The Politics of Conceptualizing Islam and the West

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What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East, Bernard Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 208 pp., $23 cloth, $12.95 paper.

Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 160 pp., $21.95 cloth, $14 paper.

Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left, Susan Buck-Morss (New York: Verso, 2003), 160 pp., $22 cloth.

In the last three years, a large number of books have been published, all trying to answer the now-classic post–September 11 question: Why do they, "the Muslims," dislike or hate "us"?—with the "us" variously defined as the United States, the West, or the modern world. Scholarly and nonscholarly curiosity on this topic is not limited to the history of al-Qaeda and a small network of fundamentalist terrorists but also tries to explain why untold numbers of Muslim intellectuals have critical, and even hostile, opinions of the United States and Western civilization. Are critiques of the "West" peculiar to the Muslim world? Are they a reflection of a simple discontent with the international order or a conservative rejection of Western-originated, universal modernity? How should Western intellectuals and leaders respond to the Muslim critiques of modernity, the international order, and Western civilization?

Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East,* though completed before the events of September 11, 2001, examines "the longer sequence and larger pattern of events, ideas, and attitudes that preceded and in some measure produced them."[1] Appearing at a fortuitous moment, the book not only became a bestseller but soon also a favorite of Washington policy circles. Lewis's approach takes the exceptionalist view that the content of the "Muslim revolt against the West" is shaped by the centuries-long conflict between Islamic and Christian civilizations. According to Lewis, as Christian civilization came to produce and embody modernity in the last three hundred years, Muslim civilization first rejected modernity due to its Christian nature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and then tried to emulate this Christian modernity after realizing that this was the only method for survival against the expansion of Western modernity. Lewis also implies that Mus-

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[1] Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 1.

lims again turned against the West and modernity in recent decades due to their perennial failures in the emulation of the Christian West. Lewis's book thus gives scholarly weight to the argument that the cause of Muslim discontent with the international order and the Western world stems from Muslims' inability to harmonize Islam and modernity.

Lewis conceives of the history of Islam and Christendom—both of which he imagines to be fairly unitary entities—as one of conflict, beginning with Muslim rule in Spain, then passing through the Crusades, the Ottoman conquests of Europe, European imperialism, decolonization, and, finally, recent anti-American ideologies. In his version of a zero-sum game, either the Muslims would be victorious and hegemonic or the Christians. Thus, Lewis asserts that since Christians were the winners in the last three hundred years, Muslims could not come to terms with their defeat and so turned against the West, as well as the modernity and international order identified with it. The book concludes that Muslims, instead of blaming themselves for "what went wrong" in their societies, as Lewis would do, blamed the West and America.

Lewis's narrative of the history of the relationship between the Muslim world and Europe differs substantially from that of the majority of Middle East scholars. Though the religious identities of Islam and Christianity were historically influential, we now know that there never was a solid and unified front dividing Islam from Christianity, as Muslim and Christian states often fought with their coreligionists, sometimes relying on people from other religions as their allies. Moreover, there was a qualitative rupture in the relationship between the Muslim world and Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century owing to globalization and the secularization of the international order. As an expert of late Ottoman history, Lewis would know very well how Ottoman leaders, as well as the leaders of other Muslim societies, aimed to join the Eurocentric international society and accepted the universal claims of modern civilization in Europe despite the Christian identity of European societies. Moreover, even in the case of the recent mobilization of Islam for politics, which reinforces criticism of Westernization, its underlying cause was neither the failure of modernity to take hold nor a clash of civilizations. For instance, historians of modern Iran have shown that the roots of modern Iranian anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism cannot simply be reduced to a conservative Muslim reaction to the liberal West. In fact, it was Iranian leftists and liberals, influenced by postwar-era "anti-imperialist" and "anti-capitalist" European thought, who contributed greatly to the anti-Western mood in the country and attempted to create an authentic alternative modernity against the failures of Pahlavi-era modernization policies.[2]

Although Lewis is considered the intellectual mentor of the current U.S. policy toward the Middle East outside of the State Department, closely connected to figures like Richard Perle, Dick Cheney, and Karl Rove,[3] *What Went Wrong?* does not offer any concrete analysis of the recent political events beyond an assertion that in an ambiguously defined Islamic "world"

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[2] See Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Ali Gheissari, *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1998); and Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[3] Peter Waldman, "A Historian's Take on Islam Steers U.S. in Terrorism Fight," *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2004, p. A1.

