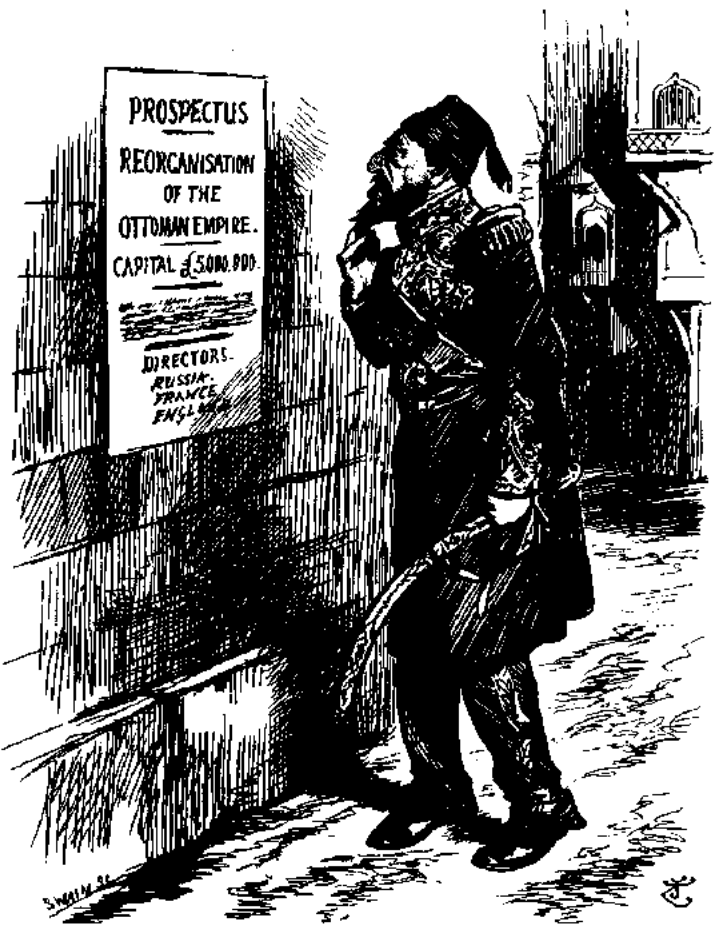


FUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI—November 26, 1896.



"TURKEY LIMITED."

SULTAN. "BISMILLIA! MAKE ME INTO A LIMITED COMPANY? M'M-AH-SPOSE THEY'LL ALLOW ME TO JOIN THE BOARD AFTER ALLOTMENT?"

[It is reported that "among the proposals" which the Powers have "under serious consideration," is a scheme for raising a "new Turkish Loan of five millions sterling," to be applied to the cost of the judiciary, revenue, and police service "under European control."]

RETHINKING MIDDLE EAST POLITICS

State Formation and Development

Simon Bromley

Polity Press

1

Understanding the Middle East

Three ways of understanding the non-European world

Analysis of the societies of the non-European world has generally operated with a series of categories derived from the analysis of the West. This can take one of two different but related forms. In the first case, non-European societies are negatively evaluated *vis-à-vis* the West, and their (lack of) development is explained by listing those features which are taken to account for the dynamism of the West, and then by asserting their absence elsewhere. Simple and clear though this procedure may be, it does not make for good logic or history. Logically, it cannot but assume precisely what it needs to prove: namely, the existence of a single, evolutionary path to modernity. And this in turn imparts a disabling circularity to historical accounts of the *absence* of development in the non-European world. In reply, it might be argued that this path is not an assumption but a fact, and that one cannot prove the existence of something which did not take place – a non-European path to modernity. After all, by definition, the breakthrough into sustained, if not yet sustainable, economic growth only occurred once and it took place in the West, from where it conquered the rest of the world. Whether it would have developed elsewhere at some later date, without the Western impact, we can never know. Irrespective of the logic of this defence, it merely exposes the second problem commonly associated with this style of argument. As it offers a description of non-European societies in terms of what they are *not*, it inevitably provides strictly residual, even circular,

accounts of their history. The West developed because it had the following features – and the non-European world remained undeveloped because it lacked them. But what is the evidence that it was *this lack* that accounts for the fortunes of the non-European world? Why, its absence of development. The teleology is complete.

A second form of argument resists positing an evolutionary path to modernity in the West, arguing instead that it is not the absence of epochal change that requires explanation but the 'European miracle'. To some extent, this was the path adopted by Max Weber. More recently, this contingent development has been explained in a number of different ways (see, for example, Jones, 1981; Hall 1985; Mann 1986; and Gellner 1988). Most accounts involve some mixture of factors such as the particular ecology of north-western Europe, the presence of extensive market relations, the existence of a state separate from civil society, the persistence of a competitive state system and the ideological input provided by the Christian Church. What these otherwise varied accounts share is a recognition of the political and cultural embeddedness of economics in pre-modern societies. Before the advent of modernity, there does not exist an institutionally separate realm of production and distribution. That is to say, as Karl Polanyi argued in *The Great Transformation*, in pre-modern societies the 'economy, as a rule, is submerged in . . . social relationships' (1944:46). Understood thus, it is the emergence of a separate, unhindered, purely economic sphere that is in need of explanation.

In Weber's case, it was the process of Occidental rationalization that was both unique and central to modernity. Following the mainstream of European social and political thought from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, Weber tended to depict the world of the Orient as a form of irrational despotism. His various accounts of 'rationalization' are an attempt to show how calculability, above all economic rationality, emerged in Occidental history. In the fields of science, art, administration, the state and the economy, Weber contrasted the formal rationality of the West with the affective and traditional modes of activity typical in the Orient. The somewhat differently focused work of historical and comparative sociology can be illustrated by reference to John Hall's emblematic study of the causes and consequences of the rise of the West, *Powers and Liberties* (1985). Hall argues that China did not develop because the imperial state placed a capstone on economic

advance; that Hindu India stagnated as a result of the hierarchical culture of the Brahmans, which prevented the emergence of an autonomous economy and contributed to political instability; and that in the world of Islam, tribalism combined with a rigid doctrine 'to make political rule alien, transitory and predatory', such that the economy never 'gained real autonomy' and the state never provided market-supporting services for society (1985:110, 101).

In these kinds of account, then, it is the disembedding of the 'economy' and 'rationality' that provides the central narrative of modernity. Theoretically, it is characteristically argued that social power comes in three kinds, based on access to the means of production, violence and cognition – the rule of producers, warriors and clerics – and each of these powers can, in the appropriate circumstances, organize, and be dominant within, the social order as a whole.¹ 'Modernity' begins when production and cognition can free themselves from the restraints imposed by the warriors and the clerics (see, especially, Hall 1985; and Gellner 1988). Once free from political and religious control, 'trade' and the 'market', or rationality and science, function as essentially unilinear vectors of modernity, as if the latter can be adequately understood as a *quantitative* expansion of production and science.

What such perspectives cannot provide is an account of *why* pre-modern societies had the character that they did, and hence they can no more supply an adequate *theory* of the process and results of disembedding.² This problem arises directly from the methodology adopted. For if we ask of a given society, why in this case was, say, religion dominant, we are offered a historical description of its dominance in the case in question or, at best, a claim that religion (clerics) provides a wider range of services to society than any other actor. This reply involves an apparently

1 In fact, Mann reckons that there are four types of social power, but this complication does not affect the basic argument.

2 Gellner's argument in *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988) is something of an exception here, in so far as he is at pains to insist on the novelty of the break represented by modernity and seeks to account for the generic stasis of agrarian social orders. Beyond this, Gellner's originality lies in his argument that cognition is also socially embedded, normally serving the functional requirements of communal order and reproduction. Thus Gellner adds that the continuous productive innovation of a market economy presupposes a process of cumulative cognitive expansion, whose discovery is both fortuitous and irreversible. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the main features of Gellner's account of the stagnant character of pre-modern society are consistent with Marx's treatment of pre-capitalist societies in the *Grundrisse* – though Gellner certainly does not share this judgement.

obvious appeal to the facts. But, in fact, it rests on the empiricist *assumption* that, in Maurice Godelier's formulation, 'the visible order of things furnishes a self-evident demonstration of their reasons for being, that their order makes them intelligible' (1986:127). This is such a powerful ideology, one that is so aligned with our everyday commonsense experience, that it takes a considerable effort to see that it is in fact just an assumption, as much in need of proof as any other.

Unlike the synthetic, empiricist approaches sketched above, it was questions like this that preoccupied Karl Marx. Marx did, indeed, ask why the 'economy' occupied a specific position within a given social order, and why it subsisted within other kinds of social relations. And he reasoned that the dominance of a particular type of social relation in any given case could not be accounted for by its general characteristics, properties it possesses in different contexts, but must rather involve some aspect of its functioning specific to each case where it is, in fact, dominant. If we could discover what this aspect was, then we could *explain*, rather than merely *describe*, the dominance of the phenomenon concerned. The hypothesis on which Marx fixed was that in each case the specific functioning of dominant social relations concerned their ability to organize the production of society's material infrastructure. As Godelier has put it: 'social relations dominate the overall functioning of a society and organize its long-term reproduction *if – and only if – they function at the same time as relations of production, if they constitute the social armature of that society's material base*' (1986:208). Let us emphasize that this is merely a hypothesis, whose validity can only be established empirically and historically. It was never intended by Marx to be used as a supra-historical theory. The crucial difference between this perspective and those sketched above is that it does not begin by privileging Western societies and then move on to explain non-Western development as a deviation. Rather, it applies a common methodology of explanation to all social orders.

Islam and modernity

These general considerations about the social theory of the West and non-European societies have a particular relevance in the case of the Middle East. In the first instance, it was through the contrasts

drawn between the Orient and the Occident that the self-definition of modernity, as well as the typifications of the Islamic world, were simultaneously accomplished. At root, the West was universal, rational, pluralist and secular, while the Orient wallowed in particularism, tradition, despotism and religious obscurantism. In turn, this self-definition became part of the unwitting conceptual baggage of the contemporary social sciences, especially as mediated through the thought of Max Weber, in so far as modernity came to be formulated in terms of such abstractions as rationalization, science or industrial society. By these and other means, Orientalism – itself one specific component of a more general Eurocentrism – became a seemingly ever-reproduced feature of Western discourse about both itself and the Islamic world. For these reasons, the critique of such thinking must go beyond the mere identification and rejection of Orientalist depictions of the Islamic world. It is not sufficient to discard Orientalism for the apparently universal categories of social science, since the latter are to a considerable extent the mirror image of the former.

