In other words, is there a connection between Dante and Rénan? In reading *Orientalism* one would get the impression that all these examples ranging from ancient Greece to our own era point to the same mechanism found in Western thinking which posits the Orient as its dark mirror image. However, this hypothesis is problematic in several aspects.

First of all it supposes an unbroken link with the past. The fact that there is hostility found in writings of several centuries does not imply we are dealing with the same phenomenon. It is a great error when talking about history to project certain contemporary attitudes upon the past. For each case one should carefully examine the factors influencing a certain person or phenomenon. For example Dante’s opinions were influenced by the medieval Christian worldview which considered any other religion as heresy or blasphemy while Bernard Lewis’

⁷⁷ Al-‘Azm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m’akūsan*, 8.

⁷⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 69.

attitude might be explained by his relation *vis-à-vis* the United States' foreign politics. Although there might be certain similarities these do not suggest a common factor influencing them both. One would be tempted to infer that Said suffered from a certain confirmation bias when he connected historical utterances of animosity with the modern form of institutional Orientalism. A second problem with this historical connection is that Said unintentionally legitimizes certain claims of modern institutional Orientalism. Al-'Azam points out that any modern European movement seeks to strengthen and legitimize its existence by rooting itself in the past, thus giving itself a historical aura of respectability. In the same way the modern Orientalists were more than willing to connect themselves with these great writers of the past.

I want to suggest this deficiency in Said's analysis stems from two main sources. First of all, he does not give a precise definition of "the West". This seems rather problematic in a book dealing with Western perceptions of other cultures. Of course it is easy to imagine what he means, everyone can make an intuitive definition when hearing the term "the West" or "Western". The ideas which most often come to mind here are; Europe, the United States, Christianity, colonialism, imperialism, secularism, et cetera. Whether the first images that come to mind have a positive or a negative connotation can depend on one's personal viewpoints. I argue this is exactly the problematic aspect, it is left to the imagination of the reader and their personal connotations of the word what exactly is meant. I have noticed this trend with a lot more writers criticizing certain aspects of Western culture or politics. Of course these criticisms are often valid, this needs to be stressed. But by focusing one's criticism at such a broad and vague category such as "the West", one only creates conceptual confusion. This seems to explain why Said moved so easily between classical Greek literature, medieval polemics against Islam, and contemporary Orientalist works at the service of US imperialism. I do not think Said really adhered to this essentialist conception of Europe or "the West". I rather assert that the problem just stems from his lack of precise definitions and the fact that he refrained from properly contextualizing different examples of what he perceived as Orientalism. Let us contrast this with a more effective approach. In his book *"Orient-Occident, La fracture imaginaire"*, Georges Corm sets out to deconstruct this artificial dichotomy between East and West. In the introductory chapter he starts by giving a working definition of what he means with "Western" and "European" for the rest of the book.

“Dans les chapitres qui suivent, nous désignerons par ‘culture européenne’ les grandes idées de la Renaissance et de la philosophie des Lumières propres à l’Europe du XVI au XIX siècle, et par les termes ‘Occident’ ou ‘culture occidentale’ l’addition de puissance, de techniques et d’idées que les États-Unis ont apportée à l’Europe, don’t ils sont issus, ainsi qu’à la culture européenne.”⁷⁹

“In the following chapters, we will refer to ‘European culture’ as the great ideas of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment philosophy proper to Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. By the terms ‘West’ or ‘western culture’ the addition of the power, the techniques and the ideas that the United States have brought to Europe and European culture, where they originated.”

This gives us a clear definition, situating all the elements properly in time and space. In this way we can avoid the vague approach which is often used when talking about “the West”. A certain logical fallacy I have often noticed with both supporters and critics of Western culture in the broad sense, is that they focus on one element, be it positive or negative, and then use this to pass judgement on the entire spectrum of Western culture and politics. For example, the institution of Trans-Atlantic slavery was a horrible crime against humanity and one of the darkest pages of history. The discussions about reparations and the ongoing effects of slavery are valid but to use this to condemn the entire Western civilization is not. Likewise, one can praise the emergence of democracy and civil liberties in Western Europe, but this does not exculpate the crimes European nation committed and still commit against other nations. The point I want to stress is that whenever we want to criticize a certain problematic, we need to be precise enough in our approach. Only this way we can delineate what are the moving factors behind it, and move forward to propose actual solutions.

4.2.2 The philosophical and historical genealogy of Orientalism

The second deficiency I have perceived is the following. Said did a great job in exposing this essentializing tendency in a great deal of Orientalist writings but he failed to place this in its proper philosophical and historical context. As we have seen before, he sees it as a *discourse* which determines what can be said and what can’t be said. But where does this discourse originate? I must say *Orientalism* does not do a good job in answering this question. I

⁷⁹ Georges Corm, *Orient-Occident, La fracture imaginaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 22.

propose it is necessary we possess a firm genealogy of how and when Orientalist writing emerged if we want to dismantle its detrimental effects. First of all I connect the essentialist view of cultures to Hegel's idealist philosophy of history and religion. This idealism sees culture and religion as the main drivers of historical development. Different cultures all have their own essence and history unfolds without much influence of the unpredictable and contingent circumstances of politics and economy. In summary, inherent spirit is what matters while the outside world is ignored. Hegel refers to this metaphysical motor of history as *Geist*. In this respect Hegel also posited a stark dichotomy between Europe and Asia. To him, the "*Germanic soul*" of Western Europe represented the highest stage of civilization and contrasts with Asia which represents the childhood stage of humanity. He expresses this sentiment as following.

*"The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia is the beginning. The History of the World is the discipline of the uncontrolled natural will, bringing it into obedience to a Universal principle and conferring subjective freedom. The East knew and to the present day knows only that One is free; the Greek and Roman world, that some are free; the German World knows that all are free. The first political form therefore which we observe in History is despotism, the second democracy and aristocracy, the third monarchy. The first phase – that with which we have to begin – is the East. Unreflected consciousness – substantial, objective, spiritual existence – forms the basis; to which the subjective will first sustains a relation in the form of faith, obedience. In the political life of the East we find a realized rational freedom, developing itself without advancing to subjective freedom. It is the childhood of History."*⁸⁰

This type of thinking would prove to be very influential for later Romanticist historical writing which tends to gush about "the soul" of a nation or culture. This trend occurred during the 19th century when a lot of Orientalist writing has been produced. A passage like the one cited above does not differ much from the writings of Rénan on the contradictions between Aryans and Semites for example. Sadly enough Edward Said did not make this connection in his book. We have to attribute this connection between Orientalist writing and Hegelian

⁸⁰ George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 121-122.

idealist philosophy to the Marxist historian Bryan Turner. In exactly the same year as Said he also wrote a book called *Marx and the End of Orientalism* where he launched his own attack against Orientalist attitudes and writings. In this book he defines the problematic of Orientalism as follows.

“Orientalism is based on an epistemology which is essentialist, empiricist and historicist. The essentialist assumption is present in the notion that ‘Islam’ is a coherent, homogeneous, global entity, and also in the decline thesis where Islam is seen as declining because of some flaw in its essence. This inner, flawed essence unfolds in history as a teleological process toward some final end-state which is the collapse of Islam and its civilization. In this historicist approach, the dynamic history of Western civilization, punctured by constant, progressive revolutions, is contrasted with the static history of Islam in which popular uprisings are merely an index of despotism and decay. The teleology of historical progress and the East-West contrast in both forms of historicism have their origin in Hegel’s attempt to come to terms with the problem of Christianity in a society with an increasing division of labour.”⁸¹

This appears as a very workable definition of the phenomenon of Orientalism. Just like Said, Turner identifies the essentialist and historicist epistemology. But what makes his analysis so valuable is the fact that he connects his definition of Orientalism with the philosophical framework from which it arose. In this respect I tend to come to the conclusion that Turner’s definition has the most merit. Sadly enough his study received much less attention than Said’s counterpart. In conclusion we can state, together with Gilbert Achcar, that Said’s lack of familiarity or interest in the history of Western philosophy prevented him from correctly contextualizing the roots of Orientalist thought.⁸² In the same vein Said also dismissed the writings of Karl Marx as another example of Orientalism without making a proper effort to get well acquainted with his philosophy, as we shall examine in the following chapter.

Now we have finished examining the philosophical roots of Orientalism we need to look at the historical context. Although we have criticized Said for his inconsistent approach in situating the problematic, he does give one precise location in the introduction of his book.

⁸¹ Bryan Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), 7-8.

⁸² Achcar, 52.

“Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.”⁸³

This also seems like a suitable definition but the problem is Said doesn't keep to it in his book. Furthermore, if he would be more consistent to this definition, there would be no need to devote any attention to Dante or Homer. This also seems like the most suitable approach in locating Orientalism because it connects Orientalism with the European projects of colonialism and imperialism. We are reminded of Corm's definition where he specifically makes the distinction that he is talking about *modern* Europe. I also contend here that it is of great importance to keep the surrounding political factors in mind when analyzing Orientalist writings. So Said starts off correct by analyzing Orientalism in its political context but then he makes a peculiar inference from this situation. Due to his focus on the literary and the textual it seems as if Said identifies Orientalism as the most important factor which made Western colonialism possible. In an interview from 2009 with the magazine *al-Ḥiwār al-'Azm* also notices this.

”يبدو من كتاب ادوارد وكأن الاستعمار هو أعلى مراحل الاستشراق بمعنى أنه بدلاً من أن يكون الاستشراق هو الخطاب الملائم للعملية الاستعمارية «الاستعمار عملية مادية» الطريقة التي قدم فيها ادوارد موضوع الاستشراق «واقف على رأسه» وكان الخطاب الاستشراقي هو الذي صنع التوسع الاستعماري الأوربي.