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(though the book relies mostly on Ottoman history) things "went wrong," in contrast to the "West," where things went right. We might find the appeal of Lewis's writings not in specific arguments, however, but in the overall style and tone of this work, which lends itself to the current penchant for "imperial hubris." Lewis's image of a decaying Islamic civilization perhaps implies that Western public opinion need not take seriously any criticism of its policies and ideas by Muslims. Moreover, it becomes the West's burden to impose the right medicine, "capitalism, modernity and democracy," to this moribund civilization, perhaps even by military force if Muslims resist. Here, the powerful knowledge of the Orientalist expert helps the projects of giving both reasons for and legitimacy to military interventions.

These arguments may seem familiar to those who have studied the history of intellectual defenders of British, French, and Japanese colonialism. Some of the most influential advocates of the colonial civilizing mission were eminent British and French scholars of the Orient or Japanese scholars of Chinese civilization, most of whom deeply admired the classic civilizational heritage of the societies they studied. Yet what distinguishes Lewis's writings in relation to the vision of an American empire from European Orientalism of a century ago and Japanese Orientalism in China during the interwar period is the marginality of Lewis's writings since the early 1980s within contemporary American academic research on the Muslim world. Lewis does not have the scholarly authority and academic respectability that William Jones, Ernest Renan, or Naito Konan had during the imperial era.

For example, when Ernest Renan made his "Islam and Science" speech in 1883,

asserting that the Muslim faith and the Arab-Semitic mind are an obstacle to modern scientific progress, he represented the Eurocentric orthodoxy of the Orientalist scholars of the time. In contrast, today the majority of Middle East scholars avoid "a clash of civilizations" approach to explain recent anti-Americanism in the Muslim world, and they reject the concomitant policy suggestion of imperial military interventions.[4] In that sense, *What Went Wrong?*, though it represents the ideas of some policy circles in the United States, is almost antithetical to the scholarly analysis of the modern Muslim world by Islamic studies experts in North America and elsewhere in the world. This anomaly also reveals a unique ideological characteristic of the current attempts to create an American empire. In the absence of support from mainstream scholars of Middle Eastern societies, those seeking to legitimate American imperial ambitions over the Muslim societies during the last few years have often had to rely on a network of conservative policy think tanks, TV commentators, and a few handpicked area studies scholars, among whom one has to count Bernard Lewis.

The very fact that some of the same critiques of and debates on the "West" that we see among Muslims existed, in similar forms, among intellectuals in non-Muslim societies such as Russia and Japan inspired the second approach to the topic. In *Occi-*

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[4] Lewis's book was criticized by several North American scholars of the Islamic world for the inaccuracies in its interpretative framework. See Juan Cole, "Review of Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*," Global Dialogue, January 27, 2003; available at www.juancole.com/essays/revlew. htm. See also Adam Sabra, "What Is Wrong with What Went Wrong?" *Middle East Report Online* (August 2003); available at www.merip.org/mero/interventions/sabra_interv.html.

dentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit offer a comparative analysis of anti-Westernism that overcomes the Orientalist fantasy of an essential Muslim hatred of the West. They present the thesis that the sources for non-Western critiques of the West were fertilized by the West itself—in the form of Counter-Enlightenment and Romantic thought. Arguing against the notion that Muslim extremists have exclusive rights to anti-modern and anti-Western ideas, Buruma and Margalit show affinities and direct borrowings among European Romantics, Hindu Revivalists, Russian Slavophiles, or pre–World War II–era Japanese philosophers. Making clear reference to Edward Said's analysis of a long-standing Western "Orientalism" that has colored the production of knowledge about the Near East, their central idea is that there exist equally essentialist visions of the West, which they gather under the rubric of "Occidentalism."

