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'ORIENTALISM' AND ITS CRITICS[1]

Fred Halliday

The subject of this lecture is a broad one, and constitutes a topic that has already aroused considerable controversy. I am certainly not the first to comment on this debate, nor shall I be the last; I doubt if I will make many friends by what I have to say here.[2] But, as someone part of whose work has been on the contemporary Middle East and who has received the singular honour of being asked by BRISMES to give this annual lecture, I hope I shall be forgiven for contributing a few additional thoughts on the issue. At the core of the argument around 'Orientalism' is one central, and enduring, question, namely: in what terms can we as social scientists approach the analysis of contemporary Middle Eastern society, i.e. with what concepts, general theories, values, questions? In this vein I would like by way of introduction to clarify how I myself have approached the study of the Middle East, not so much to enjoin it on others, as to make explicit my point of departure. There are, in broad terms, three such components.

My point of departure is a belief, cautious but firm, in the validity of social science in general, and of the branches thereof—history, sociology, politics, economics, international relations, law etc.—constituted by general analytic and theoretical categories, independent of specific data and situations.[3] I do not hold to the view of a strictly 'scientific' view of social science and the humanities, if by this is meant something that relies solely on quantification, prediction, supposedly rigorous methodology or hypothesis. Much of this is banal, chimerical, sterile. I do, however, think it is possible to talk of 'social science' in a looser, more comparative and historical sense, and one in which qualitative judgement and the issue of values, rather than being swept under the carpet, are made explicit, subjected to reason and criticism, and debated. It is in that perspective that I approach the study of the Middle East and of the recent debate on it, around the question of 'Orientalism'. My prime concern is thus not the issue of methodology, or approach as such, or the ramifications of discourse and ideology; this is of interest insofar as it pertains

[1] Text of annual British Society for Middle Eastern Studies lecture, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, March 1993.

[2] Among other discussions: Bernard Lewis, 'The Question of Orientalism', *New York Review of Books*, June 24, 1982 and Said's reply *NYRB*, 12 August 1982; Lata Many and Ruth Frankenberg, 'The Challenge of Orientalism', *Economy and Society*, vol. 14 no. 2; Bryan Turner, 'From Orientalism to Global Sociology', *Sociology*, November 1989; Sadik Jalal al-'Azm 'Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse', *Khamsin*, no. 8, 1981; Edward Said, 'Orientalism Revisited', *MERIP Middle East Reports*, vol. 18 no. 1, 1988; Edward Said, 'Orientalism and After', an interview, *Radical Philosophy*, 63 (spring 1993); Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, London: Verso Books, 1992, ch. 5.

[3] For explications of this approach see C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford: OUP, 1959; E.H. Carr, *What is History?* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967; E.J. Wilmers, *Systematic Empiricism: Critique of a Pseudoscience*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice-Hall, 1973.

to my primary concern, the analysis of Middle Eastern countries themselves. As will be evident, I retain the now supposedly outmoded and pre-modernist view that there is such a thing as reality, and that it *is* the task of concepts and theories to analyse it, that their efficacy and value is above all to be evaluated in terms of how much they explain it. That is my tribe, the *Banū Tanwīr*, or, as they might say, the descendants of enlightenment rationality: as with most tribal affiliations, seeing what a dangerous world it is outside, I do not intend to leave it.

This is an approach with an in-built presumption against treating any region or culture or people as particular or unique. As far as area studies in general, and the Middle East in particular is concerned, I therefore start from a set of universal principles, analytic and normative, and would ask how far these can help to elucidate the particular societies in question. I do not believe that it is possible to approach any society, in the Middle East or elsewhere, starting from that society alone—its history, values, or peculiarities—let alone from some supposed particularism derived from religion, political virtue, the nation or anything else. There are no special nations, no eternal missions, no mysterious unknowable humans, no particular demons, unless so proven, and on the basis of universal criteria. Comparative analysis can have its dangers, but it seems to be essential, not only to see what is shared between societies, but also to pose theoretical questions that the study of the particular may ignore, as well as to be able, with greater justice, to identify what is specific or original.[4]

Secondly, I have been shaped by the context of intellectual formation: I came to the study of the Middle East at a particular time and through specific channels. As a student in the 1960s, part of it spent here at SOAS, I was interested in the way in which the societies of the Middle East had been shaped and influenced by external domination; what can still, without too much exaggeration, be termed 'imperialism'; the forms of resistance that developed to this, on national and social bases, and the ways in which economic and social factors, not least class, affected these societies. The Middle East was, in this context, part of a broader pattern of third world revolt—not just Algeria after 1954, Iraq in 1958, or Yemen in 1962, or Algeria, or Palestine after 1967, but also Cuba, South Africa, Vietnam. Marxism was in a broad sense a major influence here, but, as the debates of the period showed so well, Marxism provided not a sense of answers, so much as a framework within which to examine these questions. Marxism allowed of contrasted positions on, say, Nasserism or Zionism. As the debate on imperialism developed, epitomized in the work of the late Bill Warren, who so influenced all of us who studied under him at SOAS, there were no simple answers on the role of foreign domination, let alone on how to address the kinds of question posed by

[4] For one attempt to identify what is, and is not, specific to the Middle East see my 'The Middle East in International Perspective, Problems of Analysis' in Ray Bush *et al.*, eds. *The World Order, Socialist Perspectives*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

the new regimes in the Middle East.[5] This avenue led me to focus my study on four particular processes, each of which influenced the other, but which, by the very fact of being seen as part of a broader regional picture, were without any privileged, or monopolistic, claim. These four areas were: the development and then overthrow of the Shah's regime in Iran; the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and its consequences; the growth of the Palestinian movement of national resistance and the emergence of a two-state settlement with Israel; the revolutions of South Arabia, and the post-revolutionary regimes in North and South Yemen.[6] In a sense it is that agenda of the 1960s, now nearing thirty years in duration, which has preoccupied me in the analysis of the region: the questions I would ask are how forms of domination are maintained; how and why they are resisted; why states fail to maintain control; how those who come to power succeed, or fail, in constructing alternative domestic and international orders. I have made plenty of mistakes, but would also argue that some of my analyses have borne the test of time and have made a contribution to the understanding of these processes. It is for others, not least those involved in these upheavals, to provide their own evaluations.

