

Orientalism in reverse

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The years 1978–79 constitute a watershed in Oriental and Islamic Studies, for they witnessed three outstanding events. I am referring here to events that occurred on two utterly different and therefore incomparable levels, but all three have powerfully impacted the academic field nonetheless. The first two events took place on the level of general history: 1978 witnessed the uprising of the Iranian masses under a clerical leadership, culminating in the overthrow of the monarchy in February 1979 and the establishment of the ‘Islamic Republic’ soon after. The same year was marked by the development of the Islamic armed uprising against the left-wing dictatorship in Afghanistan, prompting the invasion of the country by the Soviet Union in December 1979. The third event, situated on the level of intellectual history, was the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978.

These events occurred, moreover, at a time when Marxism – which, ten years earlier, had won over a large portion of global youth, and had become the most prominent bearer of the values of Enlightenment and modernity in most of the Islamic world¹ – was facing a major ideological counter-offensive that gathered momentum in the late 1970s. One of the main locations of this backlash was France, where a new label designated a group of intellectuals, the so-called *nouveaux philosophes*, many of them formerly radical leftists, especially Maoists, who turned against their previous convictions and became anti-Marxists. These converted ex-Marxists displayed equal zeal and peremptoriness in their new faith, hence evoking considerable media excitement. There was also, of course, a much more sophisticated and therefore more formidable tributary to the anti-Marxist ideological onslaught, albeit often from left-wing standpoints, in the form of critiques such as those of Michel Foucault, ultimately epitomized by the very successful launching of philosophical postmodernism with the publication of Jean-François Lyotard’s manifesto in 1979.

The three events that I mentioned at the start combined remarkably with this anti-Marxist backlash. The Iranian Islamic Revolution – which took place in the

same year, 1978, that saw Karol Wojtyła’s investiture as Pope John Paul II – signalled the massive return, with a vengeance, of that ‘opiate of the people’ which positivist Marxism had relegated quite prematurely to the museum. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan affected the ideological standing of Moscow, the Mecca of ‘communism’, almost as negatively and powerfully as the invasion of Vietnam affected that of Washington. And Edward Said’s most famous book rejected Karl Marx himself unsympathetically in the hall of shame of Western-centric ‘Orientalism’ – unfairly in the eyes of several critics who subscribed nonetheless to the book’s central thesis.

The syndrome

One of the most astute of those sympathetic critics of Said was the well-known (well-known in the Arab world and in the field of Islamic Studies, at least) Syrian radical thinker Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm. The English version of his 1981 essay titled ‘Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse’² was later expanded into a much longer one published the same year in Arabic in the form of a little book bearing the same title.³

Al-‘Azm built upon what he described as ‘one of the most prominent and interesting accomplishments of Said’s book’: the fact that it laid bare ‘Orientalism’s persistent belief that there exists a radical ontological difference between the natures of the Orient and the Occident’.⁴ He pointed in turn to the existence in Arab thinking of what he called an ‘Orientalism in reverse’ embodied in two categories. The first one, which Said had already identified, consists in reproducing the Orientalists’ essentialist dichotomy with inverted values, whereby the Orient or the ‘Arab mind’ – for those concerned were primarily Arab nationalists – is regarded as superior to the West. The second one, then a recent phenomenon in Arab countries and the one that interests us here, was depicted by al-‘Azm in these terms:

Under the impact of the Iranian revolutionary process, a revisionist Arab line of political thought

has surfaced. Its prominent protagonists are drawn, in the main, from the ranks of the left... Their central thesis may be summarized as follows: The national salvation so eagerly sought by the Arabs since the Napoleonic occupation of Egypt is to be found neither in secular nationalism (be it radical, conservative or liberal) nor in revolutionary communism, socialism or what have you, but in a return to the authenticity of what they call 'popular political Islam'.⁵

Al-'Azm went on in his book – with a wealth of quotations to substantiate his claims – to describe and sharply rebut the key features of this syndrome. Retaining al-'Azm's concept of 'Orientalism in reverse', I would synthesize the defining features of this paradigm, those that can be extended beyond the specific pool of Arab intellectuals that al-'Azm scrutinized, in the following six postulates:

1. That the Islamic Orient and the West are anti-thetic: not, or not only, that Oriental peoples are confronting Western imperialism, but that Western ideologies as a whole, including the most critical ones like Marxism, are unsuited to them.
2. That the degree of emancipation of the Orient should not and cannot be measured by Western standards and values, such as democracy, secularism and women's liberation.
3. That the Islamic Orient cannot be grasped with the epistemological tools of Western social sciences and that no analogy with Western phenomena is relevant.
4. That the key motional factor in Islamic history, the primary factor setting Muslim masses in motion, is cultural – that is, religious, taking precedence over the economic and social/class factors that condition Western political dynamics.
5. That the only path of Muslim lands towards their renaissance is through Islam – to put it in terms borrowed and adapted from the Catholic Church: for Muslims, 'there is no salvation outside Islam'.
6. That the movements that raise the banner of the 'return to Islam' are not reactionary or regressive movements as they are perceived through Western lenses, but indeed progressive movements prompted by Western cultural domination.

This pattern of 'Orientalism in reverse' was actually quite pervasive in the wake of the 1978–79 events and it quickly spread way beyond the circles of Arab or Muslim-born intellectuals, to the core countries of classical Orientalism. It has been particularly prominent on the French Orientalist scene, as I shall try to establish below.