Thus, from modernization theory through to more recent musings on post-modernism, much of the social science debate on the character of the Middle East has remained caught in the snares of this formative intellectual history, counterposing Islam and modernity, without ever becoming fully aware of its complicity with the ideological prejudgements of modernity. At its simplest, one argument runs that Islam is either incompatible with or poses a challenge to the institutions and the project of modernity (Ahmed 1992). A somewhat subtler claim to the effect that Islam is compatible with, yet not really of, modernity has also been made (Gellner 1992). How, then, are we to make progress in this deeply contested terrain?

Clearly, a great deal turns on how these assertions implicitly understand the social reality which terms such as 'Islam' and 'modernity' seek to grasp. What are the assumed features of societies described as Islamic? What contrasts are offered to distinguish pre-modern and modern societies? How is the transition from the Islamic to the modern understood? Too often, the answers to such questions, when made explicit, are so crude as to be scarcely credible as serious explanations, and yet too clever to be dismissed as merely ignorant polemics. (After all, arguments about social development being blocked by a poverty of semantic resources would look pretty silly trying to explain the non-emergence of

capitalism in ancient Greece. Yet they have acquired a unique respectability in studies of the Middle East.)

This state of affairs has, of course, been the subject of a justly celebrated critique by Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1985). Said defines Orientalism in a number of different ways (Ahmad 1992). On occasion he speaks as if there really was a unified cultural and intellectual tradition in the West, beginning with the Greeks and culminating in the Enlightenment, that could be known through its texts and that has always been bent on subordinating the non-European other. This Orientalism is characterized by a style of thought, a distinctive ontology and epistemology, based on a categorical distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident', which runs from Aeschylus to Marx. The other major definition of Orientalism is in terms of the culture of colonialism.³ Thus, Orientalism is sometimes related to the set of institutions and practices which accompanied European colonial expansion into the 'Orient', and it can thus be regarded as:

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. . . . [In this way] The Orient was viewed as if framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison, the illustrated manual. Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison or manual for scrutiny, study, judgement, discipline, or governing. (1985:3, 41)

In Said's account, then, Orientalism is more a product of a European culture than a knowledge of the Orient, and as such it contrives to produce a new reality adequate to its own ways of knowing. The vicious circle is completed, Said avers, when 'the modern Orient . . . participates in its own Orientalizing' (1985:325); that is to say, when the elite of the Arab-Islamic world becomes ensnared by an Orientalist cultural imperialism then the circular, self-confirming character of its ideology reigns supreme. Both the West and local elites remain impervious to the real voices and aspirations of the region.

³ Said in fact offers a third definition: Orientalism as an area of modern academic knowledge, but this is really parasitic on the other two versions.

drawn between the Orient and the Occident that the self-definition of modernity, as well as the typifications of the Islamic world, were simultaneously accomplished. At root, the West was universal, rational, pluralist and secular, while the Orient wallowed in particularism, tradition, despotism and religious obscurantism. In turn, this self-definition became part of the unwitting conceptual baggage of the contemporary social sciences, especially as mediated through the thought of Max Weber, in so far as modernity came to be formulated in terms of such abstractions as rationalization, science or industrial society. By these and other means, Orientalism – itself one specific component of a more general Eurocentrism – became a seemingly ever-reproduced feature of Western discourse about both itself and the Islamic world. For these reasons, the critique of such thinking must go beyond the mere identification and rejection of Orientalist depictions of the Islamic world. It is not sufficient to discard Orientalism for the apparently universal categories of social science, since the latter are to a considerable extent the mirror image of the former.

Thus, from modernization theory through to more recent musings on post-modernism, much of the social science debate on the character of the Middle East has remained caught in the snares of this formative intellectual history, counterposing Islam and modernity, without ever becoming fully aware of its complicity with the ideological prejudgements of modernity. At its simplest, one argument runs that Islam is either incompatible with or poses a challenge to the institutions and the project of modernity (Ahmed 1992). A somewhat subtler claim to the effect that Islam is compatible with, yet not really of, modernity has also been made (Gellner 1992). How, then, are we to make progress in this deeply contested terrain?

Clearly, a great deal turns on how these assertions implicitly understand the social reality which terms such as 'Islam' and 'modernity' seek to grasp. What are the assumed features of societies described as Islamic? What contrasts are offered to distinguish pre-modern and modern societies? How is the transition from the Islamic to the modern understood? Too often, the answers to such questions, when made explicit, are so crude as to be scarcely credible as serious explanations, and yet too clever to be dismissed as merely ignorant polemics. (After all, arguments about social development being blocked by a poverty of semantic resources would look pretty silly trying to explain the non-emergence of

capitalism in ancient Greece. Yet they have acquired a unique respectability in studies of the Middle East.)

This state of affairs has, of course, been the subject of a justly celebrated critique by Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1985). Said defines Orientalism in a number of different ways (Ahmad 1992). On occasion he speaks as if there really was a unified cultural and intellectual tradition in the West, beginning with the Greeks and culminating in the Enlightenment, that could be known through its texts and that has always been bent on subordinating the non-European other. This Orientalism is characterized by a style of thought, a distinctive ontology and epistemology, based on a categorical distinction between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident', which runs from Aeschylus to Marx. The other major definition of Orientalism is in terms of the culture of colonialism.³ Thus, Orientalism is sometimes related to the set of institutions and practices which accompanied European colonial expansion into the 'Orient', and it can thus be regarded as:

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. . . . [In this way] The Orient was viewed as if framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison, the illustrated manual. Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison or manual for scrutiny, study, judgement, discipline, or governing. (1985:3, 41)

In Said's account, then, Orientalism is more a product of a European culture than a knowledge of the Orient, and as such it contrives to produce a new reality adequate to its own ways of knowing. The vicious circle is completed, Said avers, when 'the modern Orient . . . participates in its own Orientalizing' (1985:325); that is to say, when the elite of the Arab-Islamic world becomes ensnared by an Orientalist cultural imperialism then the circular, self-confirming character of its ideology reigns supreme. Both the West and local elites remain impervious to the real voices and aspirations of the region.

³ Said in fact offers a third definition: Orientalism as an area of modern academic knowledge, but this is really parasitic on the other two versions.

Notwithstanding its rhetorical power and undoubted importance, Said's account is open to a number of objections. In terms of his substantive acceptance of the unity of 'Western' culture, Said replicates the idealist construction of European history, and thereby antedates the origins of Orientalism by failing to distinguish, on the one hand, the ethnic and religious provincialisms common to all cultures, and on the other, a specifically Eurocentric 'theory of world history and, departing from it, a global political project' (Amin 1989:75; see also Rodinson 1987). Equally, the theoretical procedure adopted, an analysis of Orientalist 'discourse' – understood in Foucauldian terms as a set of statements with both their own internal procedures for validating knowledge and their intrinsic relation to power – inevitably attributes a homogeneity to the phenomenon that it does not in fact possess, and falsely attributes an essentialist will to power to Western ways of knowing. The result is a position that is difficult to distinguish from cultural relativism, thereby laying Said open to the charge of producing an 'inverted Orientalism'. The way in which this combination of substantive and theoretical propositions leads to a damaging loss of analytical cogency has been well put by Aijaz Ahmad:

What gave European forms of these prejudices their special force in history, with devastating consequences for the actual lives of countless millions and expressed ideologically in full-blown Eurocentric racisms, was not some transhistorical process of ontological obsession and falsity – some gathering of unique forces in domains of discourse – but, quite specifically, the power of colonial capitalism, which then gave rise to other sorts of powers. (1992:184)

Finally, and perhaps most damagingly of all for our purposes, Said's claim that the Orient has been constructed by the West and that it is now starting to participate in its own Orientalizing can direct attention away from an analysis of the social and material reality of Middle East societies. In so doing, it is in some danger of encouraging an apologetic view in which the forces at play in the region are seen to operate very largely beyond its control.

Thus, while Said has identified a genuine problem in the study of the Middle East, *Orientalism* does little to provide us with the tools with which to build an alternative understanding of the region itself. What follows is a modest attempt to assist in that task. To this end, I will begin by outlining the different phases in the historical relationship between Europe and the Middle East and

by relating this to the main themes of Eurocentric treatments of the Orient. Next, I will critically review a range of writing on the Middle East, moving from (more or less) 'Orientalist' writing to less distorted forms of social and material analysis. And, finally, on the basis of this critique, I will present a historical materialist framework for analysing the development of the Middle East. The aim of this perspective is to refuse the temptation to offer residual and descriptive accounts of non-European history and to avoid essentialist and ahistorical judgements about 'culture'. In this search for a more adequate understanding, we need to avoid the use of such reified terms as 'Islam' and 'modernity' as explanations for social orders putatively identified as Islamic or modern. In their place, we must try to think historically the precise sets of social relations and material practices that constitute and transform these societies. Obviously, these relations and practices are not static, as they only exist in so far as they are contingently reproduced by diverse social forces. It is only a historical study of these structures that will enable us to escape the 'Orientalist' worldview.

From Orientalism to Eurocentrism

Contacts between 'Europe' and the 'East' pre-dated the emergence of Islam and the later consolidation of the Islamic empires. By way of trade and conquest, Europeans had already developed extensive relations with the East. At this time, and in fact for much of the subsequent history of Islamic-Christian interaction, the very terms of the conventional opposition between the 'West' (the Graeco-Roman world and its heritage) and the 'East' (Egypt, Persia and Mesopotamia) are misleading. Not only did the long-distance trade of the tributary social formations involve significant interaction in the Mediterranean basin, but also much of the Greek heritage (as well as the considerable corpus of Islamic scientific knowledge) entered European culture through Latin translations of Arabic texts. Moreover, levels of economic development were comparable across these areas until the late seventeenth century: Asia produced some 70 per cent of world industrial production around 1700 with 60 per cent of the world's population; although standards of living were generally higher in Europe – due to greater agricultural productivity – they were of a similar order, and the variations within each continent were far wider than any aggregate differences between the two.