What comprises Occidentalist thinking reads much like the standard litany of Counter-Enlightenment thought in Europe—criticism of the human costs and excesses of science, technology, rationality, individualism, city life, capitalism, globalization, women's liberation, mass culture, and so on. As pillars of the Occidentalist construction of an enemy West, Buruma and Margalit cite familiar dichotomies, such as profound native spirituality versus shallow and mechanistic Western rationalism; authentic moral tradition versus technological and inhuman modernity; cultural uniqueness versus the homogenizing forces of industrial capitalism; heroic, idealized common folk versus cowardly and calculating bourgeoisie; and, finally, religious purity versus idolatrous materialism. They also establish a link between Occidentalist ideas and terrorism, as the latter represents nihilistic violence against Westerners by those who believe in the intrinsic value of selfless and heroic sacrifice. Buruma and Margalit discuss several peculiar characteristics of recent Occidentalist Islamism that may differ from the Occidentalist ideas of Japanese Asianists, Russian Slavophiles, or German radicals of the interwar era. Yet they insist on the cross-contamination and global spread of a specific Occidentalist discourse whose modern forms have less to do with the Indian, Japanese, Christian, or Islamic traditions than they do with Counter-Enlightenment and Romantic ideas.

The theoretical and historical insights provided in Occidentalism not only liberate the study of anti-Westernism in the Muslim world from an exceptionalist framework of an eternal conflict between Islam and Christianity, they also suggest different policy responses. While Bernard Lewis was a champion of U.S. military intervention in Iraq, Buruma and Margalit argue for a more cautious and principled struggle against Occidentalist violence, urging their readers to uphold religious, political, and intellectual freedom—and not to fight fire with fire.

Should we conclude, then, that Buruma and Margalit believe any criticism of the West from Islamic, Indian, or Chinese traditional perspectives always stems from Occidentalist bias, and is thus unfounded? Perhaps not. There is one place in which they differentiate Occidentalist ideas from progressive critiques of the West. Using the example of Muhammad Iqbal (1873–1938), a modernist Muslim philosopher and the leading intellectual advocate of a Muslim state in the Indian subcontinent, they suggest that an alternative Islamic modernity that does not dehumanize the West may be

possible. Beyond that, however, Buruma and Margalit do not give criteria for distinguishing between Occidentalism and "healthy" critiques of Western hegemony or Western modernity. Clarifying this distinction is important. There is an entire body of literature that grew up in the era of anti-colonial struggle and decolonization—when non-European intellectuals devised critical writings on Western civilization, modernity, and imperialism—that are difficult to categorize as Occidentalist yet that contributed to current Occidentalist thought.

How can we interpret the anti-Western (or anti-white) language of such humanist thinkers and nationalists as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose, Okakura Tenshin, Namik Kemal, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, W.E.B. DuBois, Ali Shariati, Frantz Fanon, and many others?[5] Most of these intellectuals formulated their commitment to the equality and dignity of humanity in the reverse-Orientalist language of a materialist West versus a moral East. For example, Japan's Pan-Asianist radicals often quoted Okakura Tenshin's and Rabindranath Tagore's criticism of Western materialism in their denunciation of the West. It was a similar anti-white, "colored" internationalism that prompted W.E.B. DuBois to visit Japan and Manchuria during the late 1930s, praising "Japanese challenge" to the "white hegemony in the world."

Scholars of international history and decolonization have already clarified several key aspects of the anti-Western humanist critiques and the way anti-Western ideas were utilized in the struggle for liberation from Western hegemony. Prasenjit Duara's research on alternative universalism in China and Japan during the decolonization process, Michael Adas's examination of the "Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mis-

sion Ideology" before and after World War I, Mark Bradley's exploration of Vietnamese perceptions of America, and Erez Manela's research on the non-Western world's excitement and later disillusionment with the Wilsonian moment demonstrate that anti-Westernism (and its anti-American versions) contains within it an affirmation of universal norms and values.[6] Criticism of the excesses of Western civilization in the name of an alternative Eastern or Islamic civilization often included a vision of creating a more peaceful global humanity.