وما ألقنتني ثانياً في الكتاب ثقل نقاشه بأن يجعل الخطاب الاستشراقي هو المحرك الأول للتوسع الأوربي مع بداية العصر الحديث «عصر النهضة» بدلاً من أن يكون توسعه هو المحرك الأول والخطاب الاستشراقي الذي هو الإيديولوجية والرؤية والمشروع الفكري وهذه الفكرة متأنية عند إدوارد إنه حين كتب الكتاب كان متأثراً كثيراً بالكاتب الفرنسي ميشيل فوكو وكان تحت تأثير نظرية الخطاب الفرنسية وهي تعطي الخطاب كتشكيكة معرفية دوراً محركاً أولاً وحاسماً في تحريك الأحداث وهو تأثر بهذا الشيء مما انعكس في كتاب «الاستشراق» لادوارد سعيد.⁸⁴

“It seems from Edward's book as if colonialism is the highest stage of Orientalism, meaning that, instead of Orientalism being the appropriate discourse for the colonial

⁸³ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

⁸⁴ Šādiq Jalāl al-'Azm, “Lā yūjad sir lil-īstishrāq bal duwal šā'ida tatawas'a wa tast'amir wa tahyamin,” Interview by Abdelkarim al-'Afnān, *al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamadin*, August 8, 2009, <http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=182060>.

undertakings because colonialism is a material operation. The way in which Edward presented the subject of Orientalism is 'standing on its head' as if it were the case that the Orientalist discourse had created the European colonial expansion.

What worried me in the second place in the book is the weight of his discussion that the Orientalist discourse is the prime mover of the European expansion in the beginning of the modern era or 'the Renaissance' instead of this expansion being the prime mover and the Orientalist discourse which is the ideology and the vision and the project. This idea came to Edward because when he was writing the book he was influenced to a large degree by the French writer Michel Foucault and he was under the influence of French discourse theory. This gives to discourse as cognitive constitution a role of decisive and prime mover of events. He was influenced by this which is reflected in the book Orientalism by Edward Said."

This explanation seems much more down to earth. It explains Orientalism as accompanying the colonial project. As a "science" which supports imperialist endeavors and arose as a result from this, not the other way around. To suggest that something as an Orientalist discourse is what made the expansionist movement of Europe possible comes across as quite detached from reality. We need to examine the political and economic events that transpired if we want to ascertain what the conditions were that thrust Europe forward. We also cannot reduce this to one reason, it is rather a complex amalgam of interacting factors. For example I could list the following elements, while not claiming to be an exhaustive list. The development of the three-field crop rotation system which was developed in the late-medieval and early-modern era in Europe. This resulted in greater harvest yields and a more reliable source of food which in turn caused population growth and a greater labor reserve. At the other end of the Mediterranean we cannot neglect the Mongol conquest and the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 which proved to be a terrible blow for the already weakened caliphate. These are just some factors. The main point is that the reason why Europe found itself in favorable conditions for expanding beyond its borders is contingent and the result of a series of historical events which might have turned out otherwise. To suggest that a trans-historical discourse which creates an Oriental "Other" that can be subjugated is the main responsible factor comes across as somewhat far-fetched. Subsequently, al-'Azm adds.

"لا أعتبر أن هناك سراً للاستشراق، هناك دول عظمى صاعدة تتوسع وتستعمر وتهيمن من الطبيعي أن تنتج مبررات ومسوغات لنفسها وتنتج أحياناً علماً حقيقياً عن المناطق التي تفتحها وتديرها وتوجه لها مستقبلها والغرب أصحاب ثورة علمية من الطبيعي أن ينقلوا بعض مناهج الثورة العلمية في أوروبا لدراسة الثقافات واللغات في البلدان التي فتحوها ويسيطرون عليها، لكن هذا لا يكشف عن حقيقة القصة بكاملها هناك علماء ومستشرقون لديهم اندفاع علمي حقيقي لفهم الثقافات الأخرى."85

"I don't think there is any secret to Orientalism. There are powerful emerging states that expand and colonize and dominate. It is natural they fabricate justifications and pretexts for themselves. Sometimes they also produce real knowledge about the regions they conquer and administer and whose future they steer. The West had a scientific revolution and it is natural they transfer some methods of the scientific method in Europe to the study of cultures and languages of the countries they conquer and control. But this is not the entire story. There are Orientalists who have a true scientific impulse to understand other cultures."

" يبدو لي أحياناً وكأن اقتتان ادوارد الواضح بكل ما يمت بصلة الى اللغة والعبارة والخطاب والتجريد، يشكل دعوة لنا للرجوع الى طور الايمان بالفاعلية السحرية للكلمات."86

"It sometimes appears to me as if Edward's clear fascination with everything connected with language and expression and discourse and abstraction, is an invitation for us to return to the stage of faith in the magical effect of words."

These passages give us some more elements to work with. Most importantly here al-'Az̄m demystifies the subject of Orientalism by explaining it as a consequence of the expansionist movement of Europe. In this way Orientalism becomes a much more concrete phenomenon. I firmly assert this is a useful approach. If we can analyze how and why Orientalism originated it becomes more manageable to dismantle its discourse. Let us transpose this to our current era. We are dealing with a political climate where racist attitudes towards the "Other" are still very much prevalent. Almost forty years after the publication of *Orientalism* the problems which Said rightfully described in his book do not seem to have decreased. It does seem a shift has taken place from "the Arab" as racial category to "the Muslim" as cultural category. This functions as a deflection, vulgar racism is less accepted these days but to talk about culture instead of ethnicity has taken its place. I would suggest it is best to explain this

⁸⁵ Al-'Az̄m, *al-ḥiwār al-mutamadin*.

⁸⁶ Al-'Az̄m, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 23.

current obsession with Islam in the same approach of analyzing real world structural factors. For example, the United States are still embroiled in conflict after conflict in the Middle East. This is mainly in the interest of maintaining their geopolitical position of power and their dependence on a cheap and steady flow of oil for their economy. One could say the same for the foreign politics of France vis-à-vis their former colonies in Muslim majority countries such as Mali. In most discussions concerning extremist jihadi groups sprouting in these regions we keep hearing the same old talking points about the supposed nature of Islam in relation to these violent groups. Most so called experts would rather search for answers in the Qur'ān than in the foreign policy of their own nations when trying to make sense of this. Another example regards the situation of immigration and refugees in Europe which causes a lot of conflict in internal politics. The narrative being pushed is one about the supposed possibility or impossibility of co-existence between Muslims and European society. On the one hand all these people are being reduced to their religion, as if it were the only driver constituting their being and actions. On the other hand the political aspect is being ignored again. In Belgium, the greatest percentage of Muslim immigrants have arrived here as guest-workers at the invitation of our government in the seventies. Another fact is that the colonial context is being completely ignored. The fact that Europe has been experiencing a greater wave of immigration in the last decades stems from the fact that a great deal of these people are coming from formerly colonized countries and are moving to their former metropolises. Likewise, the current wave of refugees we are witnessing cannot be explained without referring to the ongoing destabilizing policies towards nations in the Middle East in which much European countries are complicit. For example, Belgium has been exporting weapons to Saudi-Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Bahrein over the past years.⁸⁷ I want to suggest that all the talk about Muslims and Islam serves as a deflection. In this way we can avoid facing the role of our own governments and policies in creating these situations. Therefore I argue for al-'Azm's approach of giving priority to political factors in examining Orientalist attitudes. In contrast, the discourse analysis approach towards Orientalism seems rather esoteric and elusive. The final remark about magic is also rather interesting in this regard. There is a strong link between ancient Semitic and Mesopotamian forms of magic and the power of language. This kept being influential throughout later stages

⁸⁷ Ludo De Brabander, "Repressie in de Arabische wereld met 'onze' wapens," *MO Magazine*, February 22, 2011, <https://www.mo.be/artikel/repressie-de-arabische-wereld-met-onze-wapens>.

of history. Arabic talismanic magic works such as Aḥmad al-Būnī's *Shams al-Ma'arif al-Kubra* or Jewish Qabbalistic practices concerning the secret name of God serve as good examples. To draw a parallel with the contemporary fascination in post-structuralist thought about how language can influence and even form reality is not that far-fetched. I need to stress here this is not meant as a disparaging remark to either of these subjects, I believe they are both highly interesting fields of study in their own respect. A comparative study between these two fields of thought could prove for very interesting research but falls outside the scope of this thesis.

4.2.3 A Problem Without a Solution ?

Now we arrive at the last element of criticism, concerning Edward Said's theoretical framework about raw reality and its representation. As we know well by now, Said stated that Orientalism works as a constituting factor for how Europe viewed and continues to view the Orient as its "Other". He describes how Orientalists have domesticated the Orient in their own ways to present it to their Western audiences. Thereby they manipulate and even create an artificial image of the cultures and peoples living in these areas. We also know by now he was influenced by Foucault's and Nietzsche's theories who state, in summary, that reality is always twisted and manipulated to a certain extent by acts of representation. The question which then imposes itself is whether it is even possible at all to attain real and objective knowledge of reality? Said also seemed to be aware of this implication and addressed it as follows.

*"One ought to remember that all cultures impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from free floating objects into units of knowledge. The problem is not that conversion takes place. It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be."*⁸⁸

"The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the

⁸⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 67.

representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth', which is itself a representation."⁸⁹

This argument Said puts forward comes across as rather self-defeating. Al-'Azm responds to this by saying.

"استنادا الى هذا الاعتبار لا بد من استنتاج هام. اذا كان صحيحا ان الشرق الذي يدرسه الاستشراق ليس إلا صورة مشوهة في خيال الغرب وتصورا مزيفا في عقله، كما يكرر ادوارد مرارا في شجب صاحب الصورة والتصور ولومه وتقريعه، أ ليس صحيحا كذلك ان الغرب يكون بفعله هذا قد سلك سلوكا طبيعيا وسيعا وفقا للمبدأ العام الذي يقول لنا ادوارد بأنه يتحكم بألية تلقي ثقافة ما ثقافة أخرى غريبة عنها؟"⁹⁰

"Based on these considerations we have to make an important conclusion. If it is true that the Orient which Orientalism studies is nothing but a distorted picture in the imagination of the West and a false perception in its mind, as Edward repeats time after time in his denunciation and lamentation and accusation of the creators of this picture and its representation. Isn't it also true then that the West, when acting this way, acts according to natural behavior and acts in accordance with the general principle of which Edward informs us controls the mechanism by which one culture receives another which is strange to it?"