In medieval Europe, the Western definition of the Islamic world was powerfully shaped by the Crusades. These were 'a manifestation of the Christian Holy War, fought against the infidels in the East, in Spain and in Germany and against heretics, schismatics and Christian lay opponents of the Church for the recovery of property or in defence' (Riley-Smith 1977:74). Legitimated by the papacy, the Crusades began in the eleventh century and declined in the fourteenth, but papal authorizations and grants of crusade indulgences continued until the late eighteenth century. As Rodinson has noted: 'What began as localized warfare grew to a mobilization of all of Europe. Europe joined the Spaniards in their struggle – the Reconquista – and the Normans marched to Italy to fight Islam' (Rodinson 1987:6). In part, this was based on the economic expansion of the Italian commercial cities throughout the Mediterranean world. At first, economic transactions with the Muslim East were carried out through intermediaries such as Greeks, Syrians and Jews, but as commercial relations developed European merchants established direct contact.

At this stage, ethnic and religious provincialisms existed in both the Christian and the Islamic world, but in neither case were these linked either to legitimating theories of world history or to universalist claims about the appropriate forms of social organization. In fact, the threat from the Mongols and the discovery of a pagan world, together with divisions in the Christian world, later led to a greater tolerance of Islam. The subsequent Ottoman advances into Europe briefly revived concern about the Turks (indeed the Knights of St John continued war against the Turks until 1798), but this threat was now seen in primarily secular, rather than theological, terms.

The sharp, theoretical dichotomy between 'West' and 'East' was only formulated in the modern political theory of the Renaissance. And in the subsequent development of European thought during the Enlightenment, in the work of Montesquieu, Smith and Hegel, a composite category of 'oriental despotism' was refined that has subsequently served to account for the different trajectories of 'Occidental' and 'Oriental' history (see Anderson 1974b).⁴ For this Orientalism equally defined *both* the backward, stagnant nature of the 'East' and,

⁴ In Marx's hands this became the 'Asiatic mode of production', a notion whose theoretical status in Marx's work seems to bear an inverse relationship to the volume of commentary on it. We return to this, thankfully briefly, later.

by contrast, the rational, dynamic character of the 'West'. The origins of 'Orientalism' were thus intimately related to the process of self-definition that accompanied the transition to capitalism in Europe and the ensuing European conquest of the globe.

As to the popular dissemination of such views in the eighteenth century, the translation of *Arabian Nights* by Antoine Galland between 1704 and 1717 was of immense importance:

the Muslim world no longer appeared the province of the Antichrist, but rather an essentially exotic, picturesque world where fantastic genies could, at their whim, do good or evil. . . . [the liberal sexual attitudes of Islam for men] were now becoming highly exciting to a society increasingly preoccupied with eroticism. (Rodinson 1987:44, 49)

Thereafter, the distinctive emphases of Eurocentric thought have resonated through Western discourse on the East. The Oriental matrix of ancient Greece has been marginalized, Christianity has been perceived as the key to the cultural unity and dynamism of Europe and the Orient itself has been constructed in racist ways based on a religious essentialism (Amin 1989). Itself part of the culture of the modern capitalist world, the specifically Middle East variant of a more general Eurocentrism was rooted in the interactions and conflicts that comprised the fall of the Islamic empires in general and the Ottoman domains in particular. Sharpened by imperialism, and aided by the comparative study of religion and language and a pseudo-scientific biology, the Romantic nationalism within Europe fashioned the idea of '*homo islamicus*, a notion widely accepted even today' (Rodinson 1987:60).

The subsequent imperialist domination of parts of the Ottoman (Turkish) and Safavid (Persian) empires was secured before the discovery of oil. Of course, both 'Islam' and 'oil' have been important in shaping the West's relations with the region, but the pattern of conflict and exploitation is at once broader and deeper than this conventional imagery supposes. As already noted, the modern Middle East was not a region existing outside of, and developing independently from, Europe, only entering the Western orbit with the finding of oil and the formation of the state of Israel. This much is obvious. Yet all too often, the active, determining role of the European powers in the political, economic and cultural formation of the region is neglected in favour of a simplistic emphasis on

resources and religion. And while Maxime Rodinson may be right to suggest that the political challenges to Eurocentrism resulting from decolonization, together with the development of a nominally universal social science, betoken a fundamental crisis of such ways of thinking, it is hard not to recognize these assumptions in a great deal of current commentary about the Middle East. Indeed, as I have suggested above and as will be seen in more detail below, the social sciences have embodied not a little of the 'Orientalist' wisdom.

The intransigence of Islamic civilization

For the most part, 'Orientalist' writing about the Islamic world is marked by a pronounced tendency towards culturalist forms of explanation. The significant features of culturalist analysis are threefold: first, it defines culture as the key moment of a social order, the determinant of its evolution; second, it then reifies non-European, in this case Islamic, culture by treating it as an unchanging tradition which condemns the society to relative stagnation; and third, it offers an idealist form of explanation by positing a unique dynamism to the culture of the West, namely Christianity. A notable reinvention of this thesis, cast in a strongly culturalist form, is to be found in the scholarly innovation in Islamic historiography represented by the work of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook (Crone and Cook 1977; Crone 1980; Cook 1983; and Crone and Hinds 1986). These authors have offered a bold and challenging reinterpretation of early Islamic history, but in their seminal study of *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (1977), a sweeping verdict on its subsequent evolution is entered in the following terms:

Whether the foreign goods were accepted or rejected, the Muslims acknowledged only one legitimate source of their cultural and religious ideals: the Arabia of their Prophet. For barbarians who had conquered the most ancient and venerable centres of human civilisation, this is a *tour de force* without parallel in history; but by the same token the fate of civilization in Islam could only be an exceptionally unhappy one. . . . Islamic history is marked by a striking narrowness and fixity of semantic resources. It was of course compounded from the same trio of classical, Hebraic and barbarian elements as was the history of Europe. But whereas in Europe the three sources remained distinct, Islam rejected the first and fused

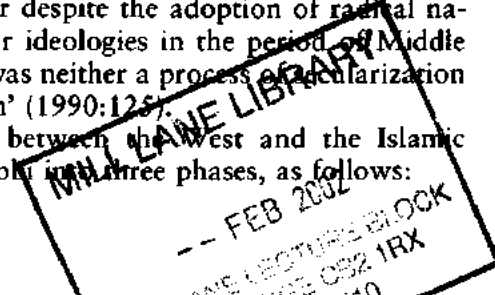
the other two; and as a result its resources are heavily concentrated in a single and specifically religious tradition. . . . [And] just as the single source of the Islamic tradition accounts for the austere unitary character of so much of Islamic history, so also the plurality of sources of the culture of Europe is a precondition for its complex historical evolution. (Cook and Crone 1977:106, 139)

There it is, then; history determined by a fixity of semantic resources. A judgement all the more forced, given that the account offered of the *formation* of the Islamic polity and tradition is considerably more nuanced (see Crone 1980).

The work of the sociologist Bassam Tibbi goes further than most in setting such judgements within a broader theory of modern societies. Tibbi argues that the global spread of the European process of civilization has been based on a Western, scientific and hence technological culture that is different from and alien to the pre-industrial cultures of the non-Western world. Islam, understood as a cultural system, is defined as the religion of the Koran, finally and fully revealed, and omniscient in social affairs by virtue of its status as law. In this cultural system, 'Law, in this case the *shari'a*, is the complex of theological and worldly regulations of Islam. Arabic is the medium of articulation in this sociocultural system. Islamic educational institutions [*madrassa*] are in addition the place in which this religiocultural tradition, practised in Arabic, is passed on' (1990:58).

Adopting a structural-functionalist model of social change, Tibbi sees secularization in terms of a '*functional differentiation of the social system as well as a redefinition of the sacred to suit the altered situation*' (1990:125). Accordingly, the Islamic societies are portrayed as stagnant from the time of the collapse of the Arab empires in the thirteenth century, and are then seen as responding to an externally imposed, secular dynamic originating in Europe. Tibbi argues that in these circumstances the component elements of Islamic culture – the *shari'a*, Koranic Arabic and the *madrassa* – have all constituted and continue to constitute formidable cultural barriers to social change. For despite the adoption of radical nationalist and socialist, secular ideologies in the period of Middle East state formation, 'there was neither a process of secularization nor a theological reformation' (1990:125).

The asymmetrical contest between the West and the Islamic Middle East is divided by Tibbi into three phases, as follows:



1. . . . [between the 1790s and 1930s, there was] a revitalization of Islam as an indigenous culture so that it could assert itself against the expanding new power, Europe . . . [which] had both *modernist* components (the integration of modern science and technology in Islam) as well as *millenarian-nativist* components (a return to pre-Islamic Islam as a defensive culture against the alien). 2. . . . [between the two World Wars] new Western-educated elites evolved who were better able to lead the anticolonial struggle. The ideologies of secular nationalism and socialism replaced the political ideology of Islam. 3. . . . [and after 1967] the suppression of secular ideologies in favour of a resurgence of Islam as a political ideology. (1990:125)

Thus it is the cultural rigidity of Islam in the face of Western-inspired projects of social transformation and the rapid social change thereby engendered which accounts for the assertion of political Islam. And the project of the latter is a populist opposition to the failure of the secular regimes. In turn, Islamist movements receive an additional impetus from the international consequences of the failure of socio-economic development, namely the widening economic gap between the Middle East and the West.

Descriptively illuminating as it is, the problems with this account are twofold. In the first place, while a functional differentiation of the social structure may well characterize modernity, it does not explain anything simply to posit such an evolution: the concept of differentiation is too bland to tell us anything specific about the changing forms of social relations and material practices. The precise *social* character of Western development remains obscure. And if we ask why there was no change in the Islamic world, then we come to the second difficulty with the argument. The Islamic world saw no differentiation because of the rigidity of Islam as a cultural system. But what is the evidence that it was *this* that blocked social change? The lack of development, of course. As with culturalist formulations in general, the argument is obviously circular and hence tells us nothing. The contrast drawn may be real enough, and the thesis of cultural blockage may even be true. But to establish the truth of the comparison we need independent argument or evidence relating to the fixity of Islam. No more than Crone and Cook does Tibbi seek to supply it, and they are not alone. In fact, this kind of claim has long been the mainstay of Anglo-American political science and sociology when confronted with the Middle East. As Lisa Anderson has pointed out in respect

of the former, when the expectations of modernization theory fell from favour, 'political scientists working on the Middle East took up the study of "tradition" ' (1990:61).