In fact, the most famous of left-wing thinkers who succumbed to the sirens of the 'Islamic revolution' is neither a Muslim nor a Middle Easterner, but none other than Michel Foucault, in a well-known episode of his life.⁶ It must be said though that, read retrospectively, Foucault's analyses of the unfolding of the Iranian Revolution are chiefly arresting because of their great perspicacity about the social and political dynamics of the revolutionary process, an achievement that is impressive all the more that this was surely not a topic falling within Foucault's area of expertise. The fact remains nevertheless that he was fascinated by what he perceived as a quest of 'spirituality' and confused what he heard from the relatively liberal Ayatollah Muhammad Kazem Shariatmadari – who turned later into a fierce opponent of Ayatollah Khomeini – for the truth of the movement. This led him to declare naively that the key tenets of democracy are to be found in Shiite Islam and that this is what the programme of an 'Islamic government' actually meant.⁷

Foucault, however, was not a professional Orientalist. He defended himself unrepentant, justifying his enthusiasm for the revolt of the Iranian masses and asserting that the clerical government, which he loathed, was not its predetermined outcome and did not delegitimize retrospectively the support that the mass movement deserved. He knew well that, of all people, French intellectuals are inclined to be indulgent towards repressive 'excesses' of revolutions for an obvious reason related to the history of their own country and the official cult of the French Revolution, including its Jacobins – a cult, incidentally, which came under attack in the context of the anti-Marxist backlash, most famously by François Furet. Thus, Foucault felt he did not have to be apologetic, but he never attempted again to tread on such an unfamiliar terrain. I have only mentioned him because this peculiar Foucauldian episode was symptomatic of a pervasive trend.

Post-1979 French Orientalists

My object here is to sketch the evolution and meanderings of those among the post-1979 crop of French Orientalists who succumbed to 'Orientalism in reverse'. Given the constraints of space, of course, it can only be a sketch. Besides, I have little incentive to devote the time it would take to write an exhaustive account of this trend. A sketch means here that I will generally deal merely with the most prominent members of this group and only with their key publications on the issue of Islam. From the very nature of my starting point

– al-‘Azm’s critique of Arab ‘Orientalists in reverse’ – it is obvious that the paradigm is far from restricted to French or even Western scholars. It should be sufficiently clear therefore that my intention is definitely not to return against French or Western ‘Orientalists in reverse’ their own arguments about the inability of Western minds to understand Muslim minds (except through unreserved empathy).

Finally, let me also make it clear from the outset that classical Orientalism, in the sense popularized by Edward Said, is far from extinct in French Islamic studies – not to mention the general ‘intellectual’ scene, where it is as strong as it has ever been. Actually, there are even shifts between the two paradigms, as one might expect in the versatile world of the intelligentsia and as I will show. The fact that I devote this article to ‘Orientalism in reverse’ does not mean it is my own main concern – it is definitely not. It is just that my opposition to Orientalism proper and to Western imperialism does not at all drive me to ‘cover up’ what I deem to be misguided and misleading ways going in an opposite direction.

Let me first situate sociologically the post-1979 generation of French scholars in the field of what I will call here ‘Islamic studies’ in order not to restrict it to any particular region of the world of Islam. These scholars came to maturity in the post-1968 era: many of them, like many other members of their generation, were marked in their youth by a more or less committed adherence to radical left views. Some of them, again like many others, abandoned eventually what they came to see as some sort of disease of puberty, a number of them shifting ‘from the Mao collar to the Rotary club’, to borrow the metaphoric title of a famous pamphlet published by French radical left-wing gay activist Guy Hocquenghem, in 1986, two years before his untimely death.⁸ This generation developed its research activity in the period that followed the 1979 ‘Islamic Revolution’ in Iran, which saw a surge in anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism and its promotion to the rank of a major concern of Western powers, France standing among the most directly affected.

Three key features characterize this post-1968 crop of researchers in Islamic studies, features that were analysed introspectively by one of their most prominent members, Olivier Roy, in a relatively recent debate on French Islamic studies.⁹ First of all, most members of the post-’68/post-’79 generation belong to the academic field of political science or political sociology, whereas the previous generation was still mainly rooted in traditional disciplines of Oriental studies, like history, ethnology or philology. In their majority,

they dealt with radical Islamic political movements as the obvious theme of the day, a fact that bore a direct relation to their specialization in politics.

Meanwhile, in the post-’68 years, the academy in France underwent a sharp drop in status and relative income. Accordingly, as Roy explained euphemistically, the scholars of the new generation had a strong incentive to look for complementary sources of revenue. One way – which constitutes our second feature (not common to all, of course, but extensive enough to figure as a key feature) – was to become a ‘consultant’ of the foreign affairs and defence institutions. For the most prominent ‘experts’ of the group, such opportunities were not limited to France. An alternative strategy was to work through the mass media, whether in the form of direct honoraria for the scholars’ ‘expertise’ or as a means to increase the sale of their books. Intensive mediatization is the third distinctive feature of present-day researchers on Islam and the Arab world. This pattern could be generalized; similar features characterize the field of Islamic studies nowadays in all Western countries

The last two features – the propensity to sell expertise to governmental institutions, and mediatization – did not affect every member of the post-1979 crop at the same time. Some of them resisted the temptation for a while, and in some cases forever. This accounts for the increasing differentiation that occurred within the group of ‘Orientalists in reverse’ over the years, as I shall explain. At the time when the new paradigm emerged, however, the impact of the defining events that I described at the beginning of this article – the Iranian revolutionary process, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the publication of Said’s *Orientalism*, all three set against a background of anti-Marxist intellectual backlash – were prevailing over a sociologically induced political differentiation that was still in its infancy.

French ‘Orientalism in reverse’

Post-1979 researchers in Islamic Studies were keen on countering ‘Orientalist’ preconceived hostility to the Iranian Revolution because of its Islamic ideology and leadership, as well as ‘Communist’ hostility to the Afghan *mujahideen* invoking similar reasons and serving to justify the invasion of Afghanistan. They were inclined to reject the defamatory depictions of resurgent Islamic fundamentalism that had impressively gathered momentum under the impact of the Iranian Revolution itself. This led them therefore to reject the very label of ‘fundamentalism’ and its French rough equivalent *intégrisme* under the pretext

that these pertained to Christianity – Protestantism in the first case and Catholicism in the second. The fact that these terms had acquired a much wider sense since their inception and designated a set of features that applied perfectly to the Islamic brand of the similar use of religion did not matter.¹⁰ The most astounding argument they used – astounding for social scientists, that is – was that the movements concerned referred to themselves as *Harakāt Islamiyya* where ‘*Islamiyya*’ actually means ‘Islamic’ as distinct from the passive sense of ‘Muslim’. In other words, post-1979 French Orientalists more or less unwittingly subscribed to the pretension of the so-called ‘Islamists’ to hold exclusive rights on the militant interpretation of Islam.¹¹

