

# **The Politics of Identity**

## **The Question of Conflict Between the East and West**

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## **Introduction**

The stereotype of the conflict between the East and the West is more dynamic than suggested by the statement. Yet a plethora of influences ranging from academic theory to media coverage have been critical towards the reification of the general assumption that Eastern and Western ideologies cannot coexist peacefully. In the post September 11<sup>th</sup> environment this situation has become extremely exacerbated. Media coverage and political discussions have become heavily focused on Islamic fundamentalist groups which have served to create an image of Islam that is antithetic to Western conceptions of modernity, tolerance and rationality. In the West, the theory of an unavoidable clash between civilizations portrayed to be monolithic and static has gained momentum and infiltrated the perception of the general public. Known as Clash theory, it purports that entire groups of people who share the same religion or geography also share the same consciousness and beliefs. Clash theorists thereafter attempt to paint a cohesive and all-encompassing image of these group identities and then pit them against each other under the assumption that their static “cultural values” are in fundamental opposition to their competitors. Samuel Huntington, one of the main ideologues behind this argument has proposed a multitude of these group identities but

there is a biased spotlight on the description of incompatibility between Islam and the West.

Yet the real dynamics or the actual history of the current political and cultural situation is much more demanding than sliding back into dichotomous stereotypes of conflict between two easily definable and opposing entities: i.e. the East versus the West, secularism versus fundamentalism, Christianity versus Islam, or even good versus evil. These simple distinctions have huge pitfalls in that they tend to veil the historical experiences of civilizations by defining them according to a constructed monolithic cultural model. Within this model it is too easy to make generalizations about culture that engender misconceptions. Rather, it must be realized that history and experience occur in many different pockets of thought, and perhaps more importantly, within the individuals consciousness: the combination of which creates the reality of an historical experience. Nonetheless, the idea of a dichotomous struggle between two homogenous political entities fundamentally opposed to the other is what is being not only suggested, but believed by the vast majority of people concerning the political situation between the Middle East and the West. Under these crude and uncritical distinctions one is often forced to commit them-selves to proclaim loyalty to the idea of a “rational” and democratic Western modernity or a spiritual, traditional and backwards Eastern identity. Indeed President Bush was doing exactly this when he stated, “you are either for or against the terrorists” shortly after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

It is my contention that these ideas of intrinsically opposed cultures are not fact, but rather the product of constructed identity born out of social experiences. In this particular political situation I would argue that the constructed identities have been

affected in large part by the tumultuous and violent situation since the end of the Cold War in the Middle Eastern geography. Furthermore, I would argue that much of the violence and tensions between the West and the East acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the ideology of irreconcilable differences (at least from the perspective of the general population) justifies the actions that those differences would necessitate were they real. These seemingly endless conflicts between the dually “canonical” Middle East and the West (i.e. The Israeli and Palestinian conflict, the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan; and the challenge to the status quo during the 1980’s and 90’s made by Islamic groups in countries as diverse as Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and the Occupied Territories, as well as various other American and European responses.) have “resulted in a sense of reinforced, deepened, and hardened identity that has not been particularly edifying” (Said p. 335). In other words, these conflicts serve to exacerbate the situation of misunderstanding and miscommunication between people in that they detract from meaningful cultural dialogue and reinforce the perceptions of intolerant, violent, and altogether incompatible group identities.

Carl W. Ernst, in his book entitled *Following Mohammed*, illustrates this heightened animosity and fear towards Islam that has been so exacerbated in the post 9/11 environment. At the Summer Reading Program of the University of North Carolina he was asked by the committee in charge of the selection to choose a book that would address some of the issues raised by the attacks. He eventually decided on Michael Sells’s *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* which is by no means designed to explain the mentalities of terrorists. National and international attention was directed at the program after a Virginia-based Christian group sued the UNC arguing that “they

were infringing on students' religious freedom by trying to convert them to Islam" (Ernst, p. xiv). Furthermore, members of the North Carolina state legislature reacted with fury to the assignment, seeing it as equivalent to support for Muslim terrorists. The lawsuit was overturned, but what deep-seated fear and hostility did the occurrence reveal when there was such opposition towards education on a subject (Ernst, p. xv)? Ernst goes on to argue that there is a "tremendous ignorance and suspicion about Islam in much of Europe and America, now considerably enhanced by recent tragedy [and that] the Islamic religion is perhaps the one remaining subject about which educated people are content to demonstrate outright prejudice and bias" (Ernst, p. xiv).

In the attempt to ameliorate some of these issues I will question and analyze the foundations of the current cultural animosity through the epistemological examination of its support and propagation through the aforementioned academic, political, and media avenues. By utilizing these specific instances of misrepresentation and their oft-unquestioned agenda towards the formation of self-knowledge, one can illustrate how current and historical "cultural clashes" have simultaneously defined the "other" and fulfilled particular and unique political and ideological projects. In other words, it is my endeavor to illustrate how these particular forms of knowledge have served the creation of a cultural identity that is assumed to be static and true while simultaneously defining the dangers that this sort of understanding implies.

How global cultural identities have been formed in response to particular political contexts is one of the main points of this discussion. I will argue that these identities are reactive and therefore constantly fluid, rather than static as Clash theorists would propose. In order to do this I will give a description of Clash theory and define some of

its major shortcomings. After this I will examine the historical motivations towards the formation of group identities during the period of colonial expansion and then tie that in to the modern context. Finally, I will give a short case study of the formation of Islamic extremism out of the Cold War politics that aims to show how U.S. political machinations actually created the Islamic extremism that is alleged to be an historical and evident constant aspect of Islam as a whole. In doing so I hope to peel back the layers of assumption and racism implicit in Clash theory in the effort to nullify the conception of any culture as intrinsically opposed to another.