This cultural and political 'intransigence of Islamic civilization' (Crone and Cook 1977), as contrasted with the complexity and dynamism of the Christian case is, of course, a mainstay of European social and political thought. Indeed, though played out in differing registers, this is the chord that has been struck loudest in Western discourse on the Middle East. And in one very particular sense it registers something which is undoubtedly true: namely, that capitalism developed in the West and conquered the rest of the world; and that the Islamic empires stagnated, declined and were overrun. But a great deal turns on precisely how this difference is reckoned and accounted for.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to identify two ways of explaining the divergence between the West and the Islamic world. On the one hand, there is the culturalist position instanced above, which when explicitly theorized is usually underpinned by a more or less functionalist model of social order and social change. On the other hand, there is a tradition of materialist analysis, originating with Ibn Khaldun, passing through Karl Marx and Max Weber, into the work of contemporary students of the Middle East. However, while Marx and Weber to some extent share a common materialism, we shall see that their respective frameworks can be developed in different directions and with important points of contrast. The Weberian tradition, itself the point of departure for much comparative sociology, represents an ambiguous departure from the culturalist position. And it is to the nature of this development that I now turn.

Islam in the path of rationalization

We have seen that culturalist accounts of Islam and the West are both idealist and circular, instances of the first kind of analysis of non-European societies noted at the outset. The work of Max Weber and Ernest Gellner, by contrast, is on an altogether different plane. While their analyses are not without problems, which I shall try to explore below, Weber and, especially, Gellner provide challenging accounts of the place of Islam in the modern world. Though culturalist strains persist in their arguments, materialist

explanations are also to be found. However, notwithstanding the considerable insight of Weber and Gellner's work, a satisfactory explanation of the place of the Islamic world in modernity eludes both thinkers. The reason for this, I will argue, lies in both their inability to break with abstract, ahistorical treatments of 'Islam' and 'modernity' and their refusal to theorize (as opposed to describe) the changing forms taken by social relations in different kinds of society. Weber and Gellner, then, represent the second kind of analysis of non-European societies noted at the beginning of this chapter.

Max Weber, rationality and Islam

On one reading of his *œuvre*, it was Max Weber who definitively fixed (for the modern social sciences) the question of the distinctiveness of the West in cultural terms. In his Preface to the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* Weber asked: 'What chain of events in the West and only here led to the appearance of cultural phenomena which nevertheless – as we at least like to believe – developed in a way which was of universal importance and value?' Weber never offered a settled, clear and unambiguous answer to this question. Moreover, his scattered writings on rationality and rationalization – generally taken to form the central theme of his comparative sociology – seem to imply many sites of rationalization, each with its own distinct mode of rationality. Despite this, Rogers Brubaker has suggested that what Weber calls the 'specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture' is 'not simply a conceptual mosaic' (1984:30). Brubaker identifies three themes which span Weber's discussion of rationality: first, rational conduct is based on the knowledge provided by systematic and empirical science and its application in technology; second, a rationalized social order is characterized by the '*Versachlichung der Gewaltherrschaft*', the 'objectification' or 'depersonalization' of power; and third, rationality involves control understood as the calculated application of rules in fixed procedures.

Furthermore, Weber did not give a univocal answer as to the origins of Occidental rationality. At times, as in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he argued that Protestantism, and especially its ascetic sects, fosters a premium on public conduct towards, as well as a psychological impulse for, orderly, sober, this-worldly activity; in short, the Protestant ethic generates the

spirit of capitalism (Marshall 1982). On other occasions, Weber offered a more eclectic account of the institutional preconditions for the operation of market rationality (Collins 1986). Conventionally, the two strands have been reconciled by noting Weber's (highly debatable) claim that without the additional spark provided by the (Protestant) spirit of capitalism, the mere presence of its institutional preconditions nowhere gave rise to capitalism in its modern form. In either case, however, it is capitalism that is seen as the main driving force for rationalization in the modern world, and Weber's model of capitalist rationality (itself taken from neoclassical economics) serves as the template by which other forms of rationalization are typified. This comes close to rendering the whole case for Protestantism circular.

In general, as Derek Sayer has argued, Weber:

in effect . . . generalizes Marx's model of alienation with the result that capitalism becomes a special case – if a uniquely 'fateful' one – of a more encompassing 'expropriation' which is the foundation of the discipline which sinews the modern subject into the 'machines' of modern society. Severance of the material means of a given human activity from its agents (which, just as for Marx, implies their isolation as solitary individuals) is the generic basis for all institutional rationalization. (1991:135)⁵

Overall, then, Weber's writings appear to oscillate between an attempt to define the 'specifically constructed' but universally significant '*rationalism*' of Western culture and a comparative historical approach concerned to explain the specificity of modern *capitalism*. Prophet of universal rationalization, or synthetic, comparative historian: these have been the poles around which interpretations of Weber's sociology have turned. What is less ambiguous is Weber's statement that his methodological device of the 'ideal-type' consciously emphasizes 'what is and was in opposition to Western cultural development'. Accordingly, the typification of the Oriental is, in large measure, the mirror image of the Occidental.

The result of this is that Weber's substantive categories of historical explanation prejudice what needs to be explained (see Mommsen 1974 and Hindess 1977). For their construction as ideal

⁵ Sayer does not appear to recognize that by generalizing a historical argument, Weber is in danger of reifying the process of social change that he seeks to explain.

types builds into concepts which are meant to be explanatory features which are also taken to describe the Occidental world. This difficulty carries over into Weber's studies of religion: on the one hand a counterpointed footnote to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, or on the other a genuinely comparative study. Anthony Giddens has noted that Weber's studies of religion 'were intended as analyses of divergent modes of the rationalization of culture, and as attempts to trace out the significance of such divergencies for socio-economic development' (1976:5), but whether the characterization of such modes is truly comparative or merely a set of negative, residual contrasts with ascetic Protestantism remains unclear.

Weber argued that Hinduism is ascetic but 'other-worldly', hence it could not provide an ethic oriented to worldly activity; that Confucianism is 'this-worldly' but not ascetic, thus it could not direct worldly activity towards a systematic calculation of gain; and that only Protestantism is ascetic and this-worldly, and thereby able to rationalize worldly activity towards capitalist ends. The religion about which Weber had least to say was Islam, but what he did say is none the less extremely interesting (see, especially, Turner 1974). Islam, on Weber's account, is this-worldly but not ascetic. At the level of values and belief, of culture, Weber argued that the ethic of the Koran was accommodating towards a hedonistic attitude, especially towards women and property, and thus that no ascetic, this-worldly ethic could emerge to direct economic activity towards rationally calculable (hence capitalist) ends.⁶ On this account, the obstacle to rational, capitalist development lay in the beliefs, and hence the worldly activities, of practising Muslims. (This last, incidentally, is a judgement which later scholars in other ways much influenced by Weber, for example Ernest Gellner, have resoundingly opposed.)

By contrast, however, and in practice representing the main emphasis of his treatment of Islam, Weber also offered an explanation of Islamic societies based on the character of prebendal feudalism and patrimonial bureaucracy, or 'Sultanism'. This materialist account stands independently of, and is not fully of a piece with, the culturalist account (Turner 1974). In this materialist version of the argument, it was the character of patrimonial domination in

⁶ These characteristics are in turn held to derive, not from Islamic monotheism, but from the tribal and warrior-like nature of the social matrix in which Islam was forged.

the Abbasid, Mamluk and Ottoman empires which frustrated the development of rational, capitalist forms of economic activity. According to Weber, the central contradiction of 'Sultanism' was as follows: the more the ruler relied on mercenaries or slaves (prebendal feudalism), the more they could subjugate the masses and extract perquisites of office; the more such overlords demanded, the more the ruler had to exploit the masses while posing as the people's leader; and thus charismatic protests against central rule were endemic. Leaders came and went with some regularity but the underlying structure remained intact. The insecurity brought about by the devolution of tributary power in the form of tax-farming resulted in a decline of the monetary economy and a general ruralization. Investment in *waqfs* was a typical expedient, given the insecurity of property rights, since the ruler could only touch these by disregarding the *shari'a* and the *ulema*. Once Ottoman expansion was stopped by the Safavids, the Portuguese and the Russians and the Hapsburgs, then parasitic exploitation set in. This was aggravated by the devaluation of the currency once Spanish silver and gold entered the eastern Mediterranean. Thereafter, the janisaries and the *ulema* opposed all reform in the Ottoman Empire, resulting in stagnation.

Here, Weber is offering a materialist account of the stagnation of the Islamic empires and their inability to generate capitalist forms of activity. This is so in two senses. To begin with, Weber is concerned to explore the role of Islam, understood as a set of social practices, in the reproduction of the social order as a whole. Islam is seen as giving shape and form to processes inherent in patrimonial, agrarian societies. And secondly, the specific cultural features of Islam are themselves explained not by reference to an unchanging 'tradition' but by the totality of its social location. As Turner has put it: in 'patrimonial conditions of social control, the urban piety of Islam was not the product of calculability and rational mastery of life; it was almost wholly geared to the problems of personal security and communal order' (1974:110).

To be sure, the thrust of Weber's case is still that patrimonial domination, buttressed by sacred law and justice dispensed by the *ulema*, is arbitrary and 'irrational'. In this sense, the specific content of Weber's account of Islam again tends towards a residual form in which it is negatively contrasted with the conditions for rationalization found only in the West. As Turner has so ably shown:

At the centre of Weber's view of Islamic society is a contrast between the rational and systematic character of Occidental society, particularly in the field of law, science and industry and the arbitrary, unstable political and economic conditions of Oriental civilizations, particularly the Islamic. (1974:14)

In its minor key, Weber's argument attributes this difference to the Islamic ethic and thus stands squarely in the culturalist and essentialist tradition noted above. But its major themes are developed in a materialist key, seeking to describe the differing character of the social and material reproduction of society in the West and the Islamic world. The organizing framework of the materialist strand of analysis is that of the development of Occidental rationality, and its major carrier, modern capitalism, as contrasted with the stagnation inherent in Oriental forms of social organization. In other words, Weber does not explain but describes Oriental forms and then only in contrast with the West. Subsequent treatments influenced by Weber have not wholly escaped these tensions.