By an amazing paradox, the new crop of researchers in Islamic studies, being careful not to incur the disgraceful reproach of falling into ‘Orientalism’ in the pejorative sense, adhered to a typical ‘Orientalist’ logic in considering that Islamic fundamentalism was irreducible to any Western-originated category. They ended up calling the phenomenon ‘Islamism’, thus restricting it to a phenomenon specific to Islam, in perfect ‘Orientalist’ logic. Wanting to avoid the terms ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘*intégrisme*’ because, so they said, they are loaded with a pejorative meaning – actually, pejorative only in the eyes of the secular-minded, whether liberal or radical – they ended up using a term originally designating the Islamic religion as such, as all dictionaries still attest. They thus contributed – by providing a scholarly legitimation to the application of the label ‘Islamism’ to various political movements referring to Islam, many of them violent and fanatical – to the confusion increasingly fostered by unscrupulous mass media between the religion of Islam and some peculiar and detestable uses made of it.¹²

A major influence on the formation of the new paradigm was a scholar who generationally, intellectually and sociologically was a bridge between the previous group of French specialists of the Muslim world, many of whom were truly erudite, and the new crop who are much shallower overall for the existential reasons indicated, not least among them the ravages of mediatization. This scholar, political sociologist Olivier Carré, has been far less translated into English than have the prominent members of the post-1979 generation, although he is definitely more learned and interesting. He published in 1979 a scholarly study on the way Arab nationalism, his major focus of interest at that time, used progressive interpretations of Islam for its own legitimation.¹³ Dwelling on views he had explored previously, one major hypothesis of his book was that the future emergence of a distinct Arab pro-

gressive Islam was quite possible – a view with which I concur as a general statement – and that it was indeed already in process – a more debatable prognosis in its time, to be sure, and one that has since been, in my view, invalidated by history.¹⁴

Carré was thus somewhat predisposed to blur the distinctions between Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. In 1982, he stressed the similarity between what he then started calling ‘Islamism’ and Arab nationalism, which he saw confirmed by Muammar al-Qaddafi – a hybrid between both as he seemed then.¹⁵ Such a similarity could be emphasized only if one looked at the problem from the angle of discourse analysis, which is what Carré had been chiefly doing. The nationalists needed naturally to prevent their opponents from pre-empting Islam whereas the fundamentalists – particularly in the 1960s, the era of ‘Arab socialism’ – needed to convince the masses that their Islam too was ‘socialist’ in some way and hence to rebut the accusation that they intended to bring back to power the old wealthy classes.

In a further book published in 1983, mainly an anthology of texts from the Egyptian and Syrian branches of the Muslim Brotherhood edited in collaboration with Michel Seurat, Carré went even further. The balance of his sympathies now began to tilt towards the ‘Islamists’, against the nationalists that he labelled ‘totalitarian’.¹⁶ In statements typical of ‘Orientalism in reverse’, he now described ‘political Islam’ as ‘the “popular culture” of the Muslim world that is managing to express itself at last’ after having been muffled successively by colonialism and post-independence regimes,¹⁷ ‘the despised modern form of ancestral popular culture’;¹⁸ ‘a remarkably permanent fact, in its goals and its means, since the dawn of the intrusion of industrial Europe in the Arab world’, a view that is correlated with Carré’s belief that ‘religiosity is a permanent and essential phenomenon of Arab societies’.¹⁹

Did Seurat mean to warn against his co-author’s drift when he wrote in their joint book: ‘One should not reverse purely and simply this scheme [of the Muslim Brothers’ reactionary character] to the point of regarding the Muslim Brotherhood as the new heralds of modernization’?²⁰ The fact is that this is exactly what Carré did, quite emphatically, in another book published the same year,²¹ where he ended the introduction to his contribution with the following imaginative statement by a fictitious ‘Islamist’:

Reaction, fundamentalism, obscurantism, clericalism, Middle Ages! ‘Let’s be serious, – replies the Islamist militant with bright eyes – the only, the

true progressivism is the Islamic alternative. The only, the true modernization is the autochthonous modernization, rooted in our popular culture, and it is Islamic to the fingernails.²²

Similar statements were made further on in the same book by Carré without using an 'Islamist' dummy: thus, he wrote, the 'Islamist' current 'mobilises for a practice, that is already initiated, of "autochthonous modernization" at the local level in immediate harmony with the language of "popular culture", which is fundamentally Islamic'.²³ Such statements include two themes that, combined, were to become distinctive of the French version of the 'Orientalism in reverse' paradigm: 'Islamism' as an agent of modernization and the religion of Islam as the essential language and culture of Muslim peoples.

In 1984, a landmark in the history of the post-1979 crop of French Orientalism was the publication of Gilles Kepel's book on radical fundamentalist groups in post-Nasserite Egypt.²⁴ Kepel never really adhered to 'Orientalism in reverse', but stood halfway between it and traditional Orientalism. He actually sported a preface to his first book by none other than Bernard Lewis, one of Said's main targets. Adopting a relatively neutral tone in describing the Egyptian radical fundamentalists, he contributed to the confirmation of the 'Islamist' label with an argumentation to that effect in his conclusion. His neutral stance was all the more comfortable in that he dealt mainly with the most fanatical and violent fringe of Islamic fundamentalism.

On the other hand, Kepel quickly became the most blatant illustration of all the features of the new generation, as described above (including a trajectory that started on the far left). His book displayed a pattern that was to characterize all his subsequent abundant production: a wealth of useful information – later facilitated by privileged access to governmental sources – with limited theoretical conceptualization, getting shallower book after book. He became a star of the mass media, the Bernard-Henri Lévy of French Orientalism, so to speak, as well as an adviser to Western and other governments in their fight against radical Islamic fundamentalism. Eventually he played an active role in promoting and defending the ban on headscarves in French schools.

