

AVOIDING ESSENTIALISM IN WRITING THE EURASIAN PAST

LECTURE PRESENTED AT THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH
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When in 1554 Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq travelled to Istanbul in his capacity as ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire to the Sublime Porte, he displayed his disappointment on many occasions. One such occasion was when he made the acquaintance of a certain mystic dervish who narrated stories for Busbecq about the eternal Khidr and his immortality. In one such story, the dervish made reference to Alexander the Great as a companion and friend of Khidr. Such popular narratives by a wandering dervish soon led Busbecq to draw the following conclusion:

The Turks have no idea of chronology and dates and make wonderful mixture and confusion of all epoch of history; if it occurs to them to do so, they will not scruple to declare that Job was master of the ceremonies to King Solomon, and Alexander the Great his commander-in-chief, and they are guilty of even greater absurdities.¹

Such accounts of Busbecq's acquaintance with a Turkish dervish, whose ignorance of chronology resulted in the traveller's cynicism, gradually evolved into the European portrait of Ottoman society: a society plagued with "silence and lack of rational curiosity", "decline", and "disintegration". However, it is interesting to note that almost one-and-a-half centuries prior to Busbecq's visit to the Sublime Porte, Ottoman historiography was an established trend initiated by such men of letters as Ahmadi. In the *Iskandernameh*, in which in addition to narrating the Islamic period Ahmadi also narrates the pre-Islamic history of the world, he includes a lucid reference to the expedition of Alexander of Macedonia.²

Discovering the Orient was not confined to learning about the aptitude of some of its individuals. Orientalist travellers often endeavoured to present a portrait of collective character and national identity based on a portrait of the individuals or groups with whom they came into contact. The authority of their narratives was based on a process of recasting themselves against the "Others". Such cultural, temperamental, and often racial characteristics of different national entities soon turned into degenerated, self-perpetuating clichés, legitimizing the colonial practices.³ While Busbecq labelled the Ottoman territory as a region "notorious for the barbarity and savagery of [its] inhabitants",⁴ in his *Voyages d'une Faux Derviche dans L'Asie Centrale* Arminius Vambery, the famous nineteenth-century British agent and Hungarian Orientalist, presents a dark portraiture of the Orientals in the following words:

The Oriental is born and dies in a mask; candor will never exist in the East.⁵

Although British politicians praised Vambery for profoundly influencing the ideas of Englishmen and adding significantly to European understanding of Central Asia, it is interesting to recall that it was Vambery himself who betrayed his hosts and deceived all of them from Tehran to Bukhara by presenting himself as an Ottoman dervish on a pilgrimage of holy shrines.

¹ *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, translated by E.S. Forster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 55.

² Iskender-Name Ahmadi (ed.), *Ismail Ünver* (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayinlari, 1983). For a detailed study of early Ottoman historiography see Halil Inalcik, "The Rise of Ottoman Historiography", and V.L. Ménage, "The Beginning of Ottoman Historiography", in Bernard Lewis and P.M. Holt (eds), *Historians of the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 152-167, 168-179.

³ For a study of national character see Ali Banuazizi, "Iranian 'National Character': A Critique of Some Western Perspectives", in L. Carl Brown and Norman Itzkowitz (eds), *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1977), 210-239.

⁴ *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq*, 76.

⁵ Arminius Vambery, *Travels in Central Asia, being the account of a journey from Teheran across the Turkoman Desert on the Eastern shore of the Caspian to Khiva, Bokhara, and Samarcand* (London: John Murray, 1864), 288.

Thus during the eighteenth century, Orientalism as a new European academic inquiry gradually established itself as a result of the initiatives of early travellers such as Busbecq and Vambéry, who were obsessed by the ideology of “circumstantial inferiority” in their personal appraisals and who provided Europe with the images of the “Others” it needed early on to recast European self-images, and which Europe needed to enter the new age of modernism. This age saw rational and scientific Europe being juxtaposed with the irrational and intuitive Orient.

In the eighteenth century, the reconstructed image of the East was gradually altered from a less dominant, reciprocal perception to an authoritarian, patronizing and denigrating discernment. Writing the “national history” of Turks, Arabs, Persians and Indians became a new profession for a group of European adventurous travellers and diplomats who, having spent some years studying “Oriental languages” but without having any historical training, provided the foundations for the Orientalists’ claim to creativity and authority usually by assembling homeless texts.