Thirdly, I would add a more personal, but in some respects universalizable, element—namely personal origin. I was born and to a considerable extent brought up in Ireland, a country where some of the issues posed in the politics and social development of the contemporary Middle East are also present. I am extremely sceptical of those who think that acquaintance with the Irish question as such, or any other 'question', be it Palestine or Kashmir, thereby qualifies one to deliver judgment on different contexts: quite a few people, including some otherwise quite sage, have fallen into that trap.[7] But I do think that there are a range of issues that emerge in the history of Ireland over the past century or two which certainly serve to sharpen one's antennae when dealing with the Middle East: the role, destructive and formative, of foreign domination and settlement; the illusions and delusions of nationalism; the divisiveness of political loyalties based on religion; the corrosive myths of deliverance through purely military struggle; the uneasy relation of national and religious identity to democratic and gender rights; the difficulties of development when links with the external world are broken; the dilemmas and agonies of secession and national unification. A good dose of contemporary Irish history makes one sceptical about much of the rhetoric that issues from dominant and dominated alike, not least about the claims of clergymen. The ideologies of political hegemony, forced modernization and market-led development have failed in Ireland as in much of the Middle East; but, to

[5] Bill Warren, *Imperialism, Pioneer of Capitalism*, London: Verso Books, 1980. Despite some over-statement of his argument, Warren's thesis stands as a powerful corrective to the prevailing literature of anti-imperialism, both in substantive analysis and in its resolutely anti-relativist and anti-whingeing tone. Had Warren lived to see the tide of post-modernism converge with that of underconsumptionist critiques of imperialism one can only imagine what his response would have been.

[6] This last was the subject of my *Arabia without Sultans*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

[7] See my 'Letter from Dublin', *MERIP Middle East Reports*, no. 154, September-October 1988.

say the least, a critique of imperialism needs to be matched by some reserve about most of the strategies proclaimed for overcoming it, and by some caution about the utterances of what in discourse theory is referred to as 'the subaltern'.

The Debate on Orientalism

As part of the political and intellectual changes of the 1960s there developed a debate on writing about the Middle East, and more generally a critique of mainstream social science literature on the Third World from a broadly left and 'anti-imperialist' perspective focusing on its relation to power and subjugation.[8] Some of this pertained to the Middle East: amongst the most comprehensive bodies of work in this regard are the writings of Maxime Rodinson, whose critique of European writing on the Middle East is the most measured and erudite of them all. The critique of 'Orientalism' long pre-dates the publication of Said's work in 1978. Indeed, given the kinds of work that were being produced by academics and others in the previous two decades, Said's work can be seen as coming at the end of and to a considerable degree negating an earlier body of debate and work, much of it stimulated by the war in Vietnam and the broader upheavals of the Third World at the time.[9] Said's work both subsumed that earlier debate and started a new one because while much of the other work was framed in broadly Marxist terms and was a universalist critique, Said, eschewing materialist analysis, sought to apply literary critical methodology and to offer an analysis specific to something called 'the Orient'; the result is that the issue of Orientalism, as debated in the Anglo-Saxon world over the past decade and a half, has had relatively clear battle lines, familiar to you all. On the one hand, the book of Edward Said, published in 1978, advanced a comprehensive critique of Western, particularly English, French and American, writing on the Middle East, ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day, and encompassing literature, history, political and other sciences. Under the influence of Said's critique a range of work has been produced, criticizing academic and other writing on the region as, in various terms, Eurocentric, imperialist, racist, essentialist, and so forth. On the other hand, a range of writers on the region, most notably Bernard Lewis, have rebutted Said's charge and argued for an approach which falls, to a greater or lesser extent, into the 'Orientalist' category.[10]

Said's critique, beyond identifying a body of literature as 'Orientalist', seeks to relate it to theories of discourse and power, especially through the

[8] See, among many examples, James Petras, *Politics and Social Structure in Latin America*, Monthly Review: New York and London, 1970, Part IV, 'Criticism of Studies of Latin America'; Robert I. Rhodes, *Imperialism and Underdevelopment: a Reader*, London: Monthly Review Press, 1970.

[9] For earlier critical work on Orientalism as such see the work of Anouar Abdel-Malek, 'Orientalism in Crisis', *Diogenes* 44, winter 1963; Bryan Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*, London, 1978; and the essays contained in Maxime Rodinson, *Marxism and the Muslim world* (French original, Paris, 1972; English version, London, 1979). For later discussions, see Maxime Rodinson *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, London: University of Washington Press, 1991; and Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought*, Cambridge: CUP, 1991.

[10] For Lewis, see note 1.

work of Michel Foucault. Within this approach, Orientalism is a discourse of domination, both a product of European subjugation of the Middle East, and an instrument in this process. Its constituent ideas can be explained by this origin and instrumentality—one that denies the culture and history of the subjugated peoples, and which ignores the process of resistance they have generated in response to this domination. The ideas of Orientalism are functional to this project of domination, or imperialism. If Said is especially insistent on the distortions imposed upon his own people, the Palestinians, he develops a broader critique of writing on the Middle East, and indeed on the whole of the Third World, derived from this critical, Foucauldian perspective.[11]

Assessment: 'Discourse' Analysis and its Limits

This debate has now raged for fifteen years, has generated a great deal of writing and fire, and is by no means over, not least because of developments since the mid-1970s. If the 'Orientalist' would appear to have received support from the rise of traditionalist and fundamentalist movements in the region (most notably the Iranian revolution) which advocate a view of Islam as all-encompassing, determinant and unchanging very similar to their own, the Saidians have been reinforced by the growth of post-modernism within the discipline as a whole, with its analyses of discourse and subjectivity. Said's critique has received apparent confirmation from the rise of a new generation of scholars influenced by historical materialism and social and economic history, and with a more flexible attitude to discourse, time and religion in the Middle East. This latter body of scholars have rather different theoretical starting points to Said, but share a common distance from more established 'Orientalist' approaches.[12]

As may already be apparent from the introductory remarks I made, my own position is one that falls into neither category. This is partly for personal reasons: Said has been a friend, a man of exemplary intellectual and political courage; Lewis was a teacher at this school when I was a student here—I learnt a great deal from him and amidst his writings there is much that I have benefited from and respect. But there are two other, more general reasons, why I decline to align with either side in this debate. One is the specific reason that to a considerable degree *both* fail us in what I have defined as the central intellectual task, namely the analysis of the societies in question. Lewis has written nothing substantive on the Middle Eastern societies since *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* in 1961, and even that is curiously flawed

[11] His most recent work, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), sets writing on the Middle East in a much broader cultural context. For a critical review of his use of Foucault, see Aijaz Ahmad, note 1.