Indeed this seems to be the conclusion if we follow this train of thought. The implication seems to be that if Said's framework is correct, the West only acts as is to be expected and is following natural patterns. The main problem here is that there does not seem to be a way out of the predicament if we look at it this way. Therefore I want to suggest that indeed Edward Said was correct in noticing and describing a certain problematic, but he didn't seem to succeed in offering any kind of workable solution. In my analysis this deadlock he seems to find himself in stems yet again from his methodological approach.

Finally, al-'Azm offers us another useful remark about the question regarding Orientalism. When discussing the imbalance between the West and the East he has the following to say.

هذا واقعة تاريخية نعرفها جميعا ولا أعتقد ان عاقلا يمكن أن يشك فيها بصورة جدية. لكن الاستشراق بعقليته البورجوازية

⁸⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 271.

⁹⁰ Al-'Azm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 14.

الكلاسيكية المعادية للتفكير التاريخي والتطوري انطلق من موقف يحول هذا الحدث الهام الى حقيقة دائمة وواقع لا يحول ولا يزول، أي من موقف يؤيد التفوق الاوروبي، ماضيا وحاضرا ومستقبلا، باستخراجه من جوهر ثابت هو طبيعة للغرب الباقية والمتفوقة. هذا ما أسمينا سابقا بميتافيزيقا الاستشراق.⁹¹

“This is a historical reality we all know and I don’t think any sane person will seriously try to dispute it. But Orientalism, with its classical bourgeois mentality which is opposed to historical and developmental thinking moved from a position transforming this important state of affairs into a permanent reality which does not evolve or change. In other words it perpetuates the European superiority, whether it be past, present or future by extracting it from a fixed essence which is superior, remaining and natural to the West.”

What we see here is that al-‘Az̄m indeed subscribes to the core thesis of *Orientalism* and even expands on it. Where Said took the first step in identifying the Orientalist framework al-‘Az̄m seems to take things a step further by analyzing how this mode of thought was instrumentalized in the project of European domination.

4.3 Said and Marx

Now the time has come to take a look at how the figure of Karl Marx appears in Said’s eyes and what the implications of this are. The difference in how Marx is presented by both Said and al-‘Az̄m tells us a lot about their respective epistemologies. In the following paragraphs I will present some of the peculiarities of Said’s interpretation. What stands out first of all when reading *Orientalism* is that Said views Marx as just another presence in the ranks of the orientalists. This becomes clear as Said mentions him a couple of times next to characters ranging from Dante to Rénan, as if they were all representatives of the same elusive phenomenon that is called Orientalism.⁹²

There is one passage in *Orientalism* where Said takes a closer look at Marx his writings. It concerns his commentary on the United Kingdom’s colonial exploits on the Indian subcontinent. The general thesis Marx puts forward is that the United Kingdom is operating here as an unconscious actor in the unfolding of history. On the one hand it is working at the destruction of the classic feudal Indian society which in turn will create the conditions for the

⁹¹ Al-‘Az̄m, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m’akūsan*, 25.

⁹² Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

transition towards a capitalist society. This is all in line with the standard Marxist method of analyzing history called historical materialism. It is important to specify what is exactly understood by this term. Marxist historiography represents a distinctive theoretical tradition which is based on certain core principles. Marx developed the basic principles of historical materialism in his 1846 work called *The German Ideology*. Therein he states that the main motor of history is the perpetual human struggle to provide in material needs. The production of goods and means to provide in our basic needs is the most important historical act. From this it follows that the process by which these means are produced is of the utmost importance. On the one hand we have the raw materials or forces of production and on the other hand we have humans working with these goods. These interactions create relations of power between people; who owns the means of production and who benefits most from the end product? Marx claims that the entire fabric of society is based on these economic relations. In the words of Anna Green and Kathleen Troup: *"In other words, he (Marx) does not ascribe an independent existence to the realm of human consciousness and ideas, but perceives these as arising out of our material existence."*⁹³ Herein lies the most groundbreaking part of Marx his theory of history, he makes a decisive break with the philosophical system of idealism, on which the orientalist framework itself is firmly based.

Marx does speak with sympathy and compassion for the Indian people but analyzes their suffering in his larger framework of historical development. Here the second major element of historical materialism comes into play. Marx believed that any human society evolves through a strict paradigm transitioning through several stages. These are the classical era, the feudal era, the capitalist era, and finally the socialist era. The ending of each era is brought about by its inherent economic class conflicts. We have to interpret Marx his comments on Britain's role in India in this light. Said's comment is remarkable.

"The idea of regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia is a piece of pure Romantic Orientalism, of course, but coming from the same writer who could not easily forget the human suffering involved, the statement is puzzling. It requires us to first ask how Marx' moral equation of Asiatic loss with the British colonial rule he condemned gets skewed back towards the old inequality between East and West we have so far

⁹³ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The houses of history: a critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 35.

remarked. Second, it requires us to ask where the human sympathy has gone, into what realm of thought it has disappeared while the Orientalist vision takes its place. It is as if the individual mind (Marx's, in this case) could find a precollective, preofficial individuality in Asia, only to give it up when he confronted a more formidable censor in the very vocabulary he found himself forced to employ. In using Marx as the case by which a non-Orientalist's human engagements were first dissolved, then usurped by Orientalist generalizations, we find ourselves having to consider the process of lexicographical and institutional consolidation peculiar to Orientalism."⁹⁴

This shows us some of the more peculiar elements of Said's theory. He disregards Marx's theory of historical materialism but rather interprets his words as symptoms of the Orientalist discourse. It seems as if it were virtually impossible for Marx, or any other Western writer, to escape the all-encompassing grasp of the Orientalist framework. Marx almost appears as a victim of this *episteme*, a sense of personal agency is hard to find here. This matter has certainly not escaped the attention of al-'Az̄m.

القول مع ادوارد بان تجريدات أحد علوم عصره، الاستشراق، وعقائده وفرضياته وتعميماته وصياغاته اللغوية قد اغتصبت عقل ماركس واستبدت به فمنعته من رؤية كل حقيقة عن الشرق شيء آخر تماما. كما يبدو لي أحيانا وكأن افقتان ادوارد الواضح بكل ما يمت بصلة الى اللغة والعبارة والخطاب والتجريد الخ، يشكل دعوة لنا الى طور الايمان بالفاعلية السحرية للكلمات.⁹⁵

"For it is a completely different thing to say, as Edward does, that the abstractions of one of the sciences of a particular age, here being Orientalism, and its beliefs, hypotheses, generalizations and linguistic formulations have subdued and enslaved the mind of Marx and have prevented him from perceiving any reality concerning the East. Sometimes it even appears to me as if Edward's clear fascination with everything concerning language, expression, speech and abstraction presents an invitation to us to return to the belief in the magical power of words."

The above quoted passage clearly reveals the epistemological opposition between the two thinkers. Al-'Az̄m repeatedly criticizes Said that he gets lost in the realm of ideas and the textual and ignores the real material world. But let us take a closer look at what is exactly at

⁹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 154-156.

⁹⁵ Al-'Az̄m, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 22-23.

the stakes here. The main problem seems to be that Said refuses to take Marx's philosophy seriously and categorically refers him to the dustbin of Orientalists.

ماركس كان يميل دوما الى تفسير التحركات التاريخية الكبيرة من خلال القوى الصاعدة والصراعات الاجتماعية والتناحرات الاقتصادية والنزاعات الطبقية. لقد طبق ماركس هذه الرؤيا على مجتمعات آسيا والشرق وحاول ان يستعيد تاريخها ويفهم حاضرها ويستشرف مستقبلها من خلال اطروحته النظرية المذكورة.⁹⁶

“Marx always tended to analyze the great movements of history through the lens of the great powers, societal conflicts, economic rivalries and class conflict. He applied this view on the societies of Asia and the East, trying to recover their history, understand their present and predict their future using his aforementioned methodology.”

It is important to stress, as al-'Az̄m points out, that when Marx was talking about the destruction and modernization of India he did this by applying his own theories of history and he did not come under the sway of the system of Orientalism as Said assumed. Marx did not mean that Europe was inherently superior and Asia should therefore follow its lead. He was rather interested in discovering the factors leading to the superior position of Europe at a certain stage in history. In other words the superiority of Europe is contingent and not essential. In the following paragraphs al-'Az̄m compares some quotes of the Communist Manifesto talking about the development of capitalism in Europe with Marx his writings about India. It becomes clear the discourse is very similar and there is no question of Orientalism or racism in Marx's work.⁹⁷

It is one thing to debunk the charges of Orientalism against Marx but this doesn't mean his work should be free from any other criticism. Another question is whether his framework for analyzing history isn't too rigid or Eurocentric. Gilbert Achcar makes the useful distinction between *epistemic* and *supremacist* Eurocentrism. Epistemic Eurocentrism arises from the limitations imposed by being located in a specific place and time. In this case, Marx could only make use of the available data and theories existing in 19th century Europe. This seems to be a rather neutral category which cautions us about the limits of any form of knowledge. Supremacist Eurocentrism is another thing altogether and arises from a racist and essentialist

⁹⁶ Al-'Az̄m, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 23.

⁹⁷ Al-'Az̄m, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 25.

viewpoint which firmly proclaimed Western superiority and is closer connected to Orientalism.⁹⁸ It is quite clear Marx suffered from the limits of an epistemological Eurocentrism but I am not convinced this spilled over into the supremacist variant.

It's important to remember that Marx's writings about India date from 1853 and only reflect a certain stage of his intellectual development. Throughout his career we see an evolution where he moves away from an initial position that was still somewhat tributary to Hegel's idealism towards a radical materialism which would only fully manifest around the first publication of *Das Kapital* in 1867. Louis Althusser did valuable work in uncovering how Marx and Engels moved from "placing Hegel upside down" towards more independent positions. Achcar correctly points out that; "*The error common to many critiques of Marx, Said's among them, as well as to many of Marx's self-proclaimed followers, is that they overlook the fact that his and Engels' thought was a body of work in the making throughout their lives and that it underwent a profound change over the years.*"⁹⁹

We see Marx his epistemic Eurocentrism shining through with his implicit assumption that the entire world would take the same path of historical development as Europe did evolving from feudalism to capitalism. This is the reason he viewed Britain's role in India somewhat favorably as it was playing the role of destroying the old feudal society. This is a very mechanistic view and is influenced by the positivist outlook which was among the ruling ideas in 19th century Europe. Marx reserves nothing but scorn here against any pre-capitalist society. However, Marx's views on colonialism were not static. Only a couple of years later in 1857 we see a different stance in the *Grundrisse*. In this work he presents the possibility of a multilinear development process for different parts of the world. An important element of this was the discovery of how the development of the capitalist center of the world was based on, and only possible through, the exploitation of the colonies. Going along with this we see a shift in attitude evolving towards a more positive outlook towards pre-capitalist modes of production and a greater compassion towards the plight of colonized peoples.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Achcar, 57.