What was significant in these assembled histories was an essentialist approach in writing about the East. For instance, Sir John Malcolm, the author of an influential nineteenth-century Orientalist history of Persia and a man fascinated by ancient world history, observed when travelling through Persia:

Though no country has undergone, during the last twenty centuries, more revolutions than the Kingdom of Persia, there is, perhaps, none that less altered in its condition. The power of the sovereigns, and of the satraps of ancient times; the gorgeous magnificence of the court; the habits of the people; their division into citizens, martial tribes, and savage mountaineers; the internal administration; and the mode of warfare; have continued essentially the same: and the Persians, as far as we have means of judging, are at the present period, not a very different people from what they were in the time of Darius, and the Nousheervan.⁶

Like Hegel, Malcolm viewed the history of Persia as “unhistorical history”, a mode of life unaltered by the passage of time. However, continuity and glorification of the past is not always the common ground that brings together Orientalists and native narratives.

In Central-Asian historiography the main criteria anchoring the narratives of Orientalists, nationalists, Islamicists, or Stalinists are their exclusive approaches to history from an elitist perspective. By assigning the agency in history to an elite that in its multiplicity could be clerics, secular intelligentsia, colonialist and social or political institutions, they not only deny the agency of subaltern and its autonomous consciousness but also by adopting an essentialist approach they dehistoricize the process of social and cultural changes.

Karl Popper was the first to define essentialism by conceptualizing it as anti-nominalistic theory.⁷ Essentialism in the historiography of Eurasia is, in my usage, an indication of false universalism: the characteristics of the dominant subset of a group or a society being attributed to all members of the group or other societies either by over-generalizations or by unstated references. Here I argue that the three fundamental expressions of essentialism, which separately or concurrently present themselves in historiography, are over-generalization, Eurocentrism and reductionism.

Essentialism One

To elaborate this argument, let me first refer to a certain pattern in Middle- Eastern and Central-Asian studies where such over-generalization is more vivid. The analytical models variously described as feudalism, the Asiatic mode of production or oriental despotism endeavour to present an inclusive picture of the long-term social and political development of Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian societies. However, as we know, the theoretical model of feudalism was based on European medieval society, a product of the demise of the Roman Empire. Amongst the main characteristics of Central-European feudalism is the existence of contractual rights and obligations between various classes and also between the state and the people. However, because of differences in environmental conditions, the land-owning system in the Middle East was unlike the European feudal system. The *aridisolatic* character of the greater part of the Middle East and Central Asia never provided the background of a performance of contractual rights between various classes, or between the individual and the state. The arbitrary nature of power did not tolerate a functioning contractual right.⁸

⁶ John Malcolm, *The History of Persia from the Most Early Period to the Present Time* (London: John Murray, 1815), vol. 2, 621.

⁷ Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 27.

⁸ For a detailed study of the failure of these models, see Homa Katouzian, “The Aridisolatic Society: A Model of Long-Term Social and Economic Development in Iran”, *International Journal of Middle East*

Karl Wittfogel's model of oriental despotism is no less essentialist than the acceptance of feudalism. This model is based on the assumption of the existence of hydraulic societies, in a vast region from Asia to North Africa and even as far as the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies of Latin America. According to this model, in all these regions the control, provision, or allocation of water was realized by the state and the existence of an extensive bureaucracy, eventually paving the way for the emergence of a political system Wittfogel referred to as "Oriental Despotism".

The hydraulic centres of Peru, Egypt, and Lower Mesopotamia all gave birth to compact system of hydraulic agriculture, whereas many of the territorial states of India and China and, for that matter, Mexico relied on loose or marginal types of Oriental agriculture... In many hydraulic civilizations the agromanagerial apparatus state, while keeping the bulk of the cultivable land from becoming private property, did not so seriously restrict the growth of nongovernmental property-based professional handcraft and commerce.⁹

Interestingly enough, what made Wittfogel pursue oriental despotism was his relentless criticism of nineteenth-century European theories of social development. Nevertheless, his essentialist methodology of generalizing the notion of hydraulic societies and hydraulic economy and applying it from China to Latin America amounts to nothing less than falling into the same pit into which his foes had fallen earlier.