[12] See, amongst other places, the series of articles published in *The Review of Middle East Studies*, London: in particular Roger Owen, 'The Middle East in the eighteenth century—an "Islamic" Society in decline: a critique of Gibb and Bowen's *Islamic Society and the West*', *Review*, no. 1, 1975.

by its failure in regard to economics.[13] Said has focussed on discourses *about* the region, not the societies or politics themselves.[14] The other is that on methodological grounds Lewis and Said are both open to criticism, and indeed in some respects are remarkably similar: each gives primacy to what can be termed (within different theoretical frameworks) ideology, or discourse, or political culture; if the Orientalists do so by ascribing a causal primacy to language, attitude and religious dogma, the post-modernists do so by locating their critique and their construction of an alternative at the same, discursive, level. For neither of them does the analysis of what actually happens in these societies, as distinct from what people say and write about them, let alone the difficulties and choices of emancipatory projects, constitute the primary concern. I can, therefore share neither the methodological assumptions and misleading polarisation, nor the quite unnecessary personal bitterness, that has characterized the public debate on this matter.

An element of distance is all the more advisable because, on closer examination, this debate involves at least four different questions, only two of which need concern us here. One is a debate about how to evaluate writing on the Middle East and how to write about the societies in question. The second issue, which is by no means particular to the Middle East, is that of methodology in social analysis, and more specifically a debate between two philosophies of knowledge—a traditional, linguistically- and culturally-based approach derived from classical studies, the other a critical approach to writing and discourse derived from post-modernism and in Said's case from a certain reading of Foucault in particular.[15] There is absolutely no reason why this second, in itself quite valid, issue should be debated with particular regard to the Middle East; it involves other more general questions, not least because, as I have indicated, there is a lot of common ground between the two camps of the 'Orientalism' debate. The third issue, which has come to suffuse the whole debate, is the Arab-Israeli question, with accusations of ethnic origin and political bias, phantasms about Zionist conspiracy on the one hand, and

[13] His reputation rests on two early works of impressive range and erudition, *The Arabs in History*, 1951, and *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 1961. His subsequent writings have been almost wholly on the writings, attitudes and perceptions of people in the Middle East—always well-researched, but failing to analyse the societies or politics in question. Thus his work on race and slavery (*Race and Colour in Islam*, 1971, re-issued in amplified form as *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, 1990) is an account of attitudes and stereotypes. It tells us little about the social and economic institutions of slavery and, as ever, seems innocent of comparison: the only comparisons with the USA are glancing references to attitude, the only comparisons to Brazil are in quotes from other writers. His other texts, *The Middle East and the West*, 1963; *The Muslim discovery of Europe*, 1982; *Semites and Anti-Semites*, 1986, reflect a similar involution, at once methodological and intellectual. The one exception is his monograph *The Assassins*, 1968.

[14] *Covering Islam* (his least illuminating book) is a naïve critique of press coverage of the Iranian revolution, collusive (with Orientalism) in its very title; *The Question of Palestine* is about attitudes, consciousness, rhetoric, identity, discourse, *not* facts.

[15] For a different use of Foucault, one that relates discourse and symbol far more closely to the material structures of power, see Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear*, London: Hutchinson/Radius, 1989.

Arab nationalist 'rage' on the other. Both 'Zionists' and their opponents seem to think that an emplacement in this conflict offers analytic and indeed ethical advantages—something which, for reasons given at the beginning of this talk, I would deny. *Neither Zion nor Palestine convey any epistemological or moral privilege.* Finally, there has been a sharp dose of ill-tempered academic disputation and intolerance, of a kind that is not specific to the USA and its academic and intellectual culture, but which is especially present there. We can see this in debates on other issues—the cold war, Armenian-Turkish relations, the role of gender, race in social science; the same rancour has suffused and confused the debate on Orientalism. What I would hope to do here is to place the latter two of these issues on one side, and to try to focus on, and disentangle, the first two, namely the question of analysing the Middle East, and the implicit contrast of epistemologies.

Components of 'Orientalism'

Before proceeding to Said's critique, it may be pertinent to review some of the central tenets of the body of writing categorized as 'Orientalist'.[16] This term will be used in a broad term here, as far as the social sciences are concerned, but will exclude the other—literary, travel-writing, artistic—variants encompassed by Said. 'Orientalism' can be characterized as an approach which bases its approach to the Middle East and specifically the Arab world, on some broad premises. The first is that the study of the region requires, and can to a considerable extent be organized through, the study of its languages and writings. This is of course a mainstay of classical studies on Greece and Rome and was applied to much of the Middle East in a derivative manner. It would appear that some such idea lies behind the use of the word 'Arabist', a term I take to mean that if someone has got as far as to learn Arabic, then this effort must, almost on its own, qualify him or her to make sensible statements about Arab society and politics, or even to understand something called 'the Arab mind'. Related to this is an argument, worked through in a range of studies, on the study of language as a path to the study of political and social ideas: examining the root, or original, meanings of words was, it was argued, a means of arriving at an understanding of what they meant to Middle Eastern peoples, and the different meanings ascribed to words in the Islamic and Western contexts.