One year after Kepel's book on Egypt, there appeared another landmark of the post-1979 crop of French Orientalists, but also, in this case, a plain contribution to the paradigm of 'Orientalism in reverse': Olivier Roy's book on Afghanistan.²⁵ A former Maoist, Roy displayed very openly his sympathy for the Afghan

Islamic movements and hostility to those he called the 'communists'. Although he seemed to take heed of Seurat's warning in the Introduction of his book,²⁶ what he actually did was to extend and amplify Carré's elevation of Islamic fundamentalism to the rank of a bearer of modernity.

Roy introduced a distinction between 'Islamism' and what he called *fondamentalisme*, using the Gallicized version of the English term rather than *intégrisme*, the label used by those on the French Left who described the Afghan *mujahideen* as reactionary forces, the Afghan equivalent of the French counter-revolutionary Chouans of the late eighteenth century. In Roy's lexicon, the term 'fundamentalism' bears its usual meaning: it is the advocacy of a return to the Holy Scriptures of Islam and the strict respect of the Shari'a. He compared Islamic fundamentalism, however, to the Protestant Reformation instead of comparing it to Protestant fundamentalism. 'Islamism', he clarified, is 'fundamentalism' turned militant and oppositional, especially in an urban context or in brutally 'modernized' societies.²⁷

Emphasizing 'the modernity of Islamism',²⁸ he then explained that the Afghan 'Islamists', influenced by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, were striving 'to develop a modern political ideology based on Islam, which they see as the only way to come to terms with the modern world'.²⁹ 'The West (both liberal and Marxist) is attempting to reject in the realm of archaism, feudalism, the Middle Ages and obscurantism, ideas that are, in fact, products of modernism.'³⁰ Furthermore, according to Roy, 'the systematic return to the *shari'at* creates the conditions for the advent of a certain form of modernity, political at least'³¹ in allowing for the traditional segmentation of Afghan society to be superseded by religion as a unifying factor. Leaving aside the fact that Roy's portrait of the Afghan 'Islamists' as transcending the variegated segmentation of their society was just a fantasy, this is indeed a kind of 'modernization' that is as old as the emergence of religions, and that Ibn Khaldun already described in similar terms six hundred years ago.

The third landmark of post-1979 French Orientalism, completing my selection of prominent figures of this crop, was the publication of François Burgat's book on the Maghreb in 1988.³² Among the well-known members of post-1979 French Orientalism, Burgat is, by far, the most zealous upholder of 'Orientalism in reverse'. Building squarely upon Carré, whom he described as 'one of the undisputed masters of the thinking on political Islam',³³ Burgat's view is best encapsulated in the following quote:

Expressing the ‘restoration of cultural balance’ that ensues from the forced withdrawal of the West initiated on the political level with decolonization and independence and continued on the economic level through nationalizations, the process of disengagement manifests itself nowadays on the cultural level through Islamism. By allowing those who were dominated yesterday to affirm their identity in the face of the West without resorting to precisely the vocabulary that it had imposed, Islamism, from Kabul to Marrakech, partakes of the same need of a return to the cultural roots.³⁴

The two key tenets of the paradigm of French ‘Orientalism in reverse’ as formulated by Carré – namely that ‘Islamism’ is an agent of modernization and that the religion of Islam is the essential language and culture of Muslim peoples – found in Burgat their most extreme expression. They combined with a third idea, also inspired by Carré, that of the continuity – rather than discontinuity – between nationalism and ‘Islamism’, which became for Burgat a continuity between the historical nationalist moment and the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism. Thus, he wrote, ‘being a modernising response to the problems of modernity, Islamism expresses therefore a need for continuity more than for rupture.’³⁵

This idea of continuity is illustrated by Burgat with the metaphor of a single rocket of decolonization with three stages, the first one political (independence), the second economic (nationalizations) and the third, represented by ‘Islamism’, cultural/ideological. This metaphor completely disregards the fact that so-called ‘Islamism’ – in what was actually its resurgence after a long marginalization – coincided with a massive reversal of both political and economic independence. The 1970s saw a huge reaffirmation of US hegemony in the Muslim world and a foretaste of the worldwide neoliberal regression, best represented by Egypt’s ‘denasserization’ under Anwar el-Sadat. To use Burgat’s metaphor, it did not occur to him that the rocket’s third stage was actually activated in a phase of descent – in other words, that the spread of Islamic fundamentalism was one expression among others of a tremendous setback and multifarious regression in the Orient’s history of decolonization.

The key presumption upon which Carré and Burgat’s view is based is to consider ‘Islamism’ only as a matter of discourse, as modernization expressed in a different language: while the language of the nationalists was borrowed from the West, in their view, the language of the ‘Islamists’ is apparently ‘autochthonous’, to use Carré’s term once again. The ultimate consequence of this conception under Burgat’s pen is to reduce

‘Islamism’ to a mere mode of expression – ‘Muslim speech’ (*le parler musulman*) as he would call it later – for a programme that is basically the same as that of nationalism. To quote him again:

Islamism, therefore, is more a language than a doctrine; a way of representing reality that does not content itself with borrowing from what the dominant imposed... With some exaggeration, one could dissociate Islamism from religion and see in this resorting to the vocabulary of Islam in order to express an alternative political project nothing but the ideological logistics of political independence, the cultural continuation of the ruptures resulting from decolonization.³⁶

One interesting aspect of Burgat’s work is that it includes transcripts of talks and other exchanges that he had with prominent figures of the ‘Islamist’ scene. As it happens, these are at times more enlightening than his own explanations. Thus the clearest rebuttal of his views was expressed by the famous Moroccan Islamic fundamentalist Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine, the founder of al-‘Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Charity), who told Burgat:

You, the external observers, when you read the literature of the Islamists ..., when you analyse their discourse, you only perceive the tip of the iceberg ... that is the denunciation of Western cultural domination ..., the denunciation of bad governance, the existence of this social injustice ... In your articles, I read the analysis of a pure Westerner who sympathises with Islamism ... indeed ..., you sympathise with Islam. But, for you, this spiritual sphere remains voluntarily opaque. You don’t want to see it; you don’t want to look at it. In fact, I recognize the failing of those intellectuals who place great emphasis on their own point of view without taking into account that of the others.³⁷

Meanderings

Let me now sketch briefly the subsequent evolution of French ‘Inverted Orientalism’. The post-1979 generation of French specialists of the Muslim world was affected by a most tragic event: the assassination, or death in detention, in 1986 of Michel Seurat after his abduction in Lebanon the year before by a group calling itself ‘Islamic Jihad’ and suspected of being actually a facade of Hezbollah, acting on behalf of Iran.³⁸ This was a devastating shock for the French Orientalist community, and for Olivier Carré in particular, with whom Seurat had closely collaborated. Consequently, the image of Iran darkened considerably in their eyes, and so did the notion of ‘Islamism’ for most of them.

In the introduction to the first book he published after Seurat's tragic death, a collection of essays that came out in 1991, Carré displayed a very different assessment of so-called 'Islamism' in the light of Iran:

The Iranian example, especially since 1981, diminishes the credibility of the 'Islamist alternative' ... The tragic example of Michel Seurat, with whom I have worked and from whom I draw inspiration, alas confirms remarkably the antagonistic game of the two barbarisms (Islamist and 'secular progressive').³⁹

Thus, Carré broke radically with 'Orientalism in reverse'. He reversed it, so to speak, meaning that he went back to old-fashioned Orientalism pure and simple. The latter on the French scene – but the same pattern applies to other communities of Orientalists – is nowadays divided between two schools. One was labelled 'neo-Orientalism' by Farhad Khosrokhavar,⁴⁰ although it is rather a traditional one – to put it roughly, it is the view that Islam is incompatible with modernity. The other I have called 'new Orientalism', for it is indeed new, and defined as the view that not only are Islam and modernity compatible, but in fact Islam is the only and necessary path to modernity in the Muslim world.⁴¹

'Orientalism in reverse' shares a common core with traditional Orientalism: the essentialist view according to which 'religiosity is a permanent and essential phenomenon' for Muslim peoples, to repeat Carré's already quoted sentence. Breaking with his illusions about 'Islamism', Carré, to be sure, did not go so far as rejecting Islam as such. By an obvious instance of wishful thinking, he came to believe that the time of 'Islamism' was coming to an end in the Muslim world, and that 'the era of post-Islamist compromises seems set out'.⁴² Two years later he published a very interesting book – regrettably not yet translated into English – where he announced in the title itself the coming of what he called paradoxically 'secular Islam', actually a return to what he called 'the Great Tradition' with capital letters.⁴³

By 'Great Tradition', Carré meant the long Islamic tradition established after the tenth century CE until the emergence of a new Islamic 'orthodoxy' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an 'orthodoxy' based on puritan interpretations of Islam – those of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyyah in particular – that laid the ground for the wave of 'Islamism'. Carré's remarkable book is a plea for a moderate, relatively secularized Islam, which could almost have been written by an enlightened Muslim scholar. The 'new Orientalist'

bias re-emerged nonetheless in the opening of the book's conclusion where Carré postulated that 'secularization can only be Islamic in Muslim societies and cultures'.⁴⁴ In other words, Carré suggested that no thorough separation of religion and state could occur in Muslim lands.

In 1992, Olivier Roy published in turn a book heralding the 'failure of political Islam'.⁴⁵ Reiterating his previous 'Inverted Orientalist' assessment that 'Islamism' was an agent of modernization and secularization, he decreed that this 'Islamism' has failed. By a trick typical of the intellectual profession, instead of admitting that this modern and secular 'Islamism' was but a figment of his own and his colleagues' imagination – in other words, that the failure was that of his own analysis – Roy attributed it to the object of his study. Now, he wrote:

In retrospect, it appears that the political action of the Islamists, far from leading to the establishment of Islamic states or societies, falls in either with the logic of the state (Iran), or with traditional, if reconfigured, segmentation (Afghanistan).⁴⁶

Islamism was a moment, a fragile synthesis between Islam and political modernity, which ultimately never took root.⁴⁷

As for the reason for this alleged failure, it is, according to Roy, an intellectual impasse (an *aporie*) in 'Islamist' thought whereby virtuous people are deemed a necessary condition for the establishment of an Islamic society while an Islamic society is the necessary condition for the education of virtuous people.⁴⁸ Leaving aside the extreme shallowness of such an explanation, the question is how could it be that Roy did not realize the *aporie* from the start, a failing that he did not even acknowledge. The failure of 'revolutionary Islamism' led, said Roy, to its 'social-democratization' – an amazing import of a concept coming from a person belonging to a group who rejected the term *intégrisme* on the ground that it originated in the history of another religion. Failed 'Islamism' turned into what he called *néofondamentalisme* ('neo-fundamentalism') – a socially 'conservative' interpretation of Islam as opposed to the 'modernizing' one – as if this feature had not been at the core of so-called 'Islamism' from the very beginning.

Olivier Roy's next book came out in French barely one year after the 2001 al-Qaeda attacks, and was written in the main before the events.⁴⁹ It was thus not primarily a reaction to the traumatic shock of 9/11 as much as a further stage in the author's thinking. The English edition came out two years later, translated, rewritten and augmented by the author himself.⁵⁰ It

includes, consequently, more references to the defining moment of the Bush administration's 'war on terror', but the bulk of the book remains nevertheless the author's more general attempt to validate his previous analyses against a reality that kept contradicting them. Theoretical confusion is perhaps what explains the fact that the book reads at times more like a nebulous philosophical comment on the state of the world than like a work of social science.