⁹⁹ Achcar, 62.

¹⁰⁰ Achcar, 65.

Chapter Five : What is Reverse Orientalism

In this chapter we will examine a separate but closely related phenomenon called Reverse Orientalism. Al-'Az̄m devoted the second part of his book to this subject. We need to stress here we are no longer dealing with the criticism of Said's *Orientalism*. Al-'Az̄m did not blame Said for proposing a so-called Reverse Orientalism. Although we have noticed there are some essentializing tendencies present in Edward's book we have also seen he was firmly committed to the humanist project of building a shared human future for all peoples. But let us rephrase first what are some of the basic premises of the Orientalist way of thinking.

"بما ان الطبيعة الثابتة لمجتمعات الغرب وشعوبه وثقافته تنمايز جوهريا عن الطبيعة الثابتة لمجتمعات الشرق وشعوبه وثقافته وتتفوق عليها فان المناهج العلمية والادوات الفكرية والمقولات النظرية والتصورات السوسولوجية الخ، الملائمة لدراسة الغرب ومجتمعاته وتفسير تاريخه لا تصلح أصلا لدراسة الشرق ولا يجوز تطبيقها عليه بهدف فهم واقعه وحضارته."¹⁰¹

"That the fixed nature of Western societies, peoples, and cultures is essentially different from the fixed nature of Eastern societies, peoples, and cultures and is superior to them. That the scientific curricula, the intellectual tools, the theoretical statements, the sociological depictions, et cetera, which are suitable for studying the West and its societies and interpreting its history are not suitable at all for studying the East and may not be applied to it in order to understand its reality and civilization."

What we have here is the conviction that there is a deep and fundamental difference between the cultures of the East and the West. It is based on the belief that what differentiates us from each other is more important than what connects us to each other. Of course there are great differences between the cultures and societies of East and West, it would be foolish to deny this. The important element is just how we approach these differences. As we have seen before, the Orientalist framework considers these differences as stemming from a supposed "essence" that each culture possesses. The contemporary situation of any society was already pre-determined or carved in stone by the characteristics of this supposed essence. In this way they all too easily ignore the complex flow of contingent historical events. This attitude has been prevalent amongst Orientalist scholars in

¹⁰¹ Al-'Az̄m, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 29.

the West for a long time, and still seems to exert a lot of influence. But this widely held belief of a fundamental difference which cannot be bridged does not limit itself to Western societies only. Both Edward Said and Ṣādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm noticed a trend where intellectuals of the East started taking over the same epistemological framework. Where Said only briefly touched upon this phenomenon in the afterword of *Orientalism* it is to the merit of al-‘Aẓm that he further examined this phenomenon. The following two citations explain more fully what is meant here.

"ويأتي تحذير ادوارد في محله لأن استعارة هذا المنهج في الشرق قد تمت بالفعل كما أن ممارسته مستمرة منذ فترة طويلة مما أدى الى بروز نظرة واسعة ومؤثرة يمكن تسميتها بالاستشراق المعكوس لأنها تحمل في طياتها الميافيزيقا الاستشراقية وابستمولوجيتها بصورة مقلوبة. العنصر الجديد الذي أدخله هذا الاستشراق المعكوس هو نقل حكم القيمة من القول بتفوق العقلية الغربية الى القول بتفوق العقلية العربية الشرقية."¹⁰²

"Edward's warning comes in the right place because the appropriating of this approach in the East has already taken place just like its practice has been going on for a long time. This led to the emergence of a broad and influential view which can be called reverse Orientalism because it carries with it the metaphysics of Orientalism and its epistemology but turned upside down. The new element introduced by this reverse Orientalism is the transfer of the value judgement from saying the Western mind is superior to saying the Eastern mind is superior."

What we are dealing with here is a mirror image of the classical Western Orientalism. It shares the same epistemology and the same ontological belief of an essential dichotomy between East and West. I propose we can identify the root of this kind of thinking by referring to it as a *metaphysics of difference*. After giving this definition, al-‘Aẓm will continue to expand on his hypothesis by illustrating it through a series of different manifestations he noticed appearing. We can summarize the main elements of Reverse Orientalism as follows. First of all, the belief that the Orient and the Occident are antithetic to each other. This means the people of the Orient are not only confronting imperialism or colonialism, but are confronting "the West" as a whole, which appears as a monolithic category. Secondly, because the East and West are so essentially different from each other, there is no use of analyzing the Orient through the lens of Western conceptual categories such as secularism or

¹⁰² Al-‘Aẓm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m’akūsan*, 30-31.

democracy. Because of the firmly rooted belief in this metaphysics of difference, no analogy is possible. This also implies that the possible benefits of these systems of thought are dismissed a priori because they emanate from the West. The third main idea in Reverse Orientalism is the belief that culture is the main driver that steers history in Islamic societies. Therefore any economic or political factors are dismissed as being subordinate to the importance of religion. The final conclusion then will be that Islam, and only Islam, will provide the solutions for restoring societies of the East to their former glory. In this most peculiar way we see that Orientalists and Islamists will arrive at the same conclusion; the West is the West and the East is the East. Al-'Aẓm applied this concept to the work of some of his contemporary Arab intellectuals, most notably the Syrian poet Adūnis. In what follows I will take the same conceptual framework and apply it to the work of other thinkers of our contemporary time.

5.1 Reverse Orientalism in the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Let us take one of the most famous Orientalists, Ernest Rénan, to start with. In his lectures he also posited his own dichotomy between East and West. In Rénan's thought this manifested in the opposition between "Semitic" and "Aryan" peoples to explain the different outcomes between Europe and the Middle East. These terms are in fact only linguistic categories to refer to language families. In his typical Orientalist fashion, Rénan will then connect some supposed elements of these languages to the "spirit" or essence of the cultures speaking them.¹⁰³ To use philological studies and extrapolate some presumed qualities of languages as a totalitarian factor that reveals anything that is needed to know about a people is another typical method of Orientalist thinking as Edward Said rightfully criticized. One would hope this type of reasoning would be considered outdated and obsolete by now, yet it does not seem to be the case. Let us illustrate this by referring to the work of the Iranian philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Nasr received a scientific education at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he studied physics. Later in his life he would develop an interest in traditional Islamic philosophy. He has become a proponent of the so-called Traditionalist school and has been greatly influenced by thinkers such as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon.¹⁰⁴ One of the main characteristics of this school of thought is its great

¹⁰³ Corm, *Orient-Occident*, 33-34.

¹⁰⁴ Boroujerdi, 121.

opposition to modernity. Nasr also seems to manifest the same belief in a dichotomy between a spiritual and traditional East and a rationalistic and modern West. He then makes a reversal and proclaims the traditional world of the East as superior to the modern West. On the other hand it is important to remark that Nasr is not what we would call an Islamist and his line of thought does not resemble “Islamic fundamentalism”. Where most of these currents are influenced by literalist interpretations of Islamic scripture and figures such as Ibn Taymiyya, Nasr on the other hand finds his inspiration in a more theosophical and esoteric form of Islam.¹⁰⁵ But let us take a look at an article he wrote called *Persia and the Destiny of Islamic Philosophy*, where his Orientalist tendency most clearly emerges. In this piece he expands on why Iran has played such an important role in the development of Islamic philosophy.

“In conclusion it might be asked why the later life of Islamic philosophy is so closely tied to Persia. The ethnic continuity of Persia from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic period, added to the elements of ancient Persian wisdom which were integrated into Islamic philosophy, is a main factor, as already mentioned. Other factors must therefore have also played a role, of which one seems to us of special significance. Islam is a Semitic religion universalized to embrace non-Semitic elements. Within the early Islamic community two peoples were instrumental most of all in the creation of classical Islamic culture, the Arabs and the Persians. Now, although the religion of the Arabs and the Persians was the same, ethnically one of the peoples was Semitic and the other Aryan, each race possessing its own particular genius. The spiritual type of the Semites tends to what has been so justly called ‘Semitic voluntarism’ and that of the Aryans to ‘Aryan intellectualism’. The tendency in the one case is toward inspiration and the other toward intellection.”¹⁰⁶

If one were to read this passage without any context it would not be surprising to mistake it for the writings of Rénan himself. Let us examine what is being said here. First of all Nasr focusses on the ethnic dimension that gives Persia its supposed special place in Islamic

¹⁰⁵ Boroujerdi, 129.