The second and perhaps most important element in this approach was, however, the issue of the Islamic religion or, as it is widely rendered, 'Islam'. In this view Islam, defined by its classical texts and traditions, can be seen not merely as a phenomenon pervading most life in the Middle East, but also as an independent variable, an explanatory factor: thus there is the sociology of Islam, the world of Islam, the Islamic city, Islam and madness, Islam and sexuality, Islam and capitalism and much else besides. There is no entry in

[16] Said offers three definitions of the term 'Orientalism' in the introduction to his book (pp.2-4). As I shall argue later, there are difficulties with the positing of such a general category, on any of the three definitions; here I am taking a minimal definition relevant to social science work, or rather work that purports to be about Middle Eastern society.

the *Encyclopedia of Islam* on Islam and alcohol, but perhaps there should be. The appropriate volumes are entitled the *Cambridge History of Islam*, the appropriate reference book the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Many other issues are explained by reference to what is presented as the Islamic tradition or 'Islamic society': the lack of an entrepreneurial class, the frailty of democracy, the hostility to Israel, the insecurity of boundaries, the apparent rejection of modernization, the irrationality, cruelty, even terrorism characteristic of Middle East politics are related to an atemporal 'Islam' or, failing that, 'the Arab mind'.

This enduring effectivity of something called Islam is said to have one further implication—the third mainstay of the Orientalist position—and that is the difficulty or impossibility of change, particularly if this is seen to be in a direction more like the liberal, secular and in broad terms rational democracies of the West. Those who imagine they see progress are dismissed as idealists, or fools, and the timeless recurrence of Islamic practice and belief is seen to explain why no such processes endure. Gibb's remarks on social scientists applying their concepts to the Middle East being like Walt Disney epitomize this view. All is timeless, stagnant, or—if Ibn Khaldūn is invoked—circular. The function of learning the language is, indeed, to lift a curtain and so to reveal the mysterious but unchanged world behind.

I have identified here three broad themes, on language, religion, and historical change respectively, which do pervade much of the scholarly writing in the West on the Middle East. It has been argued by many, Lewis included, that this idea of an Orientalist body of literature is itself a polemical fiction, a straw man invented by Said and others. There are reasons—several, indeed—for questioning Said's analysis, but I would argue that a reading of much of the literature on the history, society and politics of the region will give evidence that these ideas do occur and recur in the analysis and the language.

This nowhere more so than in the works, in some other respects valuable, of Lewis himself. Thus his *The Political Language of Islam*,[17] a brilliant and learned survey of terminology in Persian, Turkish and Arabic over several centuries, remains in the end unsatisfying: it has, as its underlying premise, the claim that the original meanings of words shape subsequent meaning and usage, and that, within Islamic countries (or, as he repeatedly and significantly calls them) 'the lands of Islam',[18] the religious origins of words determine political thinking to a special degree. What we have is a single, all-encompassing, and apparently enduring totality. Thus, beyond asserting etymological determination, Lewis goes on to imply that the members of all Islamic countries must be treated as one: in one case, he moves from arguing that Islamic *states* cooperate internationally to making statements about 'Islamic *peoples*', as if what holds for rulers holds for the used, and as if what occurs in one country can be generalized to the other.[19] The very title of the book to some

[17] London: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

[18] Why not 'the countries' of Islam? Also note the recurrence in his, and others', writings of the phrase 'where Islam holds sway', suggestive of a vague but all-encompassing domination and inescapable atmosphere.

[19] *Political Language*, p. 3.

degree begs the questions—how far it *is* a political vocabulary derived from religion, how far there *can* be one timeless set of meanings. We have disquisitions on those words that suit the argument—*siyāsa, ẓulm, 'ulamā', dawla* etc.[20] But other words, that are at least as common in twentieth-century vocabulary of what Lewis would call 'Islamic' peoples are omitted: *waḥda, ḥizb, ḥaraka, jabha, munaẓẓama, manṭiqa, ṭabaqa, fallāḥīn, 'ummāl*, not to mention *iḥtilāl, ta'dhīb, mukhābarāt, mub'adīn* and so forth.[21] It is significant too that a whole category of words with important political and normative implications are not discussed, since they would seem to undermine the idea of a continuous or specific Islamic discourse: *Miṣr, al-'Irāq, Filasṭīn, al-Yaman, al-Jazā'ir*, even *al-Kuwayt*. It is indeed striking that I can think of no so-called Islamic state that has an Islamic name, except for the qualifying word for the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is in some contrast to the neighbours of the Islamic world which have at times had names of religious redolence—Holy Roman Empire, Bharat,[22] Zion or Eretz Israel to name but three.

A second example of the assumptions in Lewis' work is an article, as ever lucid and learned, in the *New York Review of Books*,[23] a review of Stephen Humphrey's *Islamic History: A Framework for Enquiry*. This is a study of the ways in which some Islamic writers have treated history, and begins with what one can only say is a striking example of the Orientalist approach: 'For Muslims', we are told 'history is important'. This is explained as meaning that the presentation of history plays an important role in the Muslims' view of the world. But, without doubting Lewis' claim, we can suggest two other things. First, his argument is in part *not* that history matters for Muslims, but that history in our sense of the accurate assessment of the past, actually does not matter for them. But secondly, if what is meant is the production and maintenance of a legitimizing set of historical myths, then the Muslims are hardly unique: the same could, surely, be said about the Irish, the Serbs, the Hindus, the Boers, the Americans, the Japanese, and indeed almost anyone. What appears as a specific, defining, characteristic turns out to be something shared with many others. The Middle East is not so particular.

The Delusions of Etymology

There has been much distortion in the debate on this question but I believe we are not being unfair in identifying and in these terms criticizing the issues at the core of the Orientalist position—language, religion and history. No-one can dispute that a study of these societies involves a close and constantly re-invigilated knowledge of the languages of these societies, and in this the classical approach is correct. But there are two things that do not follow from this. One is the practice of what I can only term etymological reductionism, the attempt to explain politics in terms of the meaning of words, and, even

[20] Politics, oppression, 'knowledgeable men' (of religion), state.

[21] Unity, party, movement, front, organization, region, class, peasants, workers, occupation, torture, intelligence services, deportees.

[22] Bharat was the second son of the Hindu god Ram, and is the conventional Hindi word for India.