Ernest Gellner and Muslim society

The coexistence of culturalist and materialist strands of analysis, which we met in Weber, can be seen most clearly in the bold and striking attempt to theorize the nature of the Islamic world offered by Ernest Gellner. Whereas Weber wrote comparatively little on Islam and was principally concerned with its fate in the settled agriculture of the Ottoman empire, Gellner has written extensively on Islam and has focused on the nature of *Muslim Society* (1981) in the arid zones of the Maghreb. Gellner's account, and indeed his more general philosophy of history in which it is couched, owes many of its questions, if not its answers, to Weber. But his more immediate sources for the study of Islam are Emile Durkheim's theory of *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) and the historical sociology of Ibn Khaldun.

Thus, before we turn to the work of the most formidable exponent and developer of Weber's legacy, let us first sketch the main ideas of the fourteenth-century Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun. Where Weber offers an account of the cyclical contradictions of Sultanism based upon the instability of patrimonial rule and doctrinally based justice, Ibn Khaldun locates the unstable, circular character of

Islamic history in the coexistence of pastoral tribalism with urban rule. For all his theological obscurantism, Ibn Khaldun offers an account of history understood as 'information about human social organization . . . [whose guiding principle is] that differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways in which they make their living' (1967:35, 91).

In the world of medieval North African states of which Ibn Khaldun writes in his introduction to history, *The Muqaddimah* (1377), the polity was not territorially fixed but was rather an urban centre based on trading routes, around which a degree of control over the surrounding tribes might be exercised. While the urban merchants possessed estates, these were not large, as their ability to appropriate land was limited by the power of the tribes and the rights of the sovereign. The customary powers of the tribes gave them usufructory rights over the land, which was granted as a charter of *iqta'* to overlords who could raise taxes, but could neither control labour nor administer justice. As Ibn Khaldun pointed out, the dominance of a pastoral economy lay behind the persistence of the tribes. Pastoral life involves the regular movement of herders, and hence co-operation between families; the carrying of arms, and hence the need for self-defence groups; and thus the need for tribal federation.

Because the *iqta'* system did not devolve into a structure of seigniorial privilege, tribal leaders were simply *primus inter pares* with no *de jure* rights. Ibn Khaldun distinguished between 'the rural population, the people of the *bled* - a category which includes both nomads and sedentary farmers - and the townspeople and farmers who live near the towns' (Lacoste 1984:67). Where a temporary acquisition of authority or power, and with it a tribal federation, occurs, a tribe may develop 'asabiya, or solidarity, 'in which the chieftain has succeeded in asserting his dominance. Only tribes which are no longer egalitarian and which have developed 'asabiya constitute a political force capable of making their chieftains heads of states' (Lacoste 1984:106). With rulers denounced for impiety by the *ulema*, such a chieftain can overthrow a weakened regime and institute a new one. However, the pacific, trade-based nature of urban life inevitably leads in time to a weakening of the tribal-supported polity and a growing independence of the surrounding tribes. The dynastic cycle may then be repeated by the emergence of a new challenger.

Gellner's own argument begins in familiar culturalist style:

Islam is the blueprint of a social order. It holds that a set of rules exists, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society. This model is available in writing; it is equally and symmetrically available to all literate men, and to all those willing to heed literate men. These rules are to be implemented throughout social life. Thus there is in principle no call or justification for an internal separation of society into two parts, of which one would be closer to the deity than the other. . . . [The specific character of this blueprint identified by Crone and Cook above derives from the fact that] the relatively mundane and secular Jewish preoccupation with the regulation of social life, based on human legal wisdom rather than divine authority, when fused with the God-centred, unificatory theology-mindedness of Christianity, produced the characteristically Muslim divinely sanctioned and God-centred legalism. (1981:1, 2)

What, then, is the social significance of Islam? For Gellner the answer lies in the fact that 'by firmly closing the door, in principle, to further additions to the Revealed doctrine, [Islam] enormously strengthens the hand of those who have access to the delimited truth through literacy and who use it as a charter of legitimacy' (1981:23). However, in pastoral conditions, this urban, scriptural Islam must needs be coexist with the folk Islam of the tribal world analysed by Ibn Khaldun. The materialist aspect of the account emerges here: for the mobile character of pastoral means of production, together with the armed character of the tribes, means that central authorities cannot 'control or disarm the countryside' (1981:20). In this illiterate, rural environment of warring segmentary groups and tribes, religion 'is highly Durkheimian, concerned with the social punctuation of time and space, with season-making and group-boundary-marking festivals' (1981:52). Yoked together, the result is the near-permanent cyclical course of Islamic history described by Ibn Khaldun, a movement from central authority supported by a tribal federation, through urban impiety and degeneracy to the crisis which renews the impulse of tribal revolt, and thus instantiates a new central authority. For Gellner 'the fusion of scripturalism and pastoralism, the implication of each pushed a *outrance* in one continuous system, is the classical world of Islam' (1981:24).

Gellner has often been criticized for over-generalizing on the basis of the Maghreb. But in fact he is at pains to stress that he is theorizing the institutional *differentiae* of Islam in the arid zone,

and that where the weight of a settled peasantry engaged in agriculture was greater, as in the Ottoman heartlands, the polity could achieve a greater autonomy from the tribes and the *ulema*. (The full implication of this, I will argue, is that talk of a unitary 'Islam', whether High or Low, is extremely problematic. But this is not a conclusion that Gellner is drawn to.)

On the basis of his model of Muslim society, Gellner has advanced a striking and heterodox claim about the fortunes of Islam in modernity. Modernity is understood as industrial society based upon a continuous, cumulative expansion of scientific (and hence technological) knowledge. The course of human history is a (Durkheimian and Weberian) story of the fortuitous but irreversible shift from magic to religion to science, as well as the accompanying transformations in the division of labour (Gellner 1988). Modern society is thus inherently egalitarian, at least in cultural matters, involving the general literacy and mobility of the entire population. In these circumstances, what is so remarkable about Islam is the manner by which its division into High and Low forms has facilitated its renewal within the modern world. As state formation and development have together eroded the social base of folk Islam, so a return to the 'pure' (High) faith acts as a surrogate form of nationalism. For Low Islam is hierarchical and ecstatic, while High Islam is egalitarian and scriptural. The avowal of the latter is thus congruent with the requirements of an industrial society: High Islam's egalitarian and scriptural features are a functional equivalent for Protestantism's worldly and ascetic qualities. Gellner's conclusion is stark:

Things may yet change in the future. But on the evidence available so far, the world of Islam demonstrates that it is possible to run a modern, or at any rate modernizing, economy, reasonably permeated by the appropriate technological, educational, organization principles, and combine it with a strong, pervasive, powerfully internalized Muslim conviction and identification. A puritan and scripturalist world religion does not seem necessarily doomed to erosion by modern conditions. It may on the contrary be favoured by them. (1992:22)

Indeed, Gellner has some fun imagining us admiring Ibn Weber's *The Kharejite Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* had the Arabs won at Poitiers. For 'by various obvious criteria - universalism, scripturalism, spiritual egalitarianism, the extension of full participation

in the sacred community not to one, or some, but to *all*, and the rational systematisation of social life – Islam is, of the three great Western monotheisms, the one closest to modernity' (1981:7).

Now, the overall explanatory structure of Gellner's argument is rather difficult to untangle. On occasions, his formulations suggest a culturalist account in which 'Islam is a distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life' (Asad 1986:3). Different worldviews (High/pure and Low/folk) are loosely linked to different forms of life, but the explanatory weight rests primarily at the cultural level. This interpretation is also congruent with his account of the structure of human history in *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988), which can be read as an investigation of the miraculous emergence of the scientific form of cognition and its impact on the transition from agrarian poverty and violence to the relative comforts of an affluent, industrial society. The stress on the character of Muslim belief in the one is matched by the focus on cognition of the other. As evidence in favour of this reading, we might note that in discussing Islam Gellner stresses the God-centred legalism of the faith, the absence of a sphere reserved for Caesar, its separation into High and Low variants and its resistance to secularization.

However, in each of these cases, Gellner also suggests the outlines of a materialist explanation for the phenomenon concerned. For example, having outlined the salient features of Muslim society in the arid zone, Gellner immediately adds that:

The rotation-within-an-immobile-structure is perhaps inherent in a certain general ecology, or mode of production and reproduction if you prefer. . . . The pattern as such is not necessarily Islamic: it seems inherent in this kind of ecology. It was found in the arid zone before Islam. . . . Islam provided a common language and thus a certain smoothness for a process which, in a more mute and brutalistic form, had been taking place anyway. (1981:31, 32)

Equally, the division of Islam into High and Low forms – its 'really central, and perhaps most important, feature' (1992:9) – is but a particular, if exaggerated, case of the general social function of literacy in agrarian social orders (see, generally, Goody 1986). Agrarian surpluses allow for the formation of a ruling class, but the unified organization of such a class is always precarious, given its limited ability to penetrate and organize society. In situations of conflict, which are of course endemic to agrarian and pastoral

society, and given the unpredictability of outcomes, the alignment of loyalties greatly depends on the legitimacy of the contestants. The conclusion is inevitable: 'This in turn gives considerable indirect power to those who, through a mixture of literacy and ritual competence, possess the near-monopoly of legitimacy-ascription' (Gellner 1988:99).

Moreover, Gellner does not argue that all modernization in Muslim societies is *with* Islam. On the contrary, he argues that a return to a purified, High Islam occurs where colonial rule 'tolerated or utilised unregenerate traditional forms' (1981:58). For here the pure faith can act as a form of reactive nationalism. But in those cases where religion had close ties with the old, declining order – classically in the Ottoman case – then modernization is likely to be *against* Islam, as it was in Kemalism. Finally, where a return to the 'pure', literate, egalitarian faith or the development of a secular alternative is blocked, where the world of Ibn Khaldun persists and cannot be disposed of peacefully, and in conditions of uneven development in an industrializing world, then the social tragedy of the contemporary Middle East is the likely result.

Now, in each of these cases, the locus of the explanation seems to have shifted away from the character of the faith to the relation of the modernizing forces to the indigenous centres of power, to the state and to foreign colonists. The specific features of Islam, *qua* belief, are no longer centre-stage. Thus, the *same* faith can issue in three *different* outcomes: Islamic modernism, secular nationalism (Kemalism) or social conflict and violence. These in broad outline are the options for Muslim society in modernity sketched for us by Gellner.