Essentialism Two

The study of the mode of production is not the only field where essentialism dominates the theoretical approach. Another example of the essentialist approach is the reference to our common perception of nation-state building in the region. The Central-Asian twentieth-century historiography on nation-state and nationalism has been shaped, to a large extent, by a Eurocentric ethno-linguistic discourse, where "ethnicity and language become the central, increasingly the decisive or even the only criteria of potential nationhood"¹⁰, or as Karl Renner asserts:

Once a certain degree of European development has been reached, the linguistic and cultural communities of people, having silently matured throughout the centuries, emerge from the world of passive existence as people (*Passiver Volkheit*). They become conscious of themselves as a force with historical destiny. They demand control over the state, as the highest available instrument of power, and strive for their political self-determination. The birthday of the political idea of the nation and the birth-year of this new consciousness is 1789, the year of the French Revolution.¹¹

What has been largely neglected, however, is that the construction of a bounded territorial entity, or what is generally referred to as nation-state building, has often entailed components other than ethnic or linguistic attachments. Collective imagination, political allegiance, reconstructing and reinterpreting history, the invention of necessary historical traditions to justify and give coherence to the emerging modern state – all these often became major factors in bringing groups of people together and in strengthening or even forming their common sense of identity and political solidarity. In some cases the mere application of ancient, historically resonant names and traditions is enough to evoke a consensus of political legitimacy. Consequently, the social connotations of certain key socio-political phrases and geographic terms became an important element in reshaping the geographic boundaries of emerging sovereign states.

Such universalism chiefly manifested itself as Eurocentrism and comes into focus when we examine the studies of modernity and the process of modernization in the Middle East and Central Asia. The general perception of modernity as Max Weber perceived it was a product of occidental rationality, with a general mandate regarding its applicability all over the world irrespective of geography, time, environment, social order or social practice. Accordingly, the modern history of the Middle East begins in 1798, when the French Revolution, in the person of General Napoleon Bonaparte and his expedition, arrived in Egypt. By concurrence, in the Caucasus and Central Asia the beginning of modernity dates back to the Tsarist Russian arrival in the region in the early and mid nineteenth century. The immediate consequence of such

Studies, vol. 15 (1983), 259-281, and Homa Katouzian, "Arbitrary Rule: a Comparative Theory of State, Politics and Society in Iran", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1997), 49-73.

⁹ Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 257-258.

¹⁰ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 102.

¹¹ Karl Renner, *Staat und Nation* (Vienna, 1899), 89, quoted by Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 101.

a periodization is the acceptance of Europe as a “silent referent” in non-Western historical knowledge. Borrowing Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words:

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers shaping the nature of social science have produced theories embracing the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind – i.e. those living in non-Western cultures. This in itself is not paradoxical, for the more self-conscious of European philosophers have always sought theoretically to justify this stance. The everyday paradox of third-world social science is that *we* find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of “us”, eminently useful in understanding our societies.¹²

Therefore, while Third-World historians feel a need to refer to works on European history, historians of Europe do not need to reciprocate. Consequently, “a third world historian is condemned to knowing ‘Europe’ as the original home of the ‘modern’, whereas the ‘European’ historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the pasts of the majority of humankind.”¹³

By mentally accommodating the European-made modernity, the new tasks of the historiography became to portray the pre-modern history of the Middle East and Central Asia as a dark period of decline and ignorance. This new perception of the past not only corresponded with the colonial claim of civilizing and modernizing the East, it was also in harmony with the native nationalist historians who joined the new campaign of promoting authoritarian modernization. According to such historiography, prior to Russian expansion into Central Asia, the Khanates of Central Asia were in total disarray. The inter-ethnic conflicts and political rivalries in the region were so deeply rooted that people welcomed the Russian advancement in the region. Ottoman Turkey was the “sick man of Europe” whose sultan Abdul Hamid reigned for over thirty years (1876-1909) “as a terrified animal, fighting back blindly and forcefully against forces that he could not understand”. Then “he was thrown into a panic by Turkish reformers and Westernizers, who became increasingly terroristic in the face of his opposition.”¹⁴ The Egyptians, according to Lord Cromer, a British administrator with several years’ service in India, were blamed for never being able to improve their lot until they had mastered the way of the West, and for this they required a long apprenticeship under the enlightened tutelage of European countries like Great Britain.¹⁵ And finally the Persians, going through a period of disintegration of *bikhbari* (or ignorance) marked by the reign of the “despotic,” “corrupt”, and “irresponsible” government of the Qajar, who “was deservedly the most prominent locus for blame”. It was indeed by such conceptualization that the domino process of military defeat, leading from diplomatic concessions, to commercial capitulation, to economic penetration, and finally to class dislocation, was perceived even by some Marxist historians.¹⁶ The references included above are drawn from historians of different political ranks, from Marxists as well as non-Marxists. By referring to these interpretations by historians with colourful political affiliations, I intend to show how prevailing Eurocentrism is a common denominator anchoring Marxist as well as non-Marxist historians in their interpretations of life and time in pre-modern Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian societies.¹⁷