[23] *New York Review of Books*, 5 December 1991.

worse, to explain the meaning of words in today's discourse by reference to their classical roots.[24] This is an absurdity, one well criticized by Antonio Gramsci, who showed how because we use the word disaster, literally a black star, we are not necessarily subscribing to ideas of astrology, any more than if we use the word economics we are invoking some allusion to housework. Many people invoke the names of Jesus Christ, and of his Mother, without necessarily holding to the appropriate belief. It is not really possible to make generalizations about Islamic usage because, apart from anything, words mean different things in different tongues: *inqilāb* means revolution in Persian, *coup d'état* in Arabic, and in Turkish it can mean reform. One of the great joys of studying Arabic is to open Wehr's dictionary and to see how *far* words have travelled from their original meaning. The word for economics *iqtiṣād* derives from the same root as the word *qasīda* a poem. Are we to assume that poetry is a branch of economics, or the other way around? And if we take the root *qaṣada*, meaning to be thrifty, can we explain a supposedly 'Islamic' economic behaviour in terms of this meaning, which all Muslims hold to? The last thing one could say about the economics of the Middle East to-day is that it is characterized by a high savings ratio. And what are we to make of words derived from the root *sharaka*? Does it mean a capitalist company *sharika*, or a socialist as in *ishtirākiyya*, or a polytheist as in *shirk*? Is the word *wafd* really religious because Muḥammad received the *wufūd* of tribes?[25]

Very often, as we know, false etymology is used for political purposes. Two banal examples: the Turk who says all people in the world are descended from Turks because the Turkish for man is '*adam*'; the Persians who shout 'death to the CIA' *marg bar siyāh*—making 'CIA' sound like the Persian word for 'black'. A particularly interesting example of this came up at the time of the revolution when Khomeini began to use the word *ṭāghūt* to denounce his enemies—the Shah, and then Carter, Bani Sadr and Saddam Hussein. In the Arab world and elsewhere, people were quick to identify this as a word derived from the word *ṭāghiya*, meaning to be a tyrant; even Bernard Lewis advanced this view.[26] In fact it has a different origin, being a word for idol, of the kind the prophets smashed—the equivalent of the Persian *bot*. Khomeini as the *bot-shekan* smashed several of these—the Shah, Carter, Bani-Sadr, and he hoped Saddam. Even etymology, like genealogy, can become a servant of present concerns, not a determinant of transhistorical meanings.

The other fallacy of the linguistic approach, epitomized in the very word 'Arabist', is that knowledge of the language somehow qualifies one to know something or know a single truth about a society. An ability to parse Homer

[24] Contrast the methodology implicit in Lewis's *Political Language* with Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, London: Fontana, 1976. For an interesting discussion of essentialist writing in another field see Charles Stafford's review of Frank Dikotter, *The discourse of race in modern China*, *MAN*, vol. 28, no. 3, September 1993.

[25] Two further examples: the root *qll* gives both *qalīl* meaning few and *istiqlāl* meaning independence: is one to assume from this that independence meant very little to the Arabs and that this explains some subsequent political behaviour? The root *mll* gives us both *mumill*, meaning boring, and *millī* meaning national: what might this entail?

[26] *Political Language*, p.97.

did not give one a knowledge of Ionian land tenure, or gender relations, and the same must go for Arabic. The most cursory reflection will show this is not true—after all, all native speakers, by definition, know the language but this does not mean they make sensible, rational or accurate statements about their own societies. When this cult of language is tied, as it too often is, to ideas of the Arab or Islamic mind, or to the essence of the 'Muslim' and his society, this becomes a flight from serious social analysis. Here again the opposites meet or converge, for it is the conceit of post-modernism—one which Said at times reproduces—that literature and its methods can serve as a means, even a privileged one, of social analysis.

The Functions of 'Islam'

The issue of 'Islam' as an independent variable and explanatory category is equally open to debate. Here, as already indicated, the Orientalist and the Islamist go hand in hand, each stressing the essential, determinant, character of the Islamic religion. Khomeini is as much of an Orientalist, in this sense, as any German or British imperialist scholar. So too is King Fahd in saying that Muslim peoples do not want or need Western democratic principles: they prefer *shūrā, majlis, ijmā'* (consultation, tribal council, consensus) and so forth.[27] The claim that Islam has this determinant role receives greater weight from the fact that Islam claims jurisdiction over a wider range of social activity than other comparable religions, particularly Christianity in the Western form that most writers on the region are familiar with: this is summed up in the saying *al-Islām dīn wa-daula*—Islam is a religion and a state.[28] But here again some distance may be necessary. The fact that proponents of the religion claim something is no reason whatsoever to accept it, any more than one accepts the statements of a nationalist. The whole proposition of an unchanging and determinant dogma that is the enduring premise of so much of the Orientalist literature is, in any comparative perspective, absurd. Apart from falsifying the variety of interpretations, and legitimating power in the name of one interpretation, it has two debatable implications.

The first is that this essentialist rendering of 'Islam' leads to endless attempts to resolve issues by means of *tafsīr* or interpretation, asking the bogus question what 'true' Islam is. We have seen much of this with regard to women, or frontiers. In the 1960s and 1970s there was discussion of what the 'true' Islamic political system is, or should be, with a rivalry of quotes from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* about capitalism and socialism. The latter recited the phrase *al-nās shurakā' fī thalāth: al-mā' wa-al-kala' wa-al-nār*, the capitalists replying with the injunction, *man akhadh baytak uqtul*.[29] Even

[27] See, for example, his declarations on the establishment of a Consultative Council in Saudi Arabia, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, Part 4, 3 March 1992.

[28] According to the German scholar Reinhard Schulze this saying dates from the nineteenth century only: 'Muslimische Intellektuele und die Moderne' in Jochen Hippler and Andrea Lueg, *Feinbild Islam*, Hamburg: Konkret Literatur Verlag, 1993, p.199, n. 20.

[29] 'The people share three things: water, grass, fire'; 'Whoever takes your house, kill him'. For the former, cf. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*, Leiden: Brill, 1936-69, Vol. 6, p.51, s.v. *kl'*.

more important is the premise this essentialism contains that we can assume a continuity of belief and meaning—an inertia over centuries—when this is something that can never be assumed. Here the words of Barrington-Moore in his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* may be relevant:

> 'Culture or tradition is not something that exists outside of or independently of individual human beings living together in society. Cultural values do not descend from heaven to influence the course of history. To explain behaviour in terms of cultural values is to engage in circular reasoning. The assumption of inertia, that cultural and social continuity do not require explanation, obliterates the fact that both have to be recreated anew in each generation, often with great pain and suffering. To maintain and transmit a value system, human beings are punched, bullied, sent to jail, thrown into concentration camps, cajoled, bribed, made into heroes, encouraged to read newspapers, stood up against a wall and shot, and sometimes even taught sociology. To speak of cultural inertia is to overlook the concrete interests and privileges that are served by indoctrination, education, and the entire complicated process of transmitting culture from one generation to the next'.[30]

Those who have lived under the control of Mr Khomeini, Mr Turabi, Mr Hikmatyar and their ilk will need little guidance on this matter.