In case it needs saying, I am not arguing that the specific characteristics of Islamic belief are irrelevant. Rather, I am arguing the need for a historical and materialist approach to the study of Islamic culture of the kind that Gellner himself sometimes provides. Let us give Gellner the final word here, warning us against:

a certain kind of culture-talk. Now it is indisputable that what men do and endure generally 'has meaning' for them; that these meanings come as parts of loose systems, which are tied both to languages and to institutions; and that in some way or other, these systems must be sustained by the collectivities of men who share them (or partly share them), and, in turn, that they make their contribution to the perpetuation of the said collective. . . . [But] such culture-talk

tends merely to indicate a problem, not a solution. . . . It is as true that we manipulate social meanings as that we talk prose, but we should not let this idea go to our heads, and quite especially ought not to suppose that we have a theory when we merely possess a style. (1981:218)

In sum, Gellner's account of Islam differs in a number of important respects from that of Weber. Weber concentrated on the agrarian Islamic empires, Gellner has been more interested in the pastoral world of the Maghreb. Weber stressed that rationalization inevitably spelled disenchantment, Gellner has argued the potential congruence of urban Islam with modernity. Yet in the end, it is perhaps the similarities which are more important: a similar set of questions and ambiguities threads both discussions. Both oscillate between culturalist and materialist forms of argument, and both tend towards descriptive rather than theoretical treatments of social order. Thus both have a tendency to define the pre-modern and the modern in terms of a set of binary oppositions which stand in for the work of substantive, historical theorization. Weber opposed the Occident to the Orient, while Gellner counterposes the static, segmented world of pastoralism and agrarian society to the organic interdependence and mobility-cum-literacy of industrial society. Consequently, as with Weber's notion of rationalization, so with Gellner's theory of industrial society, the actual social content of such terms as 'segmented' and 'industrial' remains indeterminate and untheorized.

Historical materialism and the Middle East

We have now seen how the work of both Weber and Gellner appears to offer the basis for a materialist account of 'Islam' and 'modernity', but then fails to break with the ahistorical use of culturally specific concepts. To be sure, knowledge in the social sciences must proceed by way of the search for comparisons, what Runciman has called 'suggestive contrasts' (1983). But if we are to avoid building into our explanations that which needs to be explained, or to move beyond historical description, such contrasts should act as empirical controls on our generalizations, and not be employed as putatively explanatory concepts. This involves drawing a clear distinction between the commonsense terms we use to

describe the institutional alignments of a social order (e.g. 'economy', 'state', 'religion') and the theoretical concepts by which these are explained.

Furthermore, in any concrete explanation, the generic categories of our theory can only be specified empirically and, therefore, historically. For the *general* concepts of an explanatory framework refer to a particular class of phenomena – say, production relations in the case of Marxism – not, at least until further defined, any empirical particulars. Thus the necessary historicity of our basic theoretical concepts follows from the fact in order to apply them to the actual task of explanation they require further (empirical) definition. Our theory may hypothesize that certain kinds of social relations are primary, but what those relations are in any given instance is a question of fact. Put differently, this amounts to saying that we must apply a *common* theoretical framework, using an empirically open methodology, to *different* societies.

As we have already noted, Marxism offers one candidate methodology for such historical explanation. By focusing on the ways by which the socially organized material interchange with nature is configured, and hence on how a socially produced surplus is appropriated, circulated and utilized within society, historical materialism suggests that we will be able to explain its principal features. It follows from the foregoing that the *only* test of this procedure is whether the explanation arrived at is better than its rivals. Unfortunately, Marx's substantive writings do not always consistently follow these protocols, and his comments on pre-capitalist societies are not without the markings of their time.

On the one hand, some of what Marx (and Engels) wrote was as much under the sway of Occidental triumphalism as anything penned by Weber. Certainly, the notion of an 'Asiatic' mode of production has precious little theoretical or empirical warrant, offering merely a 'generic residual category for non-European development' (Anderson 1974b:494). In so far as Weber contrasted Occidental rationality with what went before, he shared Marx's sense of the radical gulf separating capitalism off from *all* previous forms of human society. And Marx was certainly capable of rendering this difference in the then dominant European intellectual vernacular.

On the other hand, the implication of Marx's general methodological and theoretical position, as well as the force of most of his concrete analysis, is that such binary oppositions as 'Occidental'

versus 'Oriental', 'segmented' versus 'industrial', 'West' versus 'East' and, perhaps above all, 'traditional' versus 'modern' cannot adequately grasp the *historical* character of modernity, since they are silent as to its specific social content. Despite superficial appearances to the contrary, Marx's method therefore remains much more firmly rooted in an investigation of concrete historical questions than that of either Weber or Gellner. For this reason the charge of Orientalism laid at the door of historical materialism, a claim made by Said of Marx's writings on India, is entirely wide of the mark. As Ahmad has again detailed with such exemplary clarity, in Marx's thought:

The idea of a certain progressive role of colonialism was linked . . . with the idea of a progressive role of capitalism as such, in comparison with what had gone before, within Europe as much as outside it. . . . Marx's statement [on the impact of British rule in India] follows not *anecdotally* from Goethe or German Romanticism, nor *discursively* from an overarching 'Orientalism', but *logically and necessarily* from positions Marx held on issues of class and mode of production, on the comparative structuration of the different pre-capitalist modes, and on the kind and degree of violence which would inevitably issue from a project that sets out to dissolve such a mode on so wide a scale. . . . [Marx's argument] was designed to carve out a position independent both of the Orientalist-Romantic and the colonial-modernist. (1992:225, 230, 235)

Marx on the character of modernity

Everyone knows that Marx placed his analysis of capitalism at the centre of his understanding of modernity. Yet if the recurrent charges of reductionism and economic determinism are taken at face value, they tend to suggest that this fact is almost as widely misunderstood. For Marx conceived of capitalism not as a type of economy but as a form of *society*, based upon novel forms of social relations and hence of the social itself. Derek Sayer, who has done so much to make plain this theme in Marx's work (1983, 1987 and 1991), notes that:

These forms of modern sociality include what is, for the first time in human history, conceivable as 'the economy', and its essential counterpart, 'the state'. Both rest on a radical transformation of the character of social relationships and the nature of social power, in brief, from what Marx called relations of personal dependency to

relations which are 'impersonal' and mediated by 'things': money, bureaucracy. (1991:2)

For our purposes, it is important to note two general, systemic features of the social order governed by capitalist relations of production. The first distinctive feature of capitalist society is the mediation of social power by direct control over things rather than over persons. Compared to non-capitalist societies, power takes the form of a generalized subjection of all individuals to such abstract features as the rule of law, money and bureaucracy. In the second place, as Robert Brenner (1986) has cogently argued, it is only under capitalist production relations that producers must sell their output on the market in order to secure their own reproduction, and it is therefore only under capitalism that competition acts as a coercive force to bring about continuous improvements in efficiency.

According to Marx, the 'abstraction of the political state' from particularistic communal forms of regulation comes into being only with the establishment or constitution of a modern civil society based on bourgeois forms of property. In this *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* the social forms of both private and public power involve the ordering of society by relations among the impersonal forms of 'money' and 'law', private property and the bureaucratic state. Jurisdiction, administration and coercion become separated from the personal power of a possessing class and centralized in a universal, public power – the 'purely political' state. The social forms of the 'market' and the 'sovereign' state are thus *both* specific to the capitalist mode of production. Marx further emphasizes that it is only the generalized separation of the direct producers from the means of production, together with the constitution of these means as 'private property', which enables the bourgeoisie to constitute its class rule through the possession of 'things'; all earlier ruling classes required some form of 'political' domination over subordinate classes.

The other, more familiar, side of this process is the separating out of a distinct sphere governed by the writ of private property, which itself represents the privatization of customary, public forms of political power (Meiksins Wood 1981). This historical constitution of the 'economic' as a separate, institutionally distinct realm of alienable property, in which commodification has been generalized, and hence through which capital can circulate and expand

by directly controlling labour and appropriating the surplus, is the process Marx described as primitive accumulation. And as Marx noted, even if he did not explore it in much detail, the process of capitalist state formation is an integral component of this set of changes.

Thus, as Marx formulated it, the main story of modernity has been the emergence of the distinctive social form of the capitalist state, alongside the unique mobility of capitalist economic development. Marx distinguished the quantitative dynamism of capitalism from all pre-capitalist modes as well as highlighting its qualitative difference from all personalized systems of production and domination. The differentiation of both the 'economy' and the 'state', and with them the world market and the system of states, as distinct institutional orders are accounted for by the emergence and consolidation of capitalist relations of production. It is, therefore, the historical spread of these new types of social relations which form the organizing theme of Marx's account of 'modernity'. The global spread of capitalist society, in turn, set in train a process of uneven development; and the resulting penetration of modern capitalism into backward formations, together with state-sponsored attempts to compete with the most advanced metropolises, gave to subsequent development a combined character.

In sum, these formulations suggest a third way of approaching the questions of 'Islam' and 'modernity'. In the first place, historical materialism offers a working hypothesis and methodology which does not build culturally specific judgements into its explanatory concepts. What 'Islam' or 'modernity' is in any given instance cannot be a matter of ahistorical stipulation. And secondly, Marx's application of historical materialism to the analysis of modernity suggests that the latter is best grasped in terms of the development and uneven consolidation of certain historically specific sets of social relations, as well as the distinct social forms, forces and struggles that these give rise to.

An outline history of the Middle East

'Islamic' society exhibited a number of distinctive features that marked it off from European feudalism, on the one hand, and from the tributary structures of Rome and China, on the other. These differences did not derive from Islam but the latter came to play an important role in articulating their empirical particularities.