The development central to the new book could be thought inspired by Carré as it deals with 'post-Islamism'. However, Roy's thesis is that 'Islamism' itself has now turned into 'post-Islamism' through the 'overpoliticization of religion', which, by a cunning of history, led to the distancing of the religious sphere from the political, each becoming 'autonomous, despite the wishes of the actors' themselves, setting thus 'the conditions for secularization'.⁵¹ According to Roy, one major face of 'post-Islamism' is the move of some organizations 'from Islamism to nationalism': there is a 'blurring of the divide between nationalists and Islamists everywhere in the Arab Middle East', he asserts, with Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas being the key examples in this respect.⁵² One illustration of this, wrote Roy in 2004, is that it is 'increasingly difficult to distinguish between a Hamas Islamist militant and a supposedly secular member of Arafat's Fatah'⁵³ – an assertion that is hard not to read today, in light of the widening gulf and clash between the two forces, as a sufficient reason for rejecting his thesis.

At any rate, to present Hezbollah and Hamas as signalling a shift 'from Islamism to nationalism' and a transformation into new hybrid 'Islamist-nationalist' forces is unwarranted for two reasons at least. Both have been involved since their inception in the struggle against foreign occupation of their territory, a type of struggle that has never been the monopoly of forces labelled 'nationalist' but was always waged in the region, historically, by a broad spectrum of forces within which various religious forces played a prominent role from the initial stages. On the other hand, to 'blur' the significance of the 'Islamism' of the designated organizations just because they are engaged in the national struggle outbidding their 'nationalist' rivals is obviously misleading, as history keeps demonstrating abundantly. Aside from the qualitative differences between the official programmes of both Hamas and Hezbollah and that of secular organizations that have been engaged in the same struggles against Israeli occupation, the very way both of them organize the popular constituencies that they control confirms

the fact that their social practices are informed by their religious views.

The other major illustration of Roy's thesis on 'post-Islamism' is the Iranian 'Islamic Republic'. His long comments on an alleged 'secularization' and 'declericalization' of the Iranian polity⁵⁴ – all the more paradoxical in that it was chiefly epitomized by former President Mohammad Khatami, the 'reformist' head of the 'Assembly of Militant Clerics' – were based on the illusion that Iran was fulfilling by then (2002–04) its 'political normalization'.⁵⁵ The present Iranian president, elected in 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is, of course, the living refutation of this peremptory assertion, very premature at the very least. By another cunning of history, he is a layman.

I could go on discussing most of the assertions in Roy's book, for instance his intriguing insistence on 'the privatization of re-Islamization'⁵⁶ illustrated by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Pakistani alliance of fundamentalist groups, which Roy believes to be no longer interested in changing the state. Or his belief in the 'deterritorialization' of 'Islamism', illustrated by the allegation that al-Qaeda 'has been conspicuously absent from the Middle East'⁵⁷ and that it has 'hardly ever undertaken missions in the region or with a regional objective',⁵⁸ an allegation that was evidently already wrong back in the early 1990s, when al-Qaeda began to emerge. Or the equally mistaken assertion that 'if one looks at Islamic radicalization among young Muslims (and converts) in the West, their background has nothing to do with Middle East conflicts.'⁵⁹

The London bombings of 7 July 2005 put this last assertion to the test. Roy hurriedly brought his support to the British government's vain attempt to deny the obvious relation between Middle Eastern conflicts – Britain's participation in the occupation of Iraq principally – and the attacks. He published an op-ed in the *New York Times* a few days after the bombings, titled 'Why do they hate us? Not because of Iraq',⁶⁰ where he explained that the London bombers were not reacting to US and British wars, but rather saw these wars 'as part of a global phenomenon of cultural domination'. One year later, during Israel's onslaught on Lebanon, he published in *Le Monde* an op-ed where he gave advice to the 'Sunni regimes' (*sic*) and Israel on how best to isolate Hezbollah, concluding his article with the following sentence: 'More than ever the political way should prevail: this way is not necessarily that of diplomacy, but that of adjusting military force to political ends.'⁶¹

Then, in September 2006, Roy published yet another op-ed, titled: 'We're winning, despite the "war"',⁶²

where he explained that ‘the world is safer’ because of the ‘protracted mobilization of police, experts, intelligence agencies and judiciaries’ (he couldn’t possibly omit the ‘experts’). Thus, in the space of twenty years, Olivier Roy, who had started as an ‘Orientalist in reverse’, completed his transformation into the kind of ‘expert’ who advises Western governments à la Kepel, a transformation in the light of which his introspective analysis of 2001, quoted above, seems quite perceptive, even though it was meant to be apologetic.

Of our three outstanding ‘Inverted Orientalists’ – Carré, Roy and Burgat – only the third one still sticks steadfastly to his earlier views. Indeed, Burgat’s subsequent two books on ‘Islamism’ mostly reiterate the same views outlined in the first, even more oversimplified at times, if anything, in the heat of polemics in which he indulged against his former co-thinkers.⁶³ He conceded, however, that there were reactionary currents within ‘Islamism’ – currents that incidentally he did not hesitate to call *intégristes* (‘fundamentalists’ in the English translation). However, these were only bad apples, which he did not want confused with the whole lot.

The reactionary component of the Islamist recipe is not the only one. The fact that the literalists and the fundamentalists appear condemned to grow and evolve means that no one should dare to predict if and how Islamism, generally and specifically, will ever adapt or play itself out in terms that we would call ‘modern’, meant as a term to denote a core of universal values.⁶⁴

Burgat, however, did not only engage in polemics against his former fellow ‘Orientalists in reverse’, but also, chiefly and courageously – it should be stressed – against the wave of Islamophobia that engulfed his country in the wake of 9/11. He opposed his government’s policies and the dominant trend in the media on issues like the ban on headscarves in schools and the French role in Lebanon. This necessary acknowledgement leads me to the point I wish to conclude with, going back to where I started from: Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm’s 1981 essay.