¹⁰⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Persia and the Destiny of Islamic Philosophy,” *Studies in Comparative Religion* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter, 1972)

http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/Persia_and_the_Destiny_of_Islamic_Philosophy_by_Seyyed_Hossein_Nasr.aspx

history. Here he seems to be influenced by Henry Corbin who also believed in a strong continuity of themes in Persian philosophy between the pre-Islamic and Islamic era. Corbin developed this thesis in a massive four volume work called *En Islam iranien*.¹⁰⁷ It falls outside of the scope of this work to examine this thesis but what interests us here is the specific connection Nasr makes. He makes the same distinction Rénan does between Semites and Aryans, and literally speaks of a “particular genius” particular to each “race”. It is one thing to say that there are recurring themes in Persian philosophy, this is not a problematic claim in itself if one can back it up by proper arguments and examples. It is a completely different thing to state that this hypothesis might be explained by referring to the inherent qualities of one’s “race”. Furthermore, the claim that only the Arab and Persian people were instrumental in constituting classical Islamic culture is plainly wrong historically speaking. By stating this Nasr isolates all the “foreign” elements which were involved in the genesis of Islamic cultures and society. For example, he ignores the contributions of Christian scientists in the translation movement or the fact that the newly formed caliphate was only able to maintain itself by co-opting a great deal of the pre-existing Byzantine administration which territories it conquered. Furthermore, I believe one cannot separate Islam from its Abrahamic roots, arising as a response to and in dialogue with its preceding Christian and Jewish manifestations. Add to this the great importance of classical Greek philosophy. The early Islamic scholars were fully aware of the challenges all these diverse beliefs and philosophies formed. In this respect we can also state that the development of early Islamic theology, or *kalām*, was greatly influenced by the interaction with these ‘foreign’ systems of thought. As Majid Fakhry says in *A History of Islamic Philosophy*; “Political factors, Judaeo-Christian influences, and Greek philosophical ideas seem to have been the chief forces contributing to the acceleration of this process”.¹⁰⁸ The main point I want to stress here is that no civilization ever has developed or will develop in isolation. There is always influence from other cultures. A central element of Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism is to see this as a negative thing, something which must be limited as much as possible or to be denied altogether. Now let us contrast Nasr’s approach with one I consider more positive and seems to portray a more hopeful outlook on the human condition. May Ziade was a Lebanese-Palestinian writer who lived in the first half of the 20th century. She is considered as one of

¹⁰⁷ Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

¹⁰⁸ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 3th Ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 44.

the first woman who represented feminism in the Arab world and played an important role in the literary salons that were involved in the Arab Renaissance or *Nahḍa*. She had the following to say in response to a question concerning her opinion on what should be the correct relation for Arab peoples with modern Europe.

" لم تقم إلى الآن في الشرق والغرب والشمال والجنوب بسوى مدنية واحدة تعاونت الشعوب، على غير اتفاق، أن تتناوب العمل كل في جانب من جوانبها الموافق طبيعتها. فجاء الساميون بالعنصر الديني والنبوي، وجاء الآريون ~ الهنود والفرس ~ بالفلسفة الباطنية والإلهيات، وجاء اليونان بالفن والفلسفة النظرية، والرومان بالنظام والتشريع والتجديد والاستعمال. ولما تحضر العرب فعلوا ما فعلته كل من هذه الدول قبلهم، أي إنهم جمعوا شتيت ما وجدوا من عناصر المدنية، وسبكوها في قالبهم، وطبعوها بطابعهم، فكانوا وصلة أمينة قيمة بين الماضي والحاضر.¹⁰⁹

"Up to this day, whether it is in the east, the west, the north, or the south, there hasn't been any civilization without cooperation and agreement of the different peoples, to alternate all the endeavors which are natural to their natures. The Semites came with the element of religion and prophecy. Then the Aryans – the Hindu and Persians – came with esoteric philosophy and theology. Then the Greeks came with art and theoretical philosophy. Then the Romans came with the system, legislation, recruitment, and engineering. When the Arabs came they did what each of these nations did before them. They collected all the miscellaneous elements of civilization, shaped them in their mold, instilled them according to their nature, and were a valuable link between the past and the present."

Although this text shows some superficial similarities with that of Nasr, it portrays a quite different outlook when we examine it closer. Indeed, Ziade also mentions the different characteristics of Semite and Aryan peoples but she approaches this from another angle. It is not a controversial thing to state that different cultures specialized in different areas. What Ziade stresses here, is that each culture has made its own contribution to the collective resource pool of human history and that each consecutive culture incorporates elements from a previous or neighboring one. Furthermore, she does not seem to connect these characteristics with a "racial particular genius" as Nasr does. While he seems to focus on difference and a neat demarcation between separate cultures Ziade does take cultural

¹⁰⁹ May Ziade, *"Bayna al-jazr wa al-madd: Ṣafaḥāt fī al-luḡa wa al-ādāb wa al-fann wa al-ḥaḍāra,"* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1963), 113.

differences into account but places this against the larger background of interaction between peoples and collective human evolution. Cultures are not the sole possessor of some esoteric genius but rather continually influence each other. I propose the main lesson we can draw from this is that it is completely normal and acceptable to adopt certain aspects from a different culture while rejecting others. For example there is no contradiction in adopting certain Western methods of education while at the same time rejecting the cultural and military imperialism coming from Europe. This is what Ziade and many other Nahḍa thinkers proposed.

5.2 Marxism as a Western Intrusion ?

On the other hand, the type of reasoning we often see appear amongst Islamist lines goes as follows.

"بطبيعة الحال لا يهمل الاسلاميون اهمالا كلياً الظاهرة الامبريالية ولكنهم يقدمون عليها مقولة ~ الغرب ~ لأن ابراز الظاهرة لامبريالية واعطاءها المركز الأول في التحليل السياسي يعني استبعاد الماركسية والشويوية والاتحاد السوفياتي من لعبة المجابهة الحضارية المستمرة بين الشرق والغرب. لا غرابة إذا، في ان يؤكد كتابهم بأن الماركسية والشويوية والقومية دخيلة على الشرق وتشكل قطيعة حادة مع الموروث الثقافي والتاريخي."¹¹⁰

"Off course the Islamists do not completely neglect the phenomenon of imperialism. They refer to it by saying "the West" because highlighting the phenomenon of imperialism and giving it the first place in the political analysis means excluding Marxism, communism, and the Soviet Union from the continuing game of the clash of the civilizations between East and West. It is not surprising then, that their books ensure that Marxism and communism and nationalism are alien to the East and constitute a sharp break with its cultural and historical heritage".

This is an important and relatively recent development. There seems to have occurred a fusion between the terms "imperialism" and "the West" as a whole. The older national liberation movements struggled against colonialism and imperialism but they did not proclaim the entire "West" as their enemy. As a matter of fact, a great deal of these movements were inspired by so-called "Western" ideas. A great example of the emancipatory potential of universalist ideologies is the Haitian slave revolt of 1791 – 1804 under the leadership of Toussaint L’ouverture. This was one of the first successful revolutions

¹¹⁰ Al-‘Aẓm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m’akūsan*, 37.

against slavery and colonial domination. Rather than attacking the idea of “the West” altogether, this movement was inspired by the ideas of the French revolution but took the ideas associated with it even further. They blamed the French for only applying their ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood to themselves, thereby excluding their oppressed colonial subjects. Instead of calling for a return to some fabled and idealized past, Toussaint L’ouverture was inspired by the universalist ideas of the French revolution and extended them to their fullest conclusion. I refer to C. L. R. James’ study *The Black Jacobins, Toussaint L’ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* for a more comprehensive treatment of this historical event.¹¹¹ The contemporary Islamists on the other hand don’t seem to find any use in ideas coming from the West altogether. They are obsessed with purity and tend to idealize the past. One of my main complaints against their discourse is that the pure and unadulterated past they so desperately search for is a figment of the imagination. It is a typical element of conservatives worldwide, whether they be Eastern or Western, to idealize a golden past that was not corrupted by modernity or outside influences. As I have hoped to illustrate before, civilizations have always borrowed from each other and influenced each other. So the former struggle between national liberation movements against colonialism and imperialism gets replaced by the idealist struggle between “the East” and “the West”. In a similar way the Islamists will also perform a procedure which equates communism, socialism, and Marxism with the West. They dismiss these currents of thought because of their supposed Western origin. Besides the fact this line of thinking is rather superficial and based on a totalitarian view of culture and history, we can criticize it on other grounds too. For what does it mean to equate Marxism or socialism with the West? Let us take a closer look at its roots and contemporary manifestations. Isn’t it true that the final successful manifestation of communism in the West dates back to over two centuries ago with the short lived Paris commune in 1871? For if we look at the Soviet Union or Russia, this area has never been truly considered as truly Western. Hasn’t Russia also been functioning as the Other for the West throughout the ages? Furthermore, if we look at worldwide experiments with socialism, what do we see? Are China, Cuba, Vietnam, the various socialist guerilla movements in South-America also part of the global West? It seems as if we encounter a great deal of contradictions quite fast once we start following this line of reasoning. This

¹¹¹ C.R.L. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* 2nd Ed. Revised (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

manifestation of Islamism equates modernity with the West and therefore perceives it as antithetical to their idea of a traditional Eastern Islamic world. To follow this rather simplistic formula is to ignore the complicated intricacies of historical development. All dichotomous depiction between two supposed opposites does not correspond with the real world which is not black and white. As a sidenote I want to turn back to Said's treatment of Karl Marx. He comes from a vastly different epistemological point of view than that of the Islamists and would completely disagree with their mode of thought, let this be clear. On the other hand, his dismissal of Karl Marx as a victim of the Western Orientalist discourse does seem to bear some parallels. It would be foolish to claim a direct link between Said and Islamism, but one might detect an indirect link. I suppose his imprecise use of the term "the West" and his lack of rigor in dealing with the history of philosophy might have given ammunition to Islamist currents in their portraying of "the West" as a boogeyman. This is a regretful affair as the goal of his book was the exact opposite. To conclude this passage I want to contrast the worldview of the Islamists with that of May Ziade in the second quotation. I feel it illustrates well what is at the stakes.

"نتيجة استشراقهم المعكوس هذا يؤكد الاسلامانيون دوماً وبالمطلق، إن ما ينطبق أو إنطبق على أوروبا لا يمكن بأي حال أن ينطبق على غير أوروبا. فإن فكرة الانساق كما يطرحها الاسلامانيون تعني بالاضافة الى ذلك موت وحدة التاريخ البشري وموت التقدم التراكمي للإنسانية وموت إسهام جميع الشعوب والثقافات في صنع تاريخ هذا الانسان وبناء حضاراته وتدميرها أيضاً."¹¹²

"The result of their reverse Orientalism is then, that the Islamists continually and absolutely assert that what applies or applied to Europe cannot under any circumstances apply to what is outside Europe. In addition to this, the idea of this ordering, as proposed by the Islamists, means the death of the unity of human history and of the cumulative progress of humanity and of the contribution of all peoples and cultures in making this human history and the building of civilizations and their destruction."

¹¹² Al-'Azm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan*, 40.