While civilization, with its attendant class division, city-states, long-distance trade, literacy and increasingly unified cosmologies, had first emerged in Mesopotamia on the basis of a surplus provided by settled agriculture, the poverty of the basic ecology and material development in Arabia precluded any similar development. The contrast was sharp and has been well summarized by Ira Lapidus:

Whereas the imperial world was predominantly agricultural, Arabia was primarily pastoral. While the imperial world was citted, Arabia was the home of camps and oases. Whereas the imperial peoples were committed to monotheistic religions, Arabia was largely pagan. While the imperial world was politically organized, Arabia was politically fragmented. . . . From the beginning of camel domestication and the occupation of the central Arabian desert in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries B.C., until the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the balance between parochial, local elements and the unifying forces of religion and empire lay heavily on the side of small, relatively isolated communities. Families and clans, often pastoralists and camel herders, and the confederations built upon them, were the basic units of society. (1988:11-13)

The obverse of this lack of progression was that the Arabs 'enjoyed an ethnic and cultural homogeneity quite without parallel in Central Asia or Europe' (Crone 1980:24). In this environment, what Muhammad did was to appropriate for the Arabs the monotheist primacy claimed by the Jews, thereby effecting an explosive fusion of Islamic monotheism and Arab tribal politics (Cook 1983).

During Muhammad's life, Arab power consisted in little more than a coalition of nomadic conquerors held together by Islam and the tribute of plunder. On the death of the Prophet (632), however, the very existence of an Islamic polity was put in question. Secessionist tribes and rival prophets challenged Muhammad's order. To begin with, *ad hoc* tribal federations organized the military and administrative structures of the early Islamic polity, its internal unity secured by the booty from external expansion. The Umayyad caliphate (a state based on a federation of Arab tribes) set out from Mecca and rapidly conquered much of the Middle East, swept through parts of North Africa to reach Spain and France in the West, and through Persia to arrive at India in the East. Contrary to a common assertion that it was the ideological cohesion of Islam which enabled it to overcome these empires, the evidence strongly

supports the view that imperial decay was a precondition for, not an effect of, Islamic expansion (see Hodges and Whitehouse 1983 and Hourani 1991). The collapse of the Roman empire in the West had paved the way for the eventual emergence of feudalism, but in the East the pattern of development was altogether different. The retention of an independent peasantry and more established urban power meant that no feudalism was ever established in Byzantium. The more centralized, militarized Byzantine empire successfully resisted Arab sieges of Constantinople (674–8 and 717–18) and, under the Macedonian dynasty (867–1025), drove the Arabs back.

Thus checked by Byzantium, and also by the Franks under Charles Martel at Tours and Poitiers (732), Umayyad rule (661–750) was displaced by the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) as the centre of Islamic power moved from Damascus to Baghdad. Though vibrant internally, the Persian rule of the Abbasid caliphate had itself dissolved by the middle of the tenth century. During the Umayyad period, a tribal aristocracy, the *ashraf*, constituted the link between governors and governed. Under the Abbasid reorganization, the polity mutated in two directions. On the one hand, the bureaucracy of the Abbasid period, which was increasingly backed by servile and client forces, 'was hugely expanded, fiscal and military governorships began to be separated, and an elaborate espionage system was set up to facilitate central control' (Crone 1980:62). On the other hand, the local notables withdrew from political influence into landed and commercial wealth and religious learning. Abbasid rule soon broke down as governors competed for control over the caliphate and as slave regiments confronted one another. The distribution of *iqta'* and tax farming further compounded the problem, and by 935 only Baghdad remained under central control.

An era of independent succession states followed (945–c.1220), after which Mongol invasions coursed through the Islamic world for four decades. Now expelled from Europe, Islamic rule was to be confined to the Middle East until the Ottoman advance of the fourteenth century. In the East, there was a succession of nomadic empires as the collapse of Abbasid power opened the frontiers to the Turkish peoples of inner Asia; in the West, the Fatamids ruled in Egypt, and Byzantium, Latin crusaders and the Seljuqs sought to conquer. During this time, the social structure of the Islamic world underwent a series of profound transformations. In conditions of drastic economic regression, the arrival of a political elite

of nomadic and slave warlords, allowed the consolidation of the new communal religious notability.

Another Islamic resurgence, which was eventually to issue in the Ottoman empire, had started in the eleventh century when an integration of Arab tribes and Turkish cavalry established Seljuq rule in Iraq, Syria and Iran; it confronted, and successfully contested, a now declining Byzantine power. Internally stagnating and stretched by war, Byzantium suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Seljuq Turks at Manzikert (1071) and called for assistance from the West. However, the counter-offensives launched from Vienna – involving the participation of the Franks, the Normans and the Italian city-states – failed, and the Ottoman armies inflicted crushing defeats on feudal Europe at Nicopolis (1396) and Varna (1444). Following repeated Mongol invasions, and after decades of cavalry warfare, the Osmanli sultanate consolidated its rule as Turkish armies went from strength to strength. Constantinople fell in 1453, much of the Balkans followed, as did large swathes of the Middle East in the sixteenth century. Perhaps the most powerful empire of its time, under the rule of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–66), the Ottoman empire enjoyed revenues twice those of Charles V in the West.

This writ was soon compromised by the rise of separate Islamic empires: the Mughal empire in India (consolidated 1556–1606) and the Safavid empire in Persia (established 1587–1629). The Ottomans were regularly at war with Europe, only being finally defeated at Vienna in 1683; Shi'ite Persians and Sunni Turks fought repeatedly from the late sixteenth through to the mid-seventeenth century; there were internal risings by the peasantry and local magnates; and the Cossacks continued to make numerous cross-border raids.

The block on further geographical expansion heralded a prolonged decline, occasionally interrupted by movements of internal renewal. But in the long run the Ottoman empire proved unable to match the challenge coming from an increasingly dynamic mercantile expansion based on absolutist Europe. In fact, towards the end of the sixteenth century, an increased resort to tax farming coincided with the disintegration of Ottoman rule in Anatolia. The English ambassador remarked in 1607 that the Empire was 'in great decline, almost ruined', and order was only restored in the second half of the seventeenth century. Continued, regular war with its neighbours, as well as numerous challenges to its authority

from within, pressed on the resources of the Porte. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, the erosion of Ottoman power became terminal and the question of the future of the 'East' became a constant feature of European diplomacy.

*Tributary empire, nomads and tribal state:
the three 'Islams'*

If we are to make sense of the social formations of the Middle East we must attend to the particular forms by which the material production of these societies was organized, and thence the ways these structured other social arrangements. And if we do this, we find that, roughly speaking, three types of society can be distinguished: the Ottoman heartlands, the areas dominated by tribal nomadism and the Safavid empire. Across much of Asia, but not only there, it was the case that a state class secured political rights to tax a peasantry that it did not tenurially control. (In feudalism, by contrast, landlord control of the peasantry meant that rent was the primary form of surplus extraction.) As Chris Wickham has pointed out,

[much of the Islamic world] had one socio-political feature in common . . . unlike in the Roman and Chinese empires, where a roughly homogeneous aristocratic class participated in the profits of both state and landownership, in most of these 'Islamic' states a state class clearly stood in opposition to an aristocratic class of local landowners. There was certainly overlap, but the two were socially and often ethnically distinguishable, and frequently antagonistic in ideology, as well as their economic base. (1985:176)

Indeed, in the Ottoman case, a particularly pure form of tributary society emerged. This was consolidated between c. 1280 and 1453, posed a challenge to Europe until the seventeenth century and lingered on down to the end of the First World War. The central and overriding fact of the Ottoman state was its tributary character. With the exception of *waqf* (or religious) lands, all land was the patrimony of the sultan. Both Islamic law and Ottoman practice classed land as belonging to the state (*miri*). Peasant families with rights of access to the land constituted the main units of production and consumption, and these were organized into wider village communities. Peasants farmed the land for tax payments to the state. The sultan's household was staffed by ex-Christian slaves

taken as tribute and by the Islamic stratum of *sipahi* cavalry, based on the *timars* (benefices) granted by the sultan in return for military service.⁷ (When the cavalry gave way to a salaried army, so the grants became tax farms.) In marked contrast to the position of the nobility within feudalism, such grants were neither hereditary, nor did they connote any rights of jurisdiction over the direct producers, and the revenues attached to them were set by the sultan's treasury. This state of affairs applied most fully in the empire's Anatolian (Turkish) and Rumelian (Balkan) core. By contrast, in some of the outer regions, such as Egypt, Iraq and Arabia, there were no *timar* lands; instead these were garrisoned by janissary troops and paid taxes to the treasury. Profits from guild regulation of markets and customs dues also went to the urban-based intermediaries of the state. It was this urban location and tributary form of surplus appropriation, together with the high levels of tax levied on the cultivators, that dictated the absence of any long-term interests geared towards agricultural improvement: urban consumption, not productive innovation, was the mission of the ruling class.

Formally speaking, the official corps of Sunni theologians, judges and teachers came to run parallel to this tributary structure. This religious hierarchy performed important administrative functions and filled the leading civil and judicial posts of the state. In the provinces, personnel recruited from the *ulema* formed the basis of administration. At the head of the *ulema* stood the mufti of Istanbul, the *Sheikh-ul-Islam*, the supreme religious leader who interpreted the *shari'a* for the faithful. Not recognizing any distinction between 'Church' and 'State', Islamic doctrine provided the ideology of the Osmanli empire. But what was the precise role of the Sunni *ulema*? Dating from the Abbasid period in Sunni Islam, *madrassa* (theological and legal colleges), endowments and fees constituted the clergy as a major group of surplus takers, and on this basis they extended their functions to charity, education, justice and informal social and political leadership. By contrast, the

7 The use of the term 'slave', used in relation to servile forces, in the Islamic world has often been misunderstood. The term 'was a loose one, denoting dependants with a total and exclusive loyalty; collectively they formed the ruler's "family"' (Kiernan 1980:238); and 'the sultan's slaves . . . commanded armies, governed provinces, and controlled the central administrations. Used of these . . . such words as the Arabic *mamluk* and Turkish *kul*, though technically meaning "slave", carried a connotation not of enslavement or servility but of power and dominance' (Lewis, 1988:65).