Al-‘Azm concluded his article about Arab ‘Orientalism in reverse’ by asserting that the latter ‘is, in the end, no less reactionary’ than “‘Orientalism’ proper”.⁶⁵ This kind of assessment is not and cannot be universally valid in my view. As for any value judgement, what is assessed should be put in context and evaluated relative to that context. Switching from an Arab context to a Western one, the role of ‘Orientalism in reverse’ changes radically. Whereas in the first instance, it is indeed a capitulation to what amounts

to a historical regression of massive proportion, it is often, in the second case, a form of resistance to dominant imperialist ideology and of sympathy with its targets. Burgat is the typical embodiment of such an attitude, which bears much resemblance indeed to the ‘Third Worldism’ of yesteryear, which indulged also in self-delusion by falling in blind love with the enemies of their enemies.

The way Maxime Rodinson described the ‘Third-Worldist’ approach to Islam in 1968 bears a striking resemblance to what I have discussed in this article, showing that ‘Orientalism in reverse’ is indeed a recurrent phenomenon:

The universalism that [left-wing anti-colonialism] derived from its liberal or socialist roots tended to change into a recognition, and ultimately, even an exultation of individuality. Now, it was in the Third World that the exploited, oppressed and brutalized element with its crude strength would, once and for all, overthrow the misery and domination of the old order. From then on, those values intrinsic to the formerly colonized peoples were to receive due praise, which was not diminished even when very normal misunderstandings resulted in perceiving in them, albeit in specific forms, the very same values that animated the European groups concerned. To some of those who were more deeply committed in this direction, Islam itself was seen as an inherently ‘progressive’ force.⁶⁶

Still, between ‘experts’ advising Western governments on the conduct of their imperial policies and ‘Orientalists in reverse’ denouncing those same policies – albeit with huge illusions about those who are targeted by these policies, thus preparing the disillusionments of tomorrow and their demoralizing effect – there is a qualitative difference that is obvious to my eyes. Nonetheless, while continuing to participate in the political and intellectual struggle against Western imperialist policies, I feel that it is my duty, as always, to criticize what I deem to be misleading views on my own side of the political divide.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented as the fourth Edward Said Memorial Lecture at the University of Warwick, 20 November 2007.

1. The June 1967 war accelerated the conversion of ‘objective Marxism’ into ‘subjective Marxism’ in the Arab world, as Abdallah Laroui had foreseen on the eve of the war. See his book, *L'idéologie arabe contemporaine*, preface by Maxime Rodinson, Maspéro, Paris, 1967.
2. Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm, ‘Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse’, in *Khamsin* 8, London: Ithaca Press, 1981 (the article is dated ‘Autumn 1980’), pp. 5–26; reproduced in A.L. Macfie, ed., *Orientalism: A Reader*, NYU Press, New York, 2000, pp. 217–38.

3. Al-'Azm, *Al-Istishraq wal-Istishraq Maakusan*, Dar ul-Hadatha, Beirut, 1981.
4. *Khamsin*, p. 18; Macfie, ed., *Orientalism*, p. 230.
5. *Khamsin*, p. 22; Macfie, ed., *Orientalism*, p. 234.
6. See his 1978–79 articles and interviews on Iran collected in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits II, 1976–1988*, Gallimard, Paris, 2001, pp. 662–794. These texts were translated and published in English in the appendix of Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, pp. 189–267.
7. Foucault's worst article was the one that was published in the French weekly magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* in October 1978 under the title 'What are the Iranians Dreaming About?' (*Dits et écrits II*, pp. 688–94; Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, pp. 203–9). On Foucault's 'divagations' about Iran, see the bitter and vigorous comment by Maxime Rodinson in his *L'Islam: politique et croyance*, Paris, Fayard, 1993, pp. 301–27; English translation in the appendix to *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, pp. 267–77.
8. Guy Hocquenghem, *Lettre ouverte à ceux qui sont passés du col Mao au Rotary* (1986), Agone, Marseille, 2003, preface by Serge Halimi.
9. Olivier Roy, 'Les Islamologues ont-ils inventé l'islamisme?', *Esprit*, August–September 2001, pp. 116–36.
10. For argumentation about the perfectly legitimate use of the term and concept of 'fundamentalism', see al-'Azm's excellent essay, 'Islamic Fundamentalism Reconsidered: A Critical Outline of Problems, Ideas and Approaches', Parts I and II, in *South Asia Bulletin*, vol. 13, no. 1/2, 1993, pp. 93–121, and vol. 14, no. 1, 1994, pp. 73–98.
11. Expressions such as 'political Islam' or 'militant Islam' share the same flaw.
12. The first recorded use of 'Islamism' in the new sense occurred in 1979 in an article published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (12 March) by Habib Boularès, a Tunisian nationalist who had been a member of the cabinet under Habib Bourguiba in 1970–71 and was to join again the Tunisian government under Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. His assessment of what he called 'Islamism' was not apologetic, of course. The term then found its first use in the realm of French scholarly Orientalism under the pen of Jean-François Clément, 'Pour une compréhension des mouvements islamistes', in *Esprit*, January 1980, pp. 38–51. Clément was also quite unsympathetic to the movements he described. Thus, a further paradox is that the term 'Islamism' itself, before it became the pet label of 'Orientalists in reverse', was first applied to the new generation of Islamic fundamentalists by authors despising them. These authors merely wanted to cover with one single word the whole spectrum of political currents raising the banner of Islam, from the most progressive to the most ... fundamentalist/*intégriste* (a term they did not refrain from using).
13. Olivier Carré, *La légitimation islamique des socialismes arabes. Analyse conceptuelle combinatoire des manuels scolaires égyptiens, syriens et irakiens*, FNSP, Paris, 1979. Carré's 'hypothesis' is summed up on p. 257.
14. For a discussion of this matter, see my article, 'Religion and Politics Today from a Marxian Perspective', in *Global Flashpoints: Reactions to Imperialism and Neoliberalism*, *Socialist Register 2008*, Merlin Press, London, 2007, pp. 55–76.
15. Olivier Carré, 'L'utopie islamiste au Moyen-Orient arabe et particulièrement en Egypte et en Syrie', co-authored with Michel Seurat, although each one's contribution is distinguished from the other's, in O. Carré, ed., *L'Islam et l'Etat dans le monde d'aujourd'hui*, PUF, Paris, 1982, pp. 13–20 (Carré's section). Carré thus lent his scholarly authority to the use of the term 'Islamism' against which Maxime Rodinson had argued.
16. Olivier Carré and Gérard Michaud (a pseudonym used by Seurat), ed., *Les Frères musulmans Égypte et Syrie (1928–1982)*, Gallimard/Julliard, Paris, 1983.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
21. Claire Brière and Olivier Carré, *Islam: Guerre à l'Occident?*, Autrement, Paris, 1983. Claire Brière, a French journalist, had previously co-authored a book on the Iranian Revolution that was regarded as over-enthusiastic (Claire Brière and Pierre Blanchet, *Iran: La révolution au nom de Dieu*, Paris, Seuil, 1979). It included an interesting interview with Michel Foucault that contributed, however, to the latter's moment of disgrace when the new Iranian regime started displaying its authoritarian features (Foucault, *Dits et écrits II*, pp. 743–55).
22. Olivier Carré, 'L'Islam politique en Égypte', in Brière and Carré, *Islam: Guerre à l'Occident?*, p. 138.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
24. Gilles Kepel, *Le Prophète et Pharaon. Les mouvements islamistes dans l'Égypte contemporaine*, La Découverte, Paris, 1984; English translation *The Prophet and Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Contemporary Egypt*, Saqi, London, 1985.
25. Olivier Roy, *L'Afghanistan. Islam et modernité politique*, Seuil, Paris, 1985; English translation *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.
26. *L'Afghanistan*, p. 11; *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, pp. 2–3 (mistranslated).
27. *L'Afghanistan*, pp. 12–13; *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, pp. 3–4.
28. *L'Afghanistan*, p. 17; *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, p. 8.
29. *L'Afghanistan*, p. 94; *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, p. 69.
30. *L'Afghanistan*, p. 110; *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, pp. 82–3 (translation revised).
31. *L'Afghanistan*, p. 214; *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, p. 156 (translation revised).
32. François Burgat, *L'islamisme au Maghreb: La voix du Sud*, Karthala, Paris, 1988. An English updated edition was published four years later, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*, University of Texas, Austin, 1992. The book was translated by William Dowell, then correspondent of *Time* magazine in Cairo, and bore his name as co-author, probably because he brought important changes to the original edition as there are many differences between the two versions. This is why I have preferred to select quotations from the French edition and translate them directly myself – references are to the third French edition of Burgat's book: *L'islamisme au Maghreb*, Payot, Paris, 1995.
33. François Burgat, 'De la difficulté de nommer: intégrisme, fondamentalisme, islamisme', *Esprit*, March 1988, p. 137.
34. Burgat, *L'islamisme au Maghreb*, p. 80.