"إن الحضارة العالمية الكبرى تنتقل من شعب إلى شعب خلال الدهور بحركة متموجة، تملو موجتها في أمة فتتجلى مواهب تلك الأمة وتأتي بأقصى ما في إمكانها، ثم تهبط الموجة لتتكون من جديد عند شعب آخر، بينما تتأثر بارتفاعها سائر الشعوب بدرجات متفاوتة."¹¹³

"The great world civilization moves from one people to another through the ages in a wavelike movement. The wave rises in one nation and is reflected in the talents of that nation. It goes as far as possible, then the wave descends to be reconfigured with another nation. Meanwhile the rest of the nations are affected to varying degrees by the rising of the wave."

5.3 Postcolonial Studies and Secularism

Let us examine the next aspect of Reverse Orientalism. Al-'Az̄m states that one of the consequences of this line of thinking results in the following conclusion.

"لا يمكن الخلاص الوطني الذي ظل العرب يبحثون عنه منذ الحملة النابليونية على مصر في القومية العلمانية كما أنه لا يمكن في الشوبوعية أو الاشتراكية الثورية أو ما شابه ذلك من النظم والدعوات، بل في العودة إلى الأصالة الإسلامية."¹¹⁴

"The national liberation that the Arabs have been searching for since the Napoleonic campaign on Egypt cannot be achieved by secular nationalism nor by communism or revolutionary socialism or similar systems or calls. It can only be achieved by a return to the Islamic authenticity."

Indeed, since the West is seen as a monolith this implies that all phenomena arising from the West are also considered as ill-suited for the Orient. We have already described how the rise of Islamism since the end of the seventies cannot be separated from global political and philosophical developments. Islamists indeed tend to reject secularism because of its supposedly foreign character. We have also noticed that similar developments have taken place amongst the ranks of the so-called New Left, where a lot of thinkers associated with this current manifested a growing distrust towards universalism and the applicability of Enlightenment values. While the New Left and the Islamists are greatly opposed in most

¹¹³ Ziade, 112.

¹¹⁴ Al-'Az̄m, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m'akūsan* 35.

matters, they do have in common an approach that puts greater emphasis on identity and culture as driving factors behind human history. Of course they approach this from a different direction. Islamists tend to go along with the perceived dichotomy between East and West and see Islam as the solution for the problems associated with Western domination. On the other hand, the New Left is heavily influenced by post-structuralism, which refuses the notion of essentialism, as we have previously described. Therefore it would be wrong to just simply equate them. But the Islamist right and the postmodern Left seem to find themselves as strange bedfellows in their distrust for universalist ideas. In addition to this, they also share their aversion towards the previous manifestations of leftist thought as manifested in Marxism and communism. Karl Sharro noticed the same development, describing it as follows.

“There is a broad and ongoing retreat from the universalism that once undergirded the progressive outlook, among politicians, thinkers, and the general population. This universalism had held that, at a basic level, the same institutions of democratic organization had relevance no matter the cultural context, that political analysis and strategy could exist without recourse to sect or ethnic identity, and that the same fundamental rights applied to and were valued by all peoples. Meanwhile, discussions about the future of politics and political identity in the Middle East and North Africa are heavily influenced by the trends in academia in the West. In particular, the region has suffered as a result of a worldwide intellectual trend away from universalism and toward specificity and particularism—a shift referred to by scholars as the “cultural turn.” The academic cultural turn left the intellectual foundations of universalism and moved toward particularist models, which has problematized both the notions of universalist politics and of inquiry. In particular, the cultural turn has dislodged class analysis and materialism, considering them as inadequate or insufficient tools for the investigation of socio-politics. This movement in academia and philosophy was echoed in the wider social and political context and helped undermine universalism, while accelerating political fragmentation, feeding the rise of exclusive identity-based movements.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Karl Sharro, “The Retreat from Universalism in the Middle East and the World,” *The Century Foundation*, 10 April 2019, <https://tcf.org/content/report/retreat-universalism-middle-east->

I agree with this analysis and suggest that the shift of abandoning economic and political analysis in favor of an emphasis on culture and identity creates several problems. This brings us back to Edward Said, whose introduction of discourse theory and the issue of representation in the field of Middle-Eastern studies would continue to exert great influence from then onwards. This issue appears most manifest in the field of post-colonial studies, of which Edward Said is often referred to as its grandfather.¹¹⁶ Post-colonial theory is a broad and heterogeneous field of inquiry. We can understand it as an attempt to deconstruct the prevailing discourse about Western expansion and colonialism which often perceived itself as quite benign and unproblematic. Post-colonial writing tries to place more emphasis on the perspectives of the colonized peoples. This is often achieved by presenting a counter narrative that focusses on the detrimental effects of colonialism on the indigenous people it affected. Furthermore, the aim is often to dethrone the Eurocentric perspective which presents the West at the center of history. Some important writers associated with this current are Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Ranajit Guha.¹¹⁷

Vivek Chibber is a professor of sociology whose works focusses on criticizing post-colonial theory from a Marxist perspective. In his 2013 publication *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* he examines the ideas of a certain strand of post-colonial theory called subaltern studies, of which Spivak, Guha, and Chakrabarty are amongst the main proponents. Chibber summarizes and criticizes the implications of their line of thinking as follows. Subaltern theorists claim that, since capitalism developed differently in Europe than in colonized countries, this implies that categories associated with the West are also ill suited for analyzing Third World societies. As Chibber explains, the main conclusion they arrive at is that :

“If the social matrix and developmental arc of the modernizing Global South are not the same as those of early modern Europe, if their dominant political and cultural forms depart so radically from those of the modern West, then the theories imported from the West cannot be appropriate to the study of Eastern settings. As a result, the

[world/?fbclid=IwAR2L5OAp6RPDUtI8CoDKjOcjqbupoGa0Ti9YB6jSHrnZvP014KKlovRen7w&session=1#easy-footnote-bottom-2](https://www.facebook.com/lwAR2L5OAp6RPDUtI8CoDKjOcjqbupoGa0Ti9YB6jSHrnZvP014KKlovRen7w&session=1#easy-footnote-bottom-2).

¹¹⁶ Lockman, 211.

¹¹⁷ Green and Troup, 227.

East needs its own, sui generis theoretical categories.”¹¹⁸

Although these thinkers come from a completely different philosophical angle, statements like this do sound similar to the Reverse Orientalism of the Islamists or even to Bernard Lewis’ statement that it doesn’t make any sense to apply terms such as “left” and “right” when talking about politics in Islamic societies.¹¹⁹ It is granted these thinkers do not fall in the trap of essentialism and try to explain differences by referring to different historical trajectories. Be that as it may, in their emphasis on *difference* between cultures the parallel is still clear. Chibber continues to develop his critique by stating that these theorists have also inadvertently strengthened the old Orientalist dichotomy between East and West they set out to deconstruct. His response is a defense of universalism based on radical Marxist thought. He defends the notion that, although there indeed are vast differences between cultures, humans have shared in the same basic aspirations and struggles worldwide.

“When Subalternist theorists put up this gigantic wall separating East from West, and when they insist that Western agents are not driven by the same kinds of concern as Eastern agents, what they’re doing is endorsing the same kind of essentialism that colonial authorities used to justify their depredations in the nineteenth century.”¹²⁰

I would tend to agree that the logical consequence of concentrating on what separates people from each other does not provide for much emancipatory potential. It seems to me that to focus on what unites common people across the world offers a more effective message in resisting and dismantling oppression wherever it manifests. Furthermore, in our contemporary globalized world politics and economy have become globally entangled. One cannot separate the wealth of the global West from the general poverty of the global South. To suggest that one cannot use a universal framework to analyze conflicts or that oppressed workers and farmers in different parts of the world have little in common seems rather counterproductive. As we have noted before, the accusation that Marxist theory lacks in explanatory potential due to its Eurocentric nature and is therefore not applicable outside the West is often based on a very selective reading of Marx which ignores the evolution in his

¹¹⁸ Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 14.

¹¹⁹ Al-‘Azm, *Al-istishrāq wal-istishrāq m’akūsan*, 29.

¹²⁰ Vivek Chibber, “How does the Subaltern speak,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 21 April 2013, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/04/how-does-the-subaltern-speak/>.

thinking. Other criticisms of Marxism being too rigid, deterministic, or teleological in orientation I accept as valid but I would suggest it is better to incorporate these criticisms in order to improve the theories rather than just dismissing them altogether.

Since Chibber's work focusses on the context of the Indian subcontinent, let us now take this framework he used and examine if there are similar developments in academia that specializes in the Middle East. To rephrase his observations, Chibber is critical towards Indian scholars who claim we can't apply Western concepts such as class struggle because the Indian subcontinent has known a completely different trajectory of historical development from Europe. I have noticed the same kind of attitude coming from scholars working on the Middle East concerning the applicability of secularism in Muslim nations. I propose to start with the work of Saba Mahmood. Her book, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, is a study of the development and consequences of secularism for religious minorities in contemporary Egypt. In the introduction she explains the main thesis of her work.

"This book argues that modern secular governance has contributed to the exacerbation of religious tensions in postcolonial Egypt, hardening interfaith boundaries and polarizing religious difference."¹²¹

"Following Talal Asad, I conceptualize political secularism as the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices."¹²²

Let us examine these first two citations together. Mahmood's main assertion is that secularism has caused the aggravation of religious divides between religious communities in Egypt rather than alleviating it, a rather controversial statement. I detect two problems here. First of all this hypothesis rests on the premise that the Egyptian state can indeed be classified as secular. We cannot deny that religious tensions between religious communities have risen since the last decades. This is mostly depicted as a conflict between the Sunni Muslim majority and the Coptic Christian minority, of whom the official percentages are

¹²¹ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2016), 1.