Essentialism Three

The concluding criterion of essentialist methodology in historiography is reductionism, that is the reduction of all other identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, religion and political allegiances to one inclusive identity. The rise of Islamic studies in Europe is the most recent representative manifestation of this enduring essentialism. The current field of Islamic studies suffers from essentialism. By imagining an Islamic “essence”, the Islamicists craft a fixed, unique, undivided, and a-historical identity bringing together all Muslims worldwide. Consequently, they absolutize the differences between those who belong to different identities and *naturalize* their differences. However, to accomplish this process they first Islamicize the history of societies. Islam is presented as the “historical impulse”, an authentic and the sole surviving identity, marginalizing such other identities of the subject population as ethnicity, class and

¹² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?”, *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992), 1-26.

¹³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History”, 21.

¹⁴ Robert Roswell Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World since 1815* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 657.

¹⁵ Willem L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), 103.

¹⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 52.

¹⁷ For an alternative approach to the study of essentialism in Marxism, see Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Open Court, 1985).

gender. Hence, social as well as political development is explained almost exclusively within the boundaries of Islam.¹⁸ In modern Islamicist historiography, the subjectivity is defined as underprivileged declassed urbanites, while the agency is monopolized by clerics. Politics is brought to the declassed impoverished urbanites exclusively by clerics.¹⁹ With such a definition of agency and subjectivity, the Islamicists' historiography denies the importance of the agency of non-clerical, secular elites or subaltern groups in history. Nevertheless, in their narrative, whenever they are confronted with non-clerical representation the Islamicist historians tend to marginalize certain forms of social or political movement that counter their religiosity-driven goals. By calling it "back to the roots", they provide an appropriate justification for such historicism. For example, Bernard Lewis in his latest book *What Went Wrong?* – which is a recycling of stories of the so-called failure of modernization in the Middle East – concludes his observations on the hindrances confronting the consolidation of democracy and civil societies in the Middle East with the following:

The absence of a native secularism in Islam, and the widespread Muslim rejection of an imported secularism inspired by Christian example, may be attributed to certain profound differences of belief and experiences in two religious cultures.²⁰

The reincarnation of contemporary Islamic studies as a sphere of academic inquiry is founded on historical amnesia. In the Islamic reading of history the emergence of political Islam in the twentieth century is connected to the crisis of the twentieth-century modern secular state, or "state exhaustion", and the failure of such replicas as secular nationalism and socialism. Thus, the resentment of the masses, who were misguided by a diminutive group of "Westoxicated" elites, eventually ended with the revival of Islamic accepted wisdom and the mobilization of those masses.

The amnesia of Islamicist historiography of the post-World-War-II period and the denial of agencies and subjectivities of classes and groups other than *umma* and *ulama* leave the Islamicists with perplexing political circumstances. If one considers even just the recent growth of the labour, women's, ethnic, religious, and student movements and their demands for political, social and cultural changes, in a self-proclaimed unitarian society, then the dimensions of such a dilemma become more obvious. The immediate consequence of these movements has been the rejection of the clerics' theocratic and exclusionist definition of insiders and outsiders by accepting the notion of citizen-subject with expanded boundaries of social space.

A final word

In colonial historiography, the essentialist approach denies the inclusion of identities based on class, ethnicity, gender or religion. It also renounces the paradoxical and even contradictory social practices within the same social/cultural identity in Muslim societies. Instead, crafting an "essence" of identity categorizes people according to binary categories – believers and sceptics, radicals and moderates, revolutionaries and compromisers. Categorizing people in this way deepens the problem of false universalism,²¹ and eventually dehistoricizes history.

¹⁸ See for example Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁹ For a critical study of Islamicizing school textbooks in Iran, see Sussan Siavoshi, "Regime Legitimacy and High-school Textbooks", in Saeed Rahnama and Sohrab Behdad (eds), *Iran after the Revolution* (London: IB Tauris, 1996), 203-217.

²⁰ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?*, 100.

²¹ Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 129.