In the century from the 1860s to the 1960s, a "revolt against the West" seemed to be the only way for non-Western nationalists and intellectuals to participate fully in the West's own promises. Anti-Western discourses of Third World nationalism did not reject universal modernity, nor did they necessarily dehumanize Westerners. Yet their demands for equality and autonomy in the international order became a major source of anti-Western, "Occidentalist" ideas precisely because the later nineteenth-century, Eurocentric world order was justified by claims of

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[5] Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China, and India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2000); and Marc Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan & China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
[6] Prasenjit Duara, "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 99–130; Michael Adas, "Contested Hegemony: The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology," in Prasenjit Duara, ed., *Decolonization* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 78–100; Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Erez Manela, "The Wilsonian Moment and the Rise of Anticolonial Nationalism: The Case of Egypt," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 12, no. 4 (2000), pp. 99–122.

an inherent superiority of Western civilization and its corresponding mission to make its own modernity universal. As the image of the West became closely connected both with the notion of modernity and the international order, non-Western nationalists' intellectual strategies included a redefinition of Europe's Orientalist dichotomy by attributing positive qualities to Eastern, Islamic, and Asian countries and ways of life and negative qualities to Western and European ones. Even today, the majority of Muslim liberals and humanists condemn both the United States and the impotency of the existing international system for allowing the continuing occupation and settlement of Palestinian lands decades after the end of the era of settler colonialism and the institutionalization of universal human rights. Hence, there are reasons to take seriously criticism of the West and the United States by examining its content to identify the shared humanistic and universal values that can facilitate communication about both the difficulties of global modernity and the legitimacy crisis of the world order.

Susan Buck-Morss tries to explore the possibilities for such a dialogue in her book on Muslim anti-Westernism, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*. Buck-Morss, who teaches political philosophy and social theory at Cornell University, suggests the appropriation of certain aspects of the Islamist critiques of modernity, the international order, and Western values for use in an "international public sphere" and by a "global left." In this collection of essays, which she wrote after an intensive period of reading about Islamist thought after September 11, Buck-Morss argues that a global public needs to read the literature on the relationship of Islam to modernity in order to appreciate different perspectives on such issues as economic equality, international justice, political participation, and women's liberation. Though she has no training in area studies or Islamic and Middle Eastern studies, Buck-Morss exerted great effort to familiarize herself with some of the best research conclusions and intellectual commentaries on Islamist thought, allowing her to grasp the complexity, scope, and diversity of Islamist thought—particularly in comparison to Buruma and Margalit. More importantly, Buck-Morss rightly identifies another major form of cross-contamination of ideas between the Muslim and European intellectual worlds, referring to European thinkers such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and Herbert Marcuse, all of whom were radical Western social critics who could not easily be categorized in the camp of the Romantic Counter-Enlightenment movement.

In contrast to Buruma and Margalit's depiction of radical Islamists such as Sayyid Qutb, Abul Ala Mawdudi, and other Muslim thinkers as Occidentalists to be condemned, Buck-Morss tries to recover something positive from their postcolonial criticism of the West. In the final analysis, Susan Buck-Morss expresses her disagreement with the "Occidentalist" framework of Muslim thought that perpetuates the idea of a sharp cultural divide between the West and Islam, and she criticizes Muslim intellectuals' search for a solution to global problems only within the tradition of the Islamic civilization. However, Buck-Morss's discussion of Islamist thought and its anti-Westernism does not put al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden at the center of her analysis. She thus offers a more compelling perspective—with respect to the other two books reviewed here—from which to discuss broader intel-

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lectual trends in the Muslim world, precisely because she does not limit their content and results to the radicalism and violence of fundamentalist organizations. Buck-Morss's critical engagement and her respect for Muslim critiques allows her to invite several contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Bobby S. Sayyid and Ahmed Davutoglu,[7] to join a cosmopolitan global left in formulating their ideas rather than searching for an alternative solely within the legacy of Islamic civilization.

Buck-Morss's approach to the radical ideas of such Muslim intellectuals as Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) or the revolutionary thinker of the Iranian Revolution Ali Shariati (1933–1977) also suggests political implications and prescriptions different from the other authors introduced in this essay. While Buruma and Margalit find no value in Sayyid Qutb's highly critical observations on the United States, which they take as a stereotypical example of Occidentalism, Buck-Morss urges her readers not to "patronize" Muslims like Sayyid Qutb or Ali Shariati—but to approach their writings as one would read the holistic critiques of Theodor Adorno or Jean-Paul Sartre. In the end, Buck-Morss disagrees with some of Qutb's analysis and suggestions with regard to the superiority of an Islamic alternative to the Western model. Yet she argues that there is still something to learn from Qutb, and that the global left should try to invite Muslim thinkers to engage in dialogue with their counterparts in the West and elsewhere.