¹²² Mahmood, 3.

estimated between five and twenty percent of the population, although this number is subject to heavy controversy.¹²³ In addition to this, we can't ignore the small and often overlooked Shia minorities who are subjected to the highest degrees of persecution and hostility.¹²⁴ It rather seems to be the case that while religious strife is on the rise since the last decades, secularism as enshrined in the Egyptian state is on the retreat. One could argue for the case of a secular state under Nasser, but as we have seen in a preceding chapter, since the presidency of Sadat and onwards numerous concessions have been made to accommodate for the growing importance of religion in society. For example, the Shar'ia as a source for law code has only been adopted in the constitution since 1981.¹²⁵ As stated before, the growing importance of identity and culture as a worldwide phenomenon in connection with geopolitical conflicts seems to hold a greater explanatory value in accounting for the rise of religious conflict. This brings us to the second problem in Mahmood's conclusion, which is connected to her definition of secularism. When relating the problems between religious communities in Egypt with secularism, she seems to have a very narrow definition of secularism in mind. She has abandoned the classic definition of secularism as a mere separation between the state and religion. This definition also implies the idea of religion as a private matter where the state remains neutral and citizens are free to follow their beliefs without any fear of persecution. This form of secularism is also the one that al-'Azam defends and is closely tied with a belief in the value of universalism, meaning that the same principles and ideals can be valuable for people worldwide. But Mahmood conceptualizes secularism as something that is not neutral, where the state actively interferes in the lives of believers. This sees secularism as something more authoritarian which is closely tied with the genesis and development of the modern Western nation state. This follows a new tradition of research on secularism pioneered by Talal Asad, as Mahmood mentioned herself. I suggest the problem here lies in a lack of proper formulation. What Mahmood and Asad are talking about can be more aptly described with the French word *laïcité*. Although this is often translated as secularism, it is more correct to say that *laïcité* is a specific form of secularism. It arose after the French revolution and is practiced by the

¹²³ "How many Christians are there in Egypt?" *Pew Research Center*, February 16 2011, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2011/02/16/how-many-christians-are-there-in-egypt/>.

¹²⁴ "Shi'a of Egypt," *Minority Rights Group International*, October 2017, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/shia-of-egypt/>.

¹²⁵ Mahmood, 7.

French state up to this day. Granted, it is indeed a more assertive form of secularism where religion is clearly subordinate to state power. It is outside the scope of this work to provide any value judgement of this system. But to conflate *laïcité* with any form of secularism seems to come across as an act of bad faith and serves to make secularism as a whole an easier target for criticism.

In all fairness, while being critical of this approach towards secularism, I have not encountered much elements of Reverse Orientalism until now. The following statement however, seems more problematic in this aspect.

“In light of this, the critical issue is not so much to pluralize secularism as to conceptualize its variations in relation to a universalizing project, which, in the postcolonial context, also involves the ongoing subjugation of non-Western societies to various forms of Western domination.”¹²⁶

What we have here is the conceptual linkage between secularism, universalism, and the political practices of Western colonialism and oppression. The argument seems to rest on the premise that secularism was introduced in the colonial context and thus cannot be separated from this. But is there really such a strong link between the universalizing project based on Enlightenment ideals and the ongoing subjugation of non-Western societies to various forms of Western domination? This does remind us of the conceptual conflation of everything with a Western origin under the monolithic banner of “the West” which is so typical for Reverse Orientalism. I suggest that the Haitian example of a radical extension of these ideals serves as a more fruitful example in dealing with these kinds of questions. I do agree it is a commendable effort to point attention to the fact that many Enlightenment ideas were formed in a socio-political context that was rife with oppression, slavery, and colonialism, as I am a firm believer that any idea should be subjected to criticism. But a recurring element I have noticed among these postcolonial criticisms is that they often tend not to provide any alternatives. It is one thing to problematize secularism, and might be perfectly valid depending on the substance of the criticism, but it doesn’t get us very far if the theory does not provide a solution for the supposed problem.

¹²⁶ Mahmood, 19.

Talal Asad takes a comparable approach. His work, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, serves as a critical study regarding the often held opinions about secularism as a neutral institution. In a methodology inspired by Foucault and Nietzsche, he sets out to provide a genealogy for secularism against the background of the project of Western modernity.¹²⁷ He arrives at the conclusion that, since secularism is built upon a Western framework that is heavily influenced by Protestant Christianity, Muslim minorities will always be at a disadvantageous position when dealing with secular societies in Europe. Their only choice is either to assimilate or to hold on to their traditions but continue to be perceived as hostile and foreign.¹²⁸ This is based on Asad's belief that there is a direct link going Protestant Christianity towards modern secularism. According to Asad, Protestant Christianity is mostly based on personal belief while Islam concerns itself more with the entire fabric of society. Jonas Jakobsen also noticed that Asad's antagonism against secularism only serves to deepen the perceived distance between Muslims and "the West".

"The first problem I wish to emphasize is the tendency in Asad to essentialize (or reify) group differences, in particular the group differences between 'westerners' and 'Muslims'. Paradoxically, this way of thinking has certain similarities with the way in which anti-Muslim westerners and anti-western Muslims try to construct a deep conflict between two different civilizations. Of course, our present world is full of conflicts between interests, principles, or understandings that can be defined as 'Western' or 'Islamic', respectively, but my point is simply that Asad overlooks many important commonalities between Muslims and non-Muslims, on the one hand, and many internal differences and disagreements within the 'Muslim' and the 'Western' world, on the other."¹²⁹

I am drawn to the same conclusions here. Although I don't doubt the good intentions of Mahmood and Asad, they end up reinforcing the divide between the Western world and the Islamic world. A lot of these contemporary criticisms of secularism are based on the following line of reasoning. They draw a line going from the Reformation and the

¹²⁷ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16.

¹²⁸ Asad, 159-180.

¹²⁹ Jonas Jakobsen, "Secularism, Liberal Democracy and Islam in Europe: a Habermasian Critique of Talal Asad," *Contrastes: Revista Internacional de Filosofía*, No. 20 (2015): 118.

Renaissance to the Enlightenment which would provide the adequate historical circumstances for the development of secularism. Based on this, it is argued that secularism cannot be adequately applied outside Europe because of the differing historical circumstances. I think this is based on a rather superficial view of history and just ends up reinforcing the collective myths that Europe tells about itself. Georges Corm counters this approach stressing that secularism has no specific Western or European origin but rather has always been present in Islamic societies.

“La notion même de séparation du temporel et du spirituel, un des grands marqueurs de la modernité européenne, ne peut faire de sens dans l’islam classique, puisqu’il n’y a pas d’institution spirituelle indépendante du pouvoir politique. Dans la société islamique de l’époque classique, la logique de la laïcité d’origine catholique ou de la sécularisation de type protestant est dénuée de tout fondement. Le problème ne se pose pas dans cette société où, en l’absence d’un pouvoir religieux institutionnel, le pouvoir ne peut qu’être civil.”¹³⁰

“The very notion of the separation between the temporal and the spiritual, one of the great markers of European modernity, cannot make sense in classical Islam, since there is no spiritual institution independent from political power. In the Islamic society of the classical period, the logic of Catholic secularism or Protestant secularization is completely unfounded. The problem doesn’t even arise in this society where, in the absence of an institutionalized religious power, the power cannot be but civil.”

Corm does not ignore the different historical situations but interestingly enough draws a completely different conclusion from this. Indeed one cannot deny that secularism in its European manifestations arose in a specific set of circumstances but this does not imply that secularism as a concept or idea is something inherently Western. I believe Georges Corm deserves great merit in his attempts to disentangle the mythical correlation between secularism and the West. Secularism arose in Europe as a consequence of the conflicts arising from the institutional nature of the Catholic Church. In the Islamic world on the other hand, institutionalization of religion only occurred to a far lesser degree. The caliphs might have legitimized their power through the use of religion, but with the exception of al-

¹³⁰ Corm, *Orient-Occident*, 134.

Ma'mūn, no ruler bothered much with interfering in religious matters. Furthermore, in affairs regarding to jurisprudence, there exists a clear distinction between *shar'ia* and *siyāsa*. The former referring to religious guidelines and the latter pertaining to politics and the organization of the state. In this respect we can also refer to the influential book of Ali Abderraziq, *Islam and the Principles of Government* or *Al-Islām wa Uṣūl al-Ḥukm*, published in 1925. In this controversial work he claims that there are no guidelines for political organization to be found in the Qūr'an. Since the holy book of Islam remains silent on politics, this would imply that there are no real grounds for the necessity of a caliphate and that Muslims are free to organize their political affairs as they see fit.¹³¹ We can also read this silence on politics as an implicit endorsement of the secular nature of Islam.

¹³¹ Kasab, 40.

Conclusion

Now the time has arrived to draw some general conclusions. What have I learned and how are these discussions still relevant today? First off all, a word of praise for Edward Said is due. Although I have spent a sizeable part of this dissertation criticizing his work, it is important to remember it is due to Said that a process of re-evaluation of attitudes and implicit biases in the study of the Orient gained a lot of traction. In the same way as al-‘Azm did, I do agree with a lot of elements of Said’s main premise. I consider this dissertation as a part of the ongoing discussion that Said started, my goals were to provide some valuable commentary for the situation in our current era and to contribute in the project of deconstructing any divisive or supremacist narrative.

First of all, we can state that a profound shift in global culture has taken place since the initial publication of *Orientalism*. A worldwide shift towards a greater fixation on culture and the emergence of identity politics has taken place on all parts of the political spectrum. On the left or progressive side of politics we have seen this manifested in the so called “cultural turn” and on the right wing side we notice the pervasive influence of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of the Cultures* hypothesis. The combination of the rise of Islamism since the eighties with this rising obsession with culture and identity is one of the main vectors that can explain the pervasive influence of shallow Orientalist thinking. Furthermore I frame Islamism as a general part of the global right in politics. As has become clear in this dissertation I believe in the value of universalism and am firmly convinced it is a useful endeavor to apply the same frame of reference for all cultures in contrast to the Reverse Orientalist attitudes that seem to manifest often. Subsequently I argue it is important to contextualize the rise of Islamism as a form of right wing politics in the global trend of the return of the religious in politics. We have seen this phenomenon in different places going from the United States to the Middle East to India. Therefore I propose it is nonsensical to speak of an Islamic exceptionalism as is often hypothesized nowadays.

