

# Occidentalism, Orientalism and Cultural Imperialism

Assuming there really is something we may call a Western 'cultural hegemony', 'cultural domination' or 'cultural imperialism' in this world, then 'orientalism' is its literary and social scientific form, and 'occidentalism' is a programme for revenge. We who are assembled here, are at the same time agents and students of the relationship between East and West. Most of us are Westerners studying what our grandparents used to call the Far East; none of us are Easterners studying the West; thus it is unlikely that any kind of revenge will take place at our seminar. The opposite danger exists, however: our discussions may well be seen as a continuation of an Occidental Orientalist tradition of cultural domination.

The present lecture shall be dedicated to a reflection on the relationship between East and West and our role as researchers and intellectuals in that relationship. Research publications and conferences are today an enormous growth industry and play an increasingly important role in cultural as well as political and economic exchanges between states and regions. As students and researchers we cannot conceive of ourselves as someone outside the processes we are studying. We are active participants in the formation of the future patterns of East-West, North-South and global culture.

## **Imperialism in the Post Cold War World**

These last years the East-West relationship has undergone enormous change. I shall mention only six of the great many transformations, but then they point in different directions. The two first are globalising:

1. Free trade capitalism has triumphed to a degree that only a few years ago was unconceivable.
2. Media and communication networks have created a united world of information, making it impossible to defend one cultural territory from external influences unless the inhabitants of that territory consciously accept to shield

themselves.

We live today in a global media capitalism with English as the almost universally accepted currency. A good command of English is as highly valuable today as dollars were a few years ago and gold a little before that again. English is as good as gold.

The third, fourth, fifth and sixths transformations are more equivocal in that they in some ways contradict the globalising trend by setting up new obstacles to East-West rapprochement while in other ways contributing to bring Occidentals and Orientals closer together:

3. There has been a shift in the balance of productive force between East and West, with economic growth taking place mainly in the Far East. This has created an impression in some Western circles that the East-West historic pendulum that has been swinging steadily westwards since the 14th century has started swinging back towards the East.

4. The end of the Cold War and the fall of all Western communist regimes (except Cuba) has confined communism to the Far East and has supplanted the intra-Western East-West ideological divide with a division between the whole West and the real East. Russia has come out as a crisis-ridden Western democracy while its former Eastern comrade states are prospering economically while remaining authoritarian. The main lines of political conflict in this world no longer split Europe and the West in two, but set East and West against each other. It is now the East that is split with a Confucian growth zone in the far end, a populous Hinduist federation in the middle and a fragmented islamic Near East.

5. In the relationship between the West and the Near East there was a devastating clash in 1991—the Gulf War—followed two years later with a handshake between an English-speaking Jew and an Arab-speaking Palestinian. That handshake took place on Western terms in the garden of the West's most sacred temple with the young archbishop coming out of his oval office to act as broadly smiling conciliator.

6. The sixth change is the one that has most

fundamentally contradicted globalisation is the revival of ritual, religion and tradition. This is a response to globalisation, using the same means and media to forge cultural protection for imagined communities small and large. Let me illustrate this point with an experience from the life of this lecture's main inspirator, the secular anti-imperialist Edward Said. In 1989, he held a lecture at the English Faculty of Cairo University, speaking for an hour about nationalism, independence, and liberation as alternative cultural practices to imperialism. Then he was asked by one of the listeners about 'the theocratic alternative'. He mistakenly understood the questioner as asking about 'the Socratic alternative', but was put right very quickly. The listener was a well-spoken young woman whose head was covered by a veil; Said had overlooked her concerns in his anti-clerical and secular zeal.

### **Our Options**

In the present situation of the world, how should "we" (the big global intellectual "we", Westerners and Easterners alike and particularly people like Said with one foot in each camp), relate to the question of East versus West? I see three options: thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis, to use the Hegelian dialectical scheme:

The first option is for those of us who already are Westerners to define ourselves more consciously as such, promote or defend Western values and enlist Eastern converts or clients in the endeavour. Those among us who have sentimental qualms about being Western because of birthplace, skin colour, language or religion, should convert to the Occident because of its superior values: the freedom to say what you want (and sell your soul on TV).

The second anti-thetical option is the opposite one: to engage ourselves as intellectuals in a critical, moral analysis of the centuries-old Western domination of the East while at the same time maintaining a critical distance to repressive social systems in the East.

The third synthetical option will be spared till the end of the lecture. It may not, perhaps, come as a surprise that this is my own choice. Before presenting it as a conclusion, I shall present and discuss one protagonist of the Western and two of the anti-Western stance.