Two other considerations arise in this regard. First, we can observe the contingency and variety of Islamic beliefs, and their reliance on other and identifiable factors of states, classes, ethnic groups and so forth which use and interpret this dogma for their own purposes. Secondly, we cannot take 'Islam' as a given. We need to come up with an explanation of why this idiom continues to prevail in these societies, beyond invoking the fact of the religion itself: what needs explaining is the very continuity of social forms and beliefs. Here, of course, the proponents of Islam come up with a set of arguments to show how effective Islam is: the intrusive and oppressive character of states in Islamic countries; the intolerance of dissent, pluralism, secularism and non-Muslims; and, very much at the moment, the lack of democracy—to which one can add, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

That essentialist explanations have a certain coherence and explanatory force no-one can deny: but it would seem rather implausible that these are the only explanations and that only an invocation of Islam can tell us what is going on. In the first place, many of the phenomena identified as specifically Islamic are not unique to the Islamic world: dictatorial states, tribal regimes, fragile democracies, intolerance of minorities or of dissent are hardly the prerogative of *dār al-Islām*. The same goes for religious fundamentalism: the conditions, organizational principles and rhetoric of the Islamic fundamentalists have much in common with other such movements among Christians, Jews and Hindus. Secondly, within the Islamic world there is as much variation on this matter as there is uniformity. Between Turkey, Indonesia and Senegal, or between Tunisia, Yemen and Kuwait, there is an enormous variation in political, social and economic systems. Governments claiming to be Islamic

[30] *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, London: Allen Lane, 1967, p. 486.

range from tribal oligarchies and military dictatorships to clerical regimes and ethnic tyrannies. Any study of the obstacles to democracy in the Middle East will certainly have to take into account the histories of these countries and the way in which Islamic doctrine was used to justify despotic states in the past; but this is quite different from saying that these countries were despotic because of a religion, or that this is the reason why dictatorship still prevails to this day. Looking at the way in which Saddam Hussein, Rafsanjani, or the Saudi family keep power today one has no need to have recourse to the ideas of the seventh century: repression, some distribution of wealth, and control of the political situation explain what is happening in these states.[31]

What the explanatory use of 'Islam' misses here, and something that a number of writers such as Michael Gilsenan and Sami Zubaida have brought out so well, is the very modernity of these movements.[32] The briefest of looks at the ideology of Khomeini will show this to be true: there is nothing in the Qur'ān about *jomhūrī-ye Eslāmī*, or *ṣodūr-e enqelāb* or *estekbār-e jahānī*—Islamic republic, export of revolution or world arrogance. The terms he uses of imperialism—*teshneh be-khūn, javān-khor, sheytān-e bozorg* are terms he has taken from Persian or invented, as is the case with his famous couplet, *mostakber* and *mostaz'af*.[33] What he did is take a vocabulary found in, or derived from, the classical traditions and put it to contemporary use. To understand what use he has made of these one would be better advised to look at populist and fundamentalist movements outside the Islamic world, and even at secular ones such as Peronism in Argentina, than at the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.[34] To return to the four examples of popular upheavals and political change in the Middle East that I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, I would say that invocation of Islam explains very little about what has happened in any of these countries, even when political actors have chosen to invoke this vocabulary. I would also doubt whether Islam would tell us much about the recent war over Kuwait, or Saddam's decision-making. Even more dubious is the way in which by entering this world we may be drawn to accepting the validity of Islamist conceptual claims: *eqteṣād-e towḥīdī*, or 'unitary economics'—much touted at the time of the Iranian revolution—is one example, as is the claim that Mr Khomeini's pronouncements on *The Satanic Verses* constitute in the proper juridical sense a *fatwā*.[35]

[31] For an examplary disentangling of these questions see Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics: State Formation and Development*, Cambridge: Polity, 1994.

[32] *Religion and Society in the Modern Arab World*; Michael Gilsenan, *Recognising Islam*, London: Methuen, 1982; Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State* London: Routledge, 1989; Reinhard Schulze and Azmi Bishara in Hippler and Leug edd. *Feinbild Islam.*

[33] Blood-thirsty, world-devouring, great satan, oppressed/oppressor, literally 'arrogant/weak'.

[34] See for example the analysis of populist language in Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London: Verso, 1977, and the application to Iran in Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1993.

[35] See Sadik al-Azm, 'Is the "fatwa" a fatwa?' *Middle East Report*, no. 183, vol. 23, no. 4, July-August 1993.

If these are problems within 'Orientalism', there are also a range of issues on which Said's critique, at least as he presents it in this book, leaves questions unresolved. Said may not be responsible for the use others have made of his text, but there is a range of issues, four in particular, which permit of disagreement.

In the first place, the term 'Orientalism' itself is contestable: we should be cautious about any critique which identifies such a widespread and pervasive single error at the core of a range of literature. There is what, in philosophic terms, can be termed the search for the expressive totality, or, in more mundane language, the root of all evil. Over the last twenty years we have had a long list of these—economism, humanism, eclecticism, historicism, empiricism and so on. More recently we have Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, foundationism. 'Orientalism'—while it can be used in a precise way, as I have tried to do above—may be open to such a promiscuous application. Orientalism in Said's usage acquires an almost metaphysical power to pervade very different epochs and genres of expression; in so doing it loses analytic or explanatory purchase.