What is missing in each of these approaches to anti-Western critiques in the Muslim world, however, is a portrait of what it means to be "pro-Western"—a set of ideas as complex and often contradictory as the set of anti-Western ideas. In fact, liberal and seemingly "pro-Western" intellectuals in the

Muslim world also criticize the West. In secular Turkey, for example, leftist and liberal intellectuals, despite their commitment to a project of universal modernity, are no less critical of the West compared to Islamists.[8] Though Kemalists symbolized a secular commitment to Western-inspired reforms in Turkey, they continued to perceive Western powers as sinister, untrustworthy, and imperialistic. Even today, according to recent opinion polls, secular Kemalists and Islamists in Turkey share similarly negative opinions of the United States. Strikingly, Islamists in Turkey have become some of the most enthusiastic advocates for Turkey's entry into the European Union, indicating that their previous criticism of Europe was not a wholesale rejection of the normative principles of European modernity.[9]

Given the lack of dialogue between Western and Muslim intellectual communities, there has been little opportunity for constructive and positive effects to arise from Muslim criticism of Western modernity and civilization. In the absence of communication between the criticizers and the targets of the criticism, critique merely affirms the exclusionary loyalty to culture, nation, or immediate community. Part of the problem

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[7] Bobby S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London: Zed Books, 1997); and Ahmet Davutoglu, "Political and Institutional Dimensions of Secularization: A Comparative Analysis," in John Esposito and Azzam Tamimi, eds., *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 170–208.

[8] Ahmed Riza, a secular intellectual and a leading follower of Auguste Comte's positivist ideas, wrote one of the most comprehensive critiques of "the West" in 1922. See Ahmed Riza, *The Moral Bankruptcy of Western Policy Towards the East* (Ankara, Turkey: Ministry of Culture and Tourism Publications, 1988).

[9] Pollmark Polling Agency (Ankara), "Report on Turkish Public Opinion with Regard to Nato and the West" (July 2004).

can be chalked up to the inequity that characterizes the global public sphere and networks of communication, which do not allow Muslim objections against Western violations of universal standards to reach a Western audience. In the absence of such international communication, all the progressive and humanist content in the Muslim critique of the West, rather than creating a dialogue that could represent a positive force of change could instead rebound into a justification of rejectionist and conservative trends. The same is true for critiques of the Muslim world by European and American intellectuals as well. There is a need for the global public sphere to overcome these unequal structures of communication and to turn mutual critiques into constructive dialogue on the legitimacy crisis of international order and the shared problems of global modernity. Despite the image of Muslim intellectuals as Occidentalist and anti-Western, in reality the Muslim part of the global public sphere is more prepared for and open to a dialogue, as Muslims know more about Western intellectual traditions than vice versa.

A recent decision by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to revoke the visa given to a prominent European Muslim intellectual, Tariq Ramadan, in order to teach at the University of Notre Dame demonstrates the political stakes of criticism of America.[10] Advocates of banning Tariq Ramadan's entry into the United States referred to the fact that he criticizes U.S. foreign policy and Israel in his speeches.[11] In defense of allowing it, the Middle East Studies Association and the American Academy of Religion evinced their "grave concern," noting, "Denying qualified scholars entry into the United States because of their political beliefs strikes at the core of academic freedom."[12] The debates around Tariq Ramadan's visa would seem to be a lamentable illustration of an ongoing battle in the United States between those who would like to hear Muslim's views on the West and other global questions versus those who prefer to deny them the chance to be heard.

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[10] Tariq Ramadan, "What Does America Have to Fear from Me? Virtue, Vice and My Visa," *International Herald Tribune,* September 1, 2004, p. 6.

[11] Daniel Pipes wrote in support of the decision in "Why Revoke Tariq Ramadan's U.S. Visa?" *New York Sun*, August 27, 2004, p. 9. Ramadan responded in "Scholar under Siege Defends his Record: Tariq Ramadan Responds Point by Point to the 'Unfounded Allegations' of a Critic," *Chicago Tribune,* August 31, 2004, p. C17.

[12] "Letter Regarding Dr. Tariq Ramadan," sponsored by the Middle East Studies Association of North America's Committee on Academic Freedom and the Board of Directors for the American Academy of Religion (August 30, 2004), available at www.aarweb.org/about/announce/2004/ramadan01.asp.

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