Turkish conquerors, of nomadic stock and backed by slave armies, had little or no experience of sedentary agriculture and imperial administration. Thus the *ulema* could organize society but they could not suppress banditry and parasitic disorder, while the new overlords could supply order but could not rule. The happy conjunction has been well summarized by Lapidus:

Faced with military elites unfamiliar with local traditions, the 'ulama' emerged, on the basis of religious prestige and educational and judicial authority as a new communal notability. The 'ulama' married into established merchant, administrative, and landowning families, and merged with the older local elites to form a new upper class defined by religious qualifications. The 'ulama' assumed the functions as well as the status of the former elites. They took charge of local taxation, irrigation, judicial and police affairs, and often became scribes and officials in the Saljuq succession states. While conquerors and regimes came and went, Islam became ever more firmly and widely entrenched as the basis of the social and political order. (1988:176, 180)

This was the pattern that was reproduced throughout the Ottoman empire, and elsewhere besides. But it is crucial to notice which way around the pattern of social causation ran: it was the social distance between the tributary appropriation of the state class and the locally based notability which allowed the consolidation of the religious classes, rather than any intrinsic features of Islam as such. Understood thus, the degree of institutional continuity of Islamic practices emphasized by Gibb (1949), Esposito (1988), Lapidus and others, where it existed, is not evidence in favour of the notion of a distinctively 'Islamic history' or 'Islamic society', but is instead a contingent feature of the necessary intermediation in tributary forms of rule and appropriation, and hence relates to the use made of Islam by historically specific social forces.

In the Ottoman case, the imperial Turkish overlords, whether state officials or military personnel, lived off the land and resided in the towns, and often did not learn the language of the local notability and peasantry. As Weber pointed out, this meant that tacit co-operation of urban forces, especially the merchants and the *ulema*, was therefore necessary. Merchants required the overlords to maintain order and the networks of trade and finance, and their largest customers were often the central tributary authorities. The *ulema* were even more significant to social control than the

merchants, for they provided more general social cohesion and regulation. They too depended on order and became dependent on state finance. The longevity of Turkish rule in the Ottoman case brought with it a high degree of state control over the Sunni clergy.

But beyond the compass of the urban Sunni clergy and Ottoman military power lay the tribal forces that remained outside central control. Here we are in the world of Ibn Khaldun. In these regions the tributary state was unable to control the rural areas, essentially because of the greater weight of pastoral nomadism with its mobile means of production, armed populations and absence of urban growth. Tribal pastoralism permitted neither any significant material development nor any lasting and widespread social stratification or political authority within the community. The tribal nobility was not reproduced by regulated intermarriage and it had no power to tax, control or command. And even if tribal warfare precipitated the temporary emergence of a confederation, the paucity of the available surplus meant that state formation was unthinkable: that is to say, rather than fighting wars, nomads had feuds. Where this tribal cohesion survived it proved to be destructive of development as such, for in so far as nomads accumulated surpluses at all this was by means of parasitic plunder from sedentary agriculture or from the siphoning of tribute from trade routes (see Anderson 1974a and Moghadam 1988).

Under these circumstances popular (Sufi) Islam was called on to play a very different role from the literate practice of justice and administration found in the urban centres of surplus appropriation. What Gellner calls 'folk' Islam, and in particular its array of saints, performed the following roles:

Supervising the political process in segmentary groups, e.g. election or selection of chiefs. Supervising and sanctioning their legal process, notably by collective oath. Facilitating economic relations by guaranteeing caravans and visits to the markets of neighbouring tribes; trade and pilgrimage routes may converge. Providing spatial markers for frontiers: a saintly settlement may be on the border between lay groups. Providing temporal markers; in a pastoral society, many pasture rights may be bounded by seasons and require rituals for their ratification. What better than a saintly festival for such a purpose? Supplying the means for the Islamic identification of the tribesmen. . . . All these factors clearly conspire to one end: the faith of the tribesmen needs to be mediated by special and distinct holy personnel, rather than to be egalitarian; it needs to be

joyous and festival-worthy, not puritanical and scholarly; it requires hierarchy and incarnation in persons, not in script. Its ethic is one of loyalty not of rule-observance. (Gellner 1981:41)

Of course, folk Islam was present among the settled rural peasantry as well, since they also were illiterate and had need of its ability to facilitate the interaction – material and symbolic – between otherwise hostile communities. This folk Islam, the religion of the majority of the population, was independent of the state, and often the urban tributary power sought to suppress Sufi orders, seeing them as a threat to its own position.

Finally, there was Shi'i Persia. The theological basis of the Shi'i *ulema*, articulated at a time when temporal political power resided with Sunni Muslims, lies in the notion that they are the collective deputies of the Occulted Imam (Momen 1989). Twelvers take their name from following the twelve infallible imams. The line began with Ali, who was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and it ends with Muhammad al-Mahdi who is believed to have gone into occultation in AD 874. These distinctive features of Shi'i doctrine reflect its formation in acephalous conditions and in opposition to the Sunni caliphate. After the Safavid conquest of Iran, however, Shi'ism was proclaimed the religion of the state. The latter was composed of a tributary structure similar to that of the Ottoman empire, though the control of the central state was weaker to the extent that its army was composed of tribal levies. This reflected the greater presence of pastoral nomadism, and thus tribal organization, as well as effective landlord control, within post-Mongol Iran. The peasantry had already flocked to Sufi orders. While the empire lasted, the Shi'i *ulema* supported Safavid power against the Ottoman adversary and the Safavids deferred to the *ulema* on a range of issues. Lapidus has noted that by the late Safavid period, 'Shi'ism had duplicated the whole complex of religious sensibility already found within Sunnism. It thus became a comprehensive alternative vision of Islam' (1988:299). Shi'i jurists argued that the canonical alms, the *zakat*, were to be collected and distributed by the clergy, thereby legitimating one of the material bases of the clergy (the others being the money paid for legal and educational services by the merchants, the religious endowments and the *madrassa*).

Post-Safavid Iran was subject to a series of warring dynasties, and by 1779 the Qajars had defeated their main rivals, the Zand,

to establish a dynasty that lasted until 1924. In this period, the central authority diminished and the corresponding power of tribal leaders and landowners increased, and the *ulema* were able to develop a further autonomy through establishing their own religious courts, private armies and bodies of students. In addition, the location of the most important Shi'i shrines in Iraq, especially the symbolically central site of Karbala⁸, further augmented the social distance of the clergy from the state. Taken together, these features meant that the Shi'i *ulema* constituted a powerful grouping of surplus takers, and were able to establish a much greater degree of independence from the central tributary structures than the Sunni clergy of the Ottoman domains.

Thus, by the time of the consolidation of the Ottoman and Safavid empires in the sixteenth century, it is possible to distinguish a range of different societies within the Middle East, in each of which the articulation of Islam took its own distinctive form. The first of these was the heartlands of the Sunni Ottoman empire in urban areas linked to sedentary agriculture where Islam was geared towards the provision of administration and justice. The second consisted of those regions of the Ottoman domain where the centre's writ was more attenuated, either as a result of stronger tribal organization or because of logistical distance from the Anatolian core, where Islam largely meant Sufi orders or the folk Islam of tribes. And finally, there was Shi'i Persia (Iran), where a form of Islam doctrinally distinct from the Sunni mainstream played a variety of roles in relation to political power and social organization.

Historically, then, 'Islam' has had no unitary nature, and therefore it cannot be understood either as an enduring, recalcitrant tradition, a cultural form operating to block other social and historical determinations, or in terms of the *theological* power of the Islamic clergy based on an unchanging doctrine. As a form of religious identification and a culture of signification, 'Islam' remains rooted in broader sets of social and material practices, and thus its changing forms must also be related to the historically given organization of economy and polity. Sunni Islam equally buttressed Ottoman power and tended to the needs of the rural population. Shi'i doctrine seemed equally compatible with acephalous

⁸ The martyrdom of the third imam, Husayn, by the Umayyad armies of the caliph Yazid at Karbala (AD 680) is central to the symbolism of Shi'ism.

tribal organization, support for the Safavid tributary state and the independent organization of the clergy in post-Safavid Iran. As a determinate set of institutions – the *ulema*, mosques, the *madrassa*, *shari'a* law and *qadi* justice etc. – the role of Islam also varied with its differential relation to the state and social classes. In the urban centres of the Ottoman lands the Sunni *ulema* were organized in parallel to the tributary structure of the state, for the mass of the population 'folk' Islam, or in the Iranian case the Shi'i clergy, was socially and materially independent from the state. What distinguished these 'Islams' were the different functions they were called upon to play in the regulation of social reproduction and the articulation of relations of authority, as well as the differing social forces which were mobilized under 'Islamic' organizations.

The Middle East and modernity

Given these differences, the impact of the West on the societies of the Middle East could not but be uneven. With the phenomenal growth of the world market and European power during the nineteenth century, it was the global spread and stable consolidation of capitalist property and state forms that became the project of the leading classes and powers. Let us recall that tributary and nomadic forms of appropriation contained no dynamic of long-run improvement to the forces of production of the kind unleashed by the establishment of the capitalist mode. At best, social and material reproduction was more or less static, subject to strict Malthusian constraints, if not actually regressive in the nomadic case. For this reason, when faced with a dynamic competitor capable of generating huge surpluses and thus of amassing considerable military power, these societies had no means of internal renewal. It was thus that declining tributary empires fell prey to European expansion. And it was against this backdrop that projects of modernization were launched.

We have also seen that the transition from such pre-capitalist, Islamic forms to capitalist modernity would have to involve two linked processes. In the first instance, the state apparatus must be able to uphold its authority and monopoly of coercion against other sites of political command, such that the general, public functions of society become the concern of a single body of rule-making and coercive enforcement (the modern, sovereign state). And second, there must be a significant degree of separation between

the institutions of rule and the mechanisms by which the surplus labour of the direct producers is appropriated, thus uncoupling the material basis of the power of the ruling class from the formal exercise of state political power (the creation of capitalist property relations). Taken together, the emergence of a sovereign public sphere in conjunction with the privatization of command over surplus labour provide the basis for the liberal-capitalist form of state and economy.

The social transformations behind this involve changes in which the means of public administration – a centralized monopoly of coercion, fiscal basis, monetary order and the sanctioning of state decisions by a unitary legal apparatus – become general, public forms consistent with, indeed providing the presuppositions of, private forms of appropriation set free from major communal functions. Yet in the Middle East societies, whose character we have just reviewed, the means of administration and of appropriation were not so differentiated. It follows that those complexes of social power which organized political command and surplus appropriation in the pre-modern era stood as obstacles to the development of new forms of economy and polity. Thus any account of projects of capitalist state formation and economic development must attend to the precise matrix from which these were launched. Let us now turn to a more detailed exploration of the dependent incorporation of the Middle East into the modern, capitalist world.