Secondly, the category of the 'Orient' is rather vague, since in *Orientalism* its usage implies that the Middle East is in some ways special, at least in the kind of imperialist or oppressive writing produced about it. Racist or oppressive writing is found about all subject peoples, whether they are Islamic or not, and there is nothing to choose between them. The claim of a special European animosity to Arabs—let alone Palestinians—or to Muslims does not bear historical comparison. Such ideas of persecution rest on some implicit yardstick, a comparative massacrology in which the wrongs done to one people are greater. Such an approach is best avoided, but it may be pointed out that the fate of the native people of the Americas, whose conquest was also presented as a crusade, was far worse than that of the peoples of 'Islam'. Equally spurious is the implication that the hypostatization and reification of the Middle East are specific, whether by those writing from outside, or from within: anyone familiar with the writing on Japan entitled *Nihonjiron* and books such as Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* will be familiar with similar themes—the special place of language studies, the search for the unchanging national character, the stress on the specificities of the Japanese mind, the search for the true 'Japanese' position on women, or the emperor, or flower arrangement or whatever;[36] Russia too has had its share of such ahistorical analysis. Here again external authority and internal nationalism collude to create a timeless, and particularist, discourse. About what people has it not been said 'They are like that', 'They will never change' etc? Many people in the Middle East believe that in some way they have been singled out by the West—but in its historic or contemporary forms, this is an unsustainable idea. The thesis of some enduring, trans-historical, hostility to

[36] Peter Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, London: Croom Helm, 1986; Dani Botman, 'Some Reflections on Japan, Orientalism and Post-Modernity', unpublished paper.

the Orient, the Arabs, the Islamic world, is a myth—albeit one, as already indicated, which many in the region and the West find it convenient to sustain.

A third difficulty with Said's approach is the methodological assumption it makes about the relation between the genesis of ideas and their validity, namely that because ideas are produced in a context of domination, or directly in the service of domination, they are thereby presumed to be invalid. Analogous ideas are to be found in much contemporary debate about ethnocentric and Eurocentric ideas, in the social sciences or elsewhere. Since Said's book was written, this theme has acquired much greater diffusion through cultural nationalism, post-modernism and so on. In the Middle East it can be found in the writings of Islamic writers, such as Khomeini, ever calling on people to be 'alert' *bīdār*, against this corruption, and in the writings of many nationalist intellectuals, be this the later Anouar Abdel-Malek in Egypt or Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad in Iran, with his concept of westoxification or *gharbzadegī*. This is, to say the least, a rather contestable assertion, if taken in the context not of the Middle East in particular, or of nationalist assertion, but in its proper academic context—namely, the sociology of knowledge. If I have my disagreements with the epistemological assumptions underlying the approach of Lewis and his fellow writers on 'Islam', I am equally at odds with the epistemological assumptions of Said and the post-modernists. One can do worse than look again at the discussion of this matter by Karl Mannheim in his *Ideology and Utopia*:[37] there are many difficulties with Mannheim's work, not least his view of the free-floating intellectual, but his discussion of the relation between genesis and validity is very pertinent here. As he points out, removing some of the polemic from Marx's discussion of ideology, the fact that a particular discovery or idea was produced by a particular interest group, or context-bound individual, tells us nothing about its validity. Medicine, aeronautics, or good food may be produced in such contexts of time, place, culture: they are not therefore to be rejected. The same, with appropriate variations, can apply to social science. Of course, the majority of social science ideas in the world today come from Western Europe and the US and were produced in the context of imperialism and capitalism: it would be odd if this were not so. But this tells us little about their validity. The terms 'Eurocentric' and 'ethnocentric', far too easily bandied about to-day, confuse a statement on historical origin with a covert assessment that needs justification in its own terms. And in one very important sense Eurocentrism is a valid starting point: the economic, social and political system that prevails in the world to-day, with all its variations, including those of the Far East, *is* a European product and was spread through the combination of economic, military and political pressure known

[37] *Ideology and Utopia: an introduction to the sociology of knowledge*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.

as imperialism. As Karl Marx and Bill Warren alike would have pointed out, Europe has created a world after its own image, like it or not.[38]

The implications of this issue of origin for the debate on Orientalism should be clear. The first is that in much of the critique of Western writing on the Middle East the assumption is made that because ideas are produced by exploiters this knowledge is therefore invalid. But elementary reflection would suggest that, apart from any possible independence or autonomy of the investigator, the very fact of trying to subjugate a country would to some degree involve producing an accurate picture of it. If you want to dominate a country, you need to know where its mines and oases are, to have a good map, to be aware of its ethnic and linguistic composition and so forth. The experts who came with Napoleon to Egypt in 1798 were part of an imperial project, but the knowledge they produced, whatever its motives, financing, use, had objective value. The same can be said, *pari passu*, with much later writing on the region. To put it bluntly: if you plan to rob a bank, you would be well advised to have a pretty accurate map of its layout, know what the routines and administrative practices of its employees are, and, preferably, have some idea of who you can suborn from within the organization.

This brings me to another point where, perhaps because of professional bias, Said would seem to engage in an injudicious elision—namely, that treatment of texts produced within the social sciences and in related activities such as journalism or travel writing, and literature. Of course, there are similarities and mutual influences; but while one is a necessarily fictional activity, without controls in reality or direct links to the acts of administration, domination, exploitation, the former is so controlled. To assume that the same critique of discourses within literature can be made of those within social science is questionable; it may indeed reflect the hubris, rather too diffuse at the moment, of theorists deriving their validation from cultural studies.

This brings me to the fourth, and final, area of difficulty with the critique of Orientalism, namely its analysis, or rather absence thereof, of the ideas and ideologies of the Middle East itself. Said himself has, in his other writings, been a trenchant critic of the myths of the Middle East and of its politicians, and nowhere more so than in his critique of the poverty of the intellectual life of the Arab world: while the rulers have constructed numerous international airports, he once pointed out, they have failed to construct one good library. But the absence of such a critique in his *Orientalism* does allow for a more incautious silence, since it prevents us from addressing how the issues discussed by the Orientalists and the relations between East and West are presented in the region itself. Here it is not a question of making any moral equivalence between the myths of the dominators and of the dominated, but of recognizing two other things: first, that when it comes to hypostasis, stereotyping,

[38] Here the almost complete silence of both Orientalists and their critics on the question of economics serves to obscure this major dimension of the formation of the contemporary world. Of course, in this they are joined by Islamist thinkers who, while prolix on most other issues, have a blind spot when it comes to the issue of economics: Khomeini was explicit on this, denouncing economics as the subject of donkeys.

the projection of timeless and antagonistic myths, this is in no sense a prerogative of the dominator, but also of the dominated; and, secondly, that if we analyse the state of the discourse on the contemporary Middle East, then the contribution of these ideologies of the dominated has been, and remains, enormous, not least because those outside the region who try to overcome the myths of the Orient rather too quickly end up colluding with, or accepting, the myths of the dominated within the region.[39] One of the most cogent critiques of Said, made with this in mind, was that of Sadeq al-Azm, published a decade ago in *Khamsin*.[40] If there is a condition such as *gharbzadegī*, there is also one which I would call *sharqzadegī*, the uncritical reproduction of myths about the region in the name of anti-imperialism, solidarity, understanding, and so on. Here, of course, the myth-makers of the region see their chance, since they can impose their own stereotypes by taking advantage of confusion within their own countries and without.