Considering Edward Said and *Orientalism*, I see the effects of his book as somewhat of a double edged sword. On the one hand, he deserves praise for opening the discussion about Orientalism to a wider public. The lasting influence of *Orientalism* and the discussions it raised are undeniable. On the other hand, as I have shown, the book is not without its

problematic aspects. I agree with al-Azm's verdict that Said might have gotten things backwards, by positing Orientalism as one of the main explanatory factors for the expansionary movement of Europe beyond its borders. I maintain it makes much more sense to see Orientalism as a consequence of colonialism and imperialism, and it is a more fruitful approach to start one's analysis of these phenomena in their real world origins of politics and economy. This brings me to argue that the main defects of *Orientalism* are located in its methodology. Said's training as a professor of literature and his readings of poststructuralist philosophy are very apparent in the book. Based on this, I argue that this approach has gained much traction in contemporary Middle Eastern Studies and postcolonial studies faculties et cetera. While these methodologies are not without their own merit, I do feel their current predominance is not the most useful way in providing solutions to conflicts and building pathways to a better future. Therefore I propose to incorporate the political approach of al-Azm or the philosophical genealogy of Bryan Turner as some examples of viable methodologies when discussing Orientalism. As I have noted before, Said was very perceiving in noticing the problematic, but he failed to come up with an adequate solution for the problems he described. Besides his methodology this has to do with his own positionality at the heart of the US academia. This enabled him to reach a greater audience but also prohibited him from drawing certain conclusions. I believe that the problem of Orientalism is permanently connected with imperialism, and in this case mostly United States foreign politics. Said was able to touch upon this subject to a certain extent, but to draw more radical conclusions would provoke consequences. It has probably become clear to readers of this dissertation that I have drawn much inspiration from Marxist analysis or Marxist writers. I do not propose this is the only valuable approach, let this be clear. Marxist theory has its own shortcomings such as a tendency to drift into dogmatism or almost mechanistic and teleological explanations of events. On the other hand, I do argue Marxist theory can hold great value. The most useful aspect is its insistence on analyzing political and economic factors behind events, an approach I do find is too much neglected these days.

Regarding the question of Reverse Orientalism, I argue this is a valuable framework for analysis and is very relevant for our time. We are living in an increasingly globalized world and in a culture that is increasingly focused on culture, identity, and most of all the idea of difference. As al-Azm originally demonstrated, there exist some uncanny parallels between

the ideas of Orientalism and of Islamism. I propose there has emerged a third parallel which is situated in the progressive side of the political spectrum. More and more we encounter ideas about the supposed inapplicability of so-called “Western” systems of thought on Islamic societies coming from postcolonial or progressive angles. If we apply the concept of Reverse Orientalism to these ideas it brings about some uneasy truths. Scholars associated with progressive politics have found themselves as strange bedfellows with Islamists in their insistence on the *difference* between cultures and their undermining of secularism. Of course some nuance is necessary. As I have explained these people are mostly influenced by French theory in the vein of Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, which was popularized by Said amongst others in the Anglophone world. They are mostly hesitant of applying a Western worldview on the rest of the world. While this idea might have some merit, I do believe the consequences have not been so positive. In my analysis the problem mainly stems from a conflation and lack of preciseness when talking about “the West”. I propose we should carefully specify what we are exactly talking about when criticizing “the West”. In this way we can oppose Western imperialist politics while separating this from political or philosophical ideas emanating from this hemisphere. I have applied the framework of Reverse Orientalism to several contemporary writers in this dissertation and came to the conclusion that it applies to a certain extent depending on each case. Yet again, we have to be nuanced. It is not my intent to dismiss these writers their entire work as being proponents of Reverse Orientalism. That would be too reductive. I merely propose it is a useful framework which can bring to light some often overlooked assumptions that are prevalent in our own era. As Georges Corm has said, he is sympathetic to the main thesis of Reverse Orientalism and agrees it manifests frequently nowadays, but he is rather pessimistic about to which extent this premise will be generally accepted due to the current general animosity against the United States and “the West” in the current intellectual climate.¹³²

Finally, I want to end this dissertation with a plea for the value of universalism. By this I mean the idea that the same values, ideas, rights, and institutions are valid for the entire world. The idea that there is one humanity and that there is more which connects us than there is that divides us despite our cultural differences. I believe all of humanity can subscribe to the values of peace, freedom, equality, and universal human rights. To achieve this common goal

¹³² Georges Corm, personal correspondence through email, April 4, 2019.

for humanity there is of course still a long way ahead of us. I propose the greatest obstacle for this is not a supposed difference of cultures or civilizations, but the fact that political power and economic resources are very unevenly distributed across the world. Our main problems are political, not cultural. On the other hand it is true that the global West has been responsible for a lot of these problems facing our current era. Subsequently it is also correct that during the colonial era, the Western nations tried to impose their own values and beliefs on the societies they considered as inferior. If there is one thing Said learned us, it is that our way of looking at things is often a lot less neutral than we like to think. I do believe we should take the criticisms regarding the principles of the Enlightenment values or the hegemonic nature of Western discourse into account. But to come to the conclusion there is no point in building a universal project for humanity or that the entire Western heritage is tainted is an entire different matter. It is important to remember that Said himself remained a convinced humanist and believed in the project of a united humanity. Therefore I propose to take these criticisms into account in order to strengthen a universal discourse. First off all I suggest we pay close attention to the philosophical project of Georges Corm. In his work he focusses on deconstructing the myth of a deep separation between the East and the West. He does this by disentangling the mythical connection between concepts such as secularism and its supposedly Western origin. By demonstrating that the process of secularism also took place in Islamic societies and that religion still exerts much influence in the West he argues for the universal applicability of secularism. In this way we can hope to free concepts from their supposed "Western" origin and argue for their universal value. In addition to this, I argue that the Marxist approach of analysis still holds value. Not as the only correct paradigm but as a useful prism through which we can analyze conflicts. This is mostly because its focus on material factors such as politics and economy, instead of the current fixation on culture and identity. Furthermore, authors such as al-Azm, Ahmad, Chibber, who are all influenced by Marxism to some extent are all defenders of the project of universalism. I propose we can learn some valuable lesson from their work in our era of particularism. The example of the Haitian Revolution of Toussaint L'Ouverture serves as a good example on which we can base future political projects. We can achieve liberation not by rejection the universalist ideas of the Enlightenment project, but by extending these ideas to their fullest extent. Finally, a word needs to be said about all these cultural differences. I have argued it is counterproductive to overemphasize these differences, but we shouldn't ignore them

altogether on the other hand. Regarding this problematic, I found inspiration in Alain Badiou's study on the apostle Paul, written in 1997. Badiou, who is a committed atheist, is fascinated by the figure of Paul, in whom he sees the founder of universalism. As is well known, Paul is famous for stating "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile" (Romans 10:12). Badiou strips this of its specific religious message but sees it as the foundation of a project of radical liberating politics which neutralizes the metaphysics of difference. Truth and freedom are attainable for all people on earth and are not particular to one culture or the other.

"C'est la raison pour laquelle Paul, apôtre des nations, non seulement s'interdit de stigmatiser les différences et les coutumes, mais entend s'y plier de telle sorte qu'à travers elles, en elles, passe le processus de leur déposition subjective. C'est bien la recherche de nouvelles différences, de nouvelles particularités où exposer l'universel, qui porte Paul au-delà du site événementiel proprement dit (le site du juif), et l'amène à déplacer l'expérience, historiquement, géographiquement, ontologiquement. De là une tonalité militante très reconnaissable, qui combine l'appropriation des particularités et l'invariabilité des principes, l'existence empirique des différences et leur inexistence essentielle, non par une synthèse amorphe, mais selon une succession de problèmes à résoudre.

Mais pour les en saisir, encore faut-il que l'universalité ne se présente pas elle-même sous les traits d'une particularité. On ne peut transcender les différences que si la bonté à l'égard des coutumes et des opinions se présente comme une indifférence tolérante aux différences, laquelle n'a pour épreuve matérielle que de pouvoir, et de savoir, comme le raconte Paul, les pratiquer soi-même. De là que Paul est très méfiant à l'égard de toute règle, de tout rite, qui affecterait le militantisme universaliste, en le désignant comme porteur, à son propre tour, de différences et de particularités."¹³³

"This is why Paul, apostle of the nations, not only prohibits stigmatizing differences and customs, but intends to abide by them in such a way that through them, and in them, the process of their subjective deposition happens. Paul even searches for new

¹³³ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 106.

differences, new particularities, to expose the universal. It carries him outside the proper event site (that of the Jew), and brings him to move the experience historically, geographically, and ontologically. Hence a very recognizable militant tone, which combines the appropriation of particularities and the invariability of principles, the empirical existence of differences and their essential inexistence, not by an amorphous synthesis, but by a succession of problems to be solved.

To make this possible, it is necessary that universality does not present itself as a particularity. We cannot transcend differences except if the benevolence regarding customs and opinions presents itself as a tolerant indifference towards differences, for which the only material proof of its validity, as Paul says, is to be able to know and practice these themselves. Hence Paul is very suspicious of any rule, of any rite, which would affect the universalist militancy by making it the bearer of its own differences and particularities.”

The ideas in this passage hold a lot of potential. They offer a suitable way of dealing with cultural difference in our own time as they did in the time of Paul himself. I propose the notion of a *indifferent tolerance towards difference* is indeed a positive approach for dealing with cultural identity. On the one hand it respects one's culture and identity and leaves people free to practice their own beliefs. On the other hand it relativizes these differences, thereby cancelling out the essentializing attitude towards culture that is all too common these days. It is exactly through our differences we can participate in the universality of humanity. This reminds us again of the message of May Ziade concerning the interaction of cultures in human civilization. The final aspect of this citation serves a good measure to make this approach inclusive and not exclusive. Only if we can, hypothetically speaking, participate in a custom or imagine believing something, we can make sure this practice does not become divisive. Any custom or idea particular to a culture can be incorporated in the multi-faceted face of human civilization if it passes the test of inclusiveness and manifests a basic respect for human rights. Badiou's own approach serves as a great example. A Marxist and atheist philosopher who finds inspiration in the message of a figure whose belief system he does not share and is separated two thousand years in time from him. In the same way I propose we can make use of the entire stock of human knowledge and experience through the process of universalizing particularities in order to build a common and better future for mankind.

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