35. Ibid., p. 68.
36. Ibid., p. 70.
37. Ibid., pp. 71–2.
38. Tehran at that time was engaged in an ‘asymmetric campaign’ (to put it in military jargon) against France in retaliation for the heavy involvement of Paris on Baghdad’s side in the Iraq–Iran war.
39. Olivier Carré, *L’Utopie islamique dans l’Orient arabe*, FNSP, Paris, 1991, p. 16. The term ‘barbarism’ was applied by Seurat to the Syrian regime – see his article under the pseudonym Gérard Michaud, ‘L’État de barbarie, Syrie 1979–1982’, *Esprit*, November 1983, reproduced in a posthumous collection bearing the same title, Michel Seurat, *L’État de barbarie*, Seuil, Paris, 1989.
40. Farhad Khosrokhavar, ‘Du néo-orientalisme de Badie: enjeux et méthodes’, *Peuples méditerranéens* 50, January–March 1990 – a brilliant polemical essay against Bertrand Badie.
41. Gilbert Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms*, 2nd edn, Saqi, London, p. 167 n33.
42. *L’Utopie islamique*, p. 16.
43. Olivier Carré, *L’Islam laïque ou le retour à la Grande Tradition*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1993.
44. Ibid., p. 136.
45. Olivier Roy, *L’Échec de l’Islam politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1992; English edition: *The Failure of Political Islam*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1994.
46. *L’Échec de l’Islam politique*, p. 39; *The Failure of Political Islam*, p. 23 (translation revised).
47. *L’Échec de l’Islam politique*, p. 102; *The Failure of Political Islam*, p. 75.
48. *L’Échec de l’Islam politique*, p. 10; *The Failure of Political Islam*, pp. ix–x.
49. Olivier Roy, *L’islam mondialisé*, Seuil, Paris, 2002.
50. Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, Hurst, London, 2004.
51. *Globalised Islam*, pp. 3–4.
52. Ibid., p. 64.
53. Ibid., pp. 1–2.
54. Ibid., p. 88.
55. Ibid., p. 1.
56. Ibid., p. 97.
57. Ibid., p. 52.
58. Ibid., p. 307.
59. Ibid., p. 48.
60. Olivier Roy, ‘Why do they hate us? Not because of Iraq’, *New York Times*, 22 July 2005.
61. Olivier Roy, ‘L’Iran fait monter les enchères’, *Le Monde*, 21 July 2006.
62. Olivier Roy, ‘We’re winning, despite the “war”’, *International Herald Tribune*, 7 September 2006.
63. François Burgat, *L’islamisme en face*, La Découverte, Paris, 1995; English translation *Face to Face with Political Islam*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2003. *L’islamisme à l’heure d’Al-Qaida*, La Découverte, Paris, 2005.
64. *L’islamisme en face*, p. 100; *Face to Face with Political Islam*, p. 65.
65. Al-‘Azm, ‘Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse’, p. 25; Macfie, ed., *Orientalism*, p. 237.
66. Maxime Rodinson, *La Fascination de l’Islam*, Maspero, Paris, 1980, p. 100; English translation: *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1988, pp. 76–7 (translation revised).

Versus Laboratory

POLITICS AND THOUGHT

27–28 September 2008

Jan van Eyck Academie

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SUBJECT TO STATE, SUBJECT OF REVOLUTION

Nina Power, Peter Klepec, Frank Ruda

Closing Session:

POLITICS AS THOUGHT

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