### **The Clash of Civilisations**

My Western man is Samuel P. Huntington, president Lyndon B. Johnson's former national security adviser, now Eaton Professor of the Science of Government and Director of the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University. Over the last years, Huntington has focussed mainly on the successful spread of democracy in what he has called *The Third Wave*. Now, in a programmatic article in the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, he tries to formulate a new American outlook on the world to replace the anti-communist one. Americans need an orderly world of conflict between good and bad. Huntington suggests a conflictual order based on the "Clash of Civilizations". The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural, he says: "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics". He defines a civilization as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. He finds seven or eight such civilizations: the Western (Europe and North-America, which thus is meant to encompass both Huntington himself and most of us present here); the Confucian, the Japanese (which perhaps mainly for American reasons is elevated to a society and civilization unique to itself), the Islamic, the Hindu, the Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American "and possibly African". Differences between these civilizations are in Huntington's view more fundamental than differences among ideologies and political regimes. Communists can become democrats, and rich can become poor, but Russians cannot become Estonians or Azeris become Armenians. Huntington furthermore contends that it is differences among civilizations that have generated history's most prolonged and most violent

conflicts. At present, according to Huntington, the West is at the peak of its power, but is confronting non-Westerns that "increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways" ... "The Velvet Curtain of culture has replaced the Iron Curtain of ideology". The West stands against an Eastern economic bloc, likely to be led by China, and the Gulf War was not the world against Iraq (as Bush presented it), but really "the West against Islam". Huntington is bold with words and goes as far as saying: "The next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations". Western culture's influence in the rest of the world is only superficial: "At a more basic level ... Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures .... The very notion that there could be a "universal civilization" is a Western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies and their emphasis on what distinguishes one people from another". Despite these differences among Asians themselves, Huntington still thinks that the Asians will find together in a Confucian-Islamic connection to challenge Western interests, values and power. The West must meet this challenge, says Huntington, by promoting greater cooperation and unity within its own civilizations, and to limit the expansion of the military strength of Confucian and Islamic states.

I don't think I shall have to explain to you, in this audience, why I find Huntington's world view frightening. Fortunately, the USA is enough of an open society to have given Huntington a lot of backlash already in the following Autumn 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Fouad Ajami explains to him that nation states will continue to act upon their own interests with little regard for civilizational duties, both in the East and the West: "let us be clear: civilizations do not control states, states control civilizations". Therefore most Arab countries did not even side with Iraq in 1990-91, and would certainly not feel any

commitment to supporting Confucians against the West if that was not in their interest. Also Ajami corrects Huntington's idea that Western culture has just had a superficial impact in Asia: "The secular idea, the state system and the balance of power, pop culture jumping tariff walls and barriers, the state as an instrument of welfare, all these have been internalized in the remotest places", says Ajami, from his moderate islamic standpoint. The same says the Chinese dissident Liu Binyan: "though Confucianism is gradually coming back to China, it cannot be compared to the increasingly forceful influence of Western culture on the Chinese people in the last twenty years."

Huntington is also corrected by another scholar based in a Confucian state, Kishore Mahbubani of the Civil Service College, Singapore. He sees Huntington's article as evidence of a dangerous siege mentality: "It will ... come as a great surprise to many Westerners to learn that the rest of the world fears the West even more than the West fears it, especially the threat posed by a wounded West." Mahbubani has comfort for Huntington: There is no likeliness of a Confucian-Islamic connection, because: "The simple truth is that East and Southeast Asia feel more comfortable with the West." But Mahbubani is concerned on behalf of the West. Through budgetary indiscipline, low savings, an eroding work ethic, lacking leadership and excessive democracy, the West "is bringing about its relative decline by its own hand."

Is there something good to be said about the Huntington debate? Yes, one very good thing. By expressing a crude, almost naivistic, White Anglo-Saxon American outlook on the post Cold War world, phrased in the bluntest of terms, Huntington has forced upon the enormous readership of *Foreign Affairs* a basic discussion of some of the most crucial issues facing mankind today. When reading Huntington and his critics, we are forced to make up our minds about some of our inner feelings.

### Critique of Cultural Imperialism

If we move out of solid America and approach the near East, we will find that on the intellectual left, there is a figure who has struggled with Western cultural domination of the East and South for a couple of decades already. I'm thinking of Edward Said, a man with a double culture: on the one side a Palestinian, thus Arab, on the other a Western with great expertise in European and American literature. His book *Orientalism* in 1978 was a broad attack on French and British expertise on Asia. It was an expertise using knowledge and Western-based interpretations to degrade the East as a cultural pendant to economic and political imperialism. And this did not end with decolonization, but continued in the form of American area studies.

This year, Edward Said published a new monumental study entitled *Culture & Imperialism*, and this time he dissects Western fiction, showing how the great novels of the West reflect Western attitudes towards the East and the South. It is in its dealings with the black South that European domination comes out at its crudest, the worst case being Belgian Congo. In Edward Said's book, as in the work of the Dutch and Swedish "Said's": Jan Breman and Sven Lindqvist, the European destruction of the Congo at the turn of the century has come to embody Western inhumanity. All quote Joseph Conrad *The Heart of Darkness*. He appears in the form of a self-defending quote on the first page of Said's new book:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to ...

In Breman's article on primitive racism in a colonial setting, Conrad again appears with a vivid description of the nameless victims, not of a Belgian "bad beginning", but

of the crude idealtype version of Western domination:

Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking ... They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages ...