No-one familiar with the political rhetoric of the region will need much convincing of this tendency to hypostatisation from below: a few hours in the library with the Middle Eastern section of the *Summary of World Broadcasts* will do wonders for anyone who thinks reification and discursive interpellation are the prerogative of Western writers on the region. The uses made of the term 'the West', to denote one single, rational, antagonistic force; the rantings of Islamists about *jāhiliyya*; the invalidation of ideas and culture because they are, or are supposed to be, from the West; the uncritical but often arbitrary imposition of controls and customs that are supposed to be genuinely from the region; an expression of some *turāth* (heritage) or other; the railings against Zionists, Persians, kafirs, traitors and so on with which Middle Eastern political leaders happily puncture their speeches, without apparent qualm or contradiction, or awareness that they themselves are promoting prejudice—all confirm this point. Of course, this hypostatisation is most evident in the discussion of the idea of 'Islam' itself, for no-one is more insistent on the unitary, determinant, timeless, and, in his version, orthodox interpretation of Islam than the fundamentalist. Equally, while brave and critical souls in the West have tried to break the usage of the term 'Muslim' as a denotation of an ethnic or cultural identity, whether in its British or French colonial usages, the reifiers of the region are keen to re-establish this link. In this they are joined by communal politicians in western Europe, who purport to treat all 'Muslims' as one social, cultural or even ethnic group.

Conclusion: Studying the Middle East

The argument so far would suggest that the debate on Orientalism has revealed some interesting issues in the study of the region and in the construction of academic knowledge in general, but may be of limited use in addressing what I at the outset suggested was the main issue confronting us—namely,

[39] Said's *Covering Islam*, a critique of US press coverage of the Iranian revolution, misses this point. The hypostases of the *New York Times* pale before those of the *mullahs* of Southern Tehran, or of the likes of 'Alī Sharī'atī and Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad.

[40] See note 2.

how to analyse Middle Eastern societies, contemporary or historical. Both camps, the Orientalists and their critics, have to a considerable degree shied away from this task, focusing more on discourse than on the analysis of reality.

This would lead me to say that in approaching the analysis of the Middle East the element of particularism, uniqueness, or impenetrability has been greatly overrated. Let me mention four issues on the analyses of the contemporary Middle East familiar to us all: the structure of states, the prevalence of conspiracy theory in political culture, the role of the Islamic religion, and the difficulties in establishing and sustaining democracy. It is easy to construct analyses of each of these that locate themselves in the influence of Islam, in the workings of the 'Arab' or 'Persian' mind, or in the particular havoc wrought in the region by imperialism. But other, less particularistic, explanations are also possible, starting from the obvious enough point that many of the phenomena analysed in this way are seen elsewhere in the world: the Middle East is not unique in the incidence of dictatorships, or of states created by colonialism, or of conspiracy theories. Every nation thinks its own conspiracy theories are greater and more inventive than those of others, but a comparative survey would suggest this may not be so: while I would certainly, if pushed, give the gold medal to the Persians, one can find some fine examples in Latin America, in China, in Greece, not to mention the USA. It would, moreover, be possible to provide explanations of conspiracy theory in terms of historical and material, as well as purely cultural, features of the countries in question. If we turn to the question of the dictatorial state, and its impact not just on opposition political activity, but on economic activity independent of the state, there is no doubt that this has been an enduring feature of many Middle East states, and that, for dictators and for analysts alike, the cause has been found in those aspects of Islamic tradition that allow the state to exert such power. But this is to beg the question, since, as is equally well known, other interpretations of Islam are possible and in some countries – Turkey being an obvious example—a flourishing private sector and a degree of opposition politics exist. Any analysis of the contemporary Middle East has to confront the enduring power of dictatorship, in many cases enhanced by the flow of oil revenues to the state; there are clear, and in some cases specific, obstacles there. But it is doubtful how far a hypostatized Islam can explain this.[41]

The Middle East is not unique, except possibly in the content of the myths that are propagated about it, from within and without. The political, economic, social and cultural activities of the peoples of this region have their peculiarities and differences, as much between each other, as in terms of one Middle East contrasted with the outside world. Material concerns, jokes, the pleasures of good food, and the horrors of political oppression, are theirs as much as of any other peoples in the world. The development of social science in general will never be completed, and each specific issue, or country,

[41] For alternative, contingent and social, explanations see Roger Owen, *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, London: Routledge, 1992; Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics: State Formation and Development*, Cambridge: Polity, 1994; Halim Barakat, *The Arab World. Society, Culture and State*, London: University of California Press, 1993.

or incident, poses questions for it. But we are no more precluded by our concepts from understanding the Middle East, and no more limited in our ideas, whatever their origins, than in addressing any other area of the world. In normative terms, we have, perhaps, allowed the discussion to be too inflected by relativism and doubt as to the validity of universal standards, in the face of a mistaken, and often self-interested, critique of imperialism and Western norms. Perhaps I could sum this up by adapting a slogan: *na gharbzadegī, na sharqzadegī*, neither westoxification nor eastoxification. Let us therefore go beyond this unnecessarily polarized and in some ways methodologically impoverished debate and continue with the job of studying these societies. I have warned against the perils of *tafsīr*, but I will end with the words from the Qur'ān that can be easily and I hope not too arbitrarily interpreted to justify this enterprise, *wa ja'alnākum shu'ūban wa-qabā'ila li-ta'ārafū*. 'And I have created peoples and tribes so that they could get to know each other.'[42] That could be the motto for our necessarily unfinished, and unfinishable, endeavour.

[42] Qur'ān, xlix.13.