And Joseph Conrad's Congo novel reappears a third time in the title of Sven Lindqvist's revolt against being European:

The word "Europe" is derived from a semitic word which means precisely darkness. The phrase that appears on the monitor before me is truly European. The thought had been a long time on its way when it was finally phrased in 1898-99 by a Polish author who often thought in French, but wrote in English: Joseph Conrad. The main personality in *The Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz, concludes his treatise on the civilizing mission of the whites among the savages in Africa with a handwritten postscriptum, which summarizes the flamboyant rhetoric's real meaning. It is this phrase that now gleams towards me on the monitor: "Exterminate all the brutes".

This sentence, in its Swedish translation, "Utrotta varenda jävel", became the title of Lindqvist's 1992 book, where he tried to remind the cold war winning west of its past, a shared European past that had led directly to the nazi camps. Lindqvist concludes his "Saidistic" book: "Anywhere in the world where there exists a deeply concealed knowledge which, if it were brought out into the open, would make us conscious, splinter our world view and force



us to question ourselves, there you find the *Heart of Darkness*.

### Occidentalism

Occidentalism is a positive Arab response to Edward Said's critique of Western Orientalism. The man behind the concept Occidentalism is professor Hassan Hanafi, leader of the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Cairo and a former researcher at the United Nations University in Tokyo. Last year he published a book of 881 pages about Occidentalism (*Muquaddima fi ilm al-Istighrab* [Introduction to the science of Occidentalism]). Hanafi's project is to objectivate the Occident in the same way that Westerners have done it with the Orient with the purpose of recreating an independent Arabic intellectual tradition. So far the Occident has been the teacher and we the pupils. How long will this tutelage last? Hanafi asked in an interview with a French journal. And he answered the question himself: as long as we consider the West just as a source of knowledge and not as an object of inquiry. Arabs must learn to dissect the West the same way one does it with a mouse in the laboratory. Hanafi believes in the proposition that is often heard in the West itself that the West is in decline. Asked by the French journal about Francis Fukuyama's claim that History has come to its end, Hanafi answers: "For Arabs, Africans, Latin-Americans, Asians, History has not ended. It has perhaps not even started."<sup>1</sup> History does not coincide in East and West. For Arabs, the period that Westerners call "middle age" was the real Antiquity. Now there is time for a renaissance.

But Hassan Hanafi does not see the Japanese experience as a source of inspiration: "Japan is a country I know well", he explains, "it is at one and the same time a giant and a dwarf ... in the field of philosophy it is a dwarf. There exists a French, German, Anglo-saxon philosophy, but no Japanese. It is the most translating country in the

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Hassan Hanafi in *Arabies*, 1992, reproduced in Center for kulturforskning, NYT, September 1993.

world. Translating but not creating." Arabs, however, can be creative if only they are liberated from the mythical domination of the West. Arabs must not be fooled by the idea of a universal culture. The idea of a universal culture is a myth destined to fool the dominated. This has been done by the ancient Egyptian civilization, later by the Chinese, Hindus and by the Occident. Hanafi's project is to desanctify in the eyes of the Arabs the Western gods: Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Marx.

### Conclusion

The third option (my choice) is exactly the one that Hanafi warns against: to reject the whole East-West dichotomy in favour of a universal approach. East and West have so much in common, and both East and West differ so much internally that any attempt to understand the world from the standpoint of an East-West divide is bound to fail. We should thus reject Samuel Huntington and Hassan Hanafi's contention that humanism always serves as a smokescreen for Western domination. It must be possible to do what Liu Binyan suggests: to use "the best of all civilizations, not emphasizing the differences between them", to promote global civilization, create or build one world on the basis of shared human values, fight seclusiveness and protectionism without also promoting domination. Bridges can be built on the basis of drawings from architects on both sides, and in the way that will permit people on each side to cross them. The basic idea behind the humanistic approach is that in essence every human being is alike. The differences highlighted by cultural relativists should be seen as exceptions to the general rule, and should never be exaggerated.

I take the liberty of enlisting, without having asked for permission, Edward Said, among the supporters of the universal, cross-cultural enterprise. In his *Culture & Imperialism*, he relates an idealized version of the Middle East he knew as a young man: (pages 361-2). Towards the end of Said's book he returns to his wish to place knowing

about others on top, and puts forward a vision of being perfectly homeless in an open world. This he does by quoting a beautiful passage by a twelfth-century European monk from Saxony, Hugo of St. Victor:

The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his. (Said 407)

This must have been difficult in the 12th century, but should perhaps be easier in the age of satellites. The synthetical humanistic option may perhaps be considered as idealistic, but it is not at all devoid of realism: a whole range of powerful forces are on the side of cultural bridge-builders. Let me just name a few: computer industries, English teachers, publishers, satellites, travel agencies, airway systems, telecommunication companies, high tech capitalism, hotels, international funding agencies, former colonial institutions, international research institutes, refugees and immigrants, and finally: an enormous quantity of good and bad culturally mixed restaurants, one of which is the *Coruna*. *Coruna* is neither Spanish, nor Italian, Latin American, Philippin or Scandinavian, but a wonderful amalgam of pizza, pasta, American sauce and Danish tomatoes. Its food may tilt towards the West, but then the waiters are border-crossing Kurds. Let *Coruna* bridge us together tonight.

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