### **The Clash of Civilizations**

To demonstrate the dangers of theories that propose two monolithic and intrinsically opposed cultures we can look to the work of modern days Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and Samuel P. Huntington. Both of these men claim that the “clashes” between the West and the Near East are driven by incompatible civilizations. They go so far as to lump historical events such as “the Crusades, 1492, and European colonization” into a singular long standing conflict. What they fail to recognize is that each of these encounters were “fueled by a specific political project—the making of a political entity called “Christendom,” the Castilian monarchy’s desire to build a nation-state called Spain following its conquest of neighboring territories, modern European imperial expansion, and so on” (Mamdani, p 27). Instead of critically examining these unique and multifaceted periods of conflict between the two religions, or perhaps more appropriate, political identities, they choose to blame their occurrence on the diametric and irreconcilable differences between them. Furthermore, there is no consideration of the years of peace and cooperation between Muslims and Christians’ that would call into

question the thesis of intrinsically opposed cultures. In other words, they write a history of the conflicts between the Middle East and West in static and uncritical terms that create another history that serves a political goal. They say that there is an inevitability of conflict between the East and West, an unavoidable “clash of civilizations”.

This concept of cultural battle and its theoretical pitfalls are further explicated by a quote from Mamdani’s book “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim,”

It does not make sense to think of culture in political—and therefore territorial—terms. States are territorial; culture is not. Does it make sense to write political histories of Islam that read like histories of places like the Middle East? Or to write political histories of states in the Middle East as if these were no more than political histories of Islam there? We need to think of culture in terms that are both historical and nonterritorial. Otherwise, one is harnessing cultural resources for very specific national and imperial political projects.

In other words, it does not do to think of a culture as attached to a state because the interests of a political party cannot be said to encompass the entirety of values and dispositions within another culture. Yet this is exactly what “clash theorists” are proposing. They promote the idea “that Islam is inherently violent in nature; and that, therefore, violent attacks against the West are inevitable and are provoked not by any particular grievances or set of circumstances but by the very existence of Western civilization” (Qureshi & Sells, p. 2). If this were true, and these conflicts did not in fact rise from changes in political circumstances that are the products of their historical environment, then it would follow that any existence of Islam needs to be eradicated or thoroughly dominated and changed in order to preserve Western values and security. This idea of innate civilizational conflict consequently functions like a declaration of war in that it proclaims that there is a definite hostility existing between two states, thereby

suggesting the certain inevitable consequences or war (Qureshi & Sells, p. 2). Thus, subscription to this theory could in fact justify political projects against Islamic communities.

In Bernard Lewis's work entitled "The Roots of Muslim Rage" he leaves no room open for the interpretation of Islamic religious scripts. He asserts that Islamic extremists correctly subscribe to the "classical Islamic view" that separates the world into two opposing entities known as the House of Peace (Islam) and the House of War (Non-Muslims). By focusing on this concept, and ultimately skewing it to serve his purposes, he disseminates the idea that anyone outside of the House of Peace is the enemy of Islam. He chooses not to discuss alternate interpretations of this dogma, or even compare it to other religious doctrines that have been utilized towards the promotion of violence in the name of religious ideals and misleads his readers into the assumption that violent intolerance of other religions is "inscribed within the origins of Islam and is the logical, indeed necessary, result of such inscription" (Q & S, p. 3).

This lack of a compare and contrast ethic within the discourse of clash theorists not only creates an easily definable monolithic culture out of billions of people but also points blame towards Islam for the conflict. The conflict is reduced to a single cause; that is Islam's hostility towards the West and their intrinsically violent and intolerant values. Lewis's interpretation of Muhammad explicates this idea well:

Muhammad, it will be recalled, was not only a prophet and a teacher, like the founders of other religions; he was also the head of a polity and of a community, a ruler and a soldier. Hence his struggle involved a state and its armed forces. If the fighters in the war for Islam, the holy war "in the path of God," are fighting for God, it follows that their opponents are fighting against God. And since God is in principle the sovereign, the supreme head of the Islam state – and the Prophet and, after the Prophet, the caliphs are his vice-regents – then God as sovereign commands the

army. The army is God's army and the enemy is God's enemy. The duty of God's soldiers is to dispatch God's enemies as quickly as possible to the place where God will chastise them – that is to say, the afterlife.  
(Lewis)

This argument is not presented as a theory of any particular school or version of Islamic history, but as if it were an objective reality of all Islam. Therefore, the duty of Muslims to dispatch of the non-Muslim enemies becomes incontestable (Qureshi & Sells, p. 4). Under this reduction of motivation, hostility from the West becomes a justifiable response to the “innate hostility” within Islam, and the “secular” and rational West must ready its defenses, and even attack preemptively in order to secure its security.

If Lewis had taken a paragraph to make a comparison between the doctrines of other religions, especially Abrahamic ones, he would have not been able to maintain the logic of his argument. He can state that Islam, by its very nature, is violent. But the same could be said, indeed has been said, about Judaism and Christianity. Violence in the name of almost every religion has been carried out for centuries and Lewis's deliberate (and I do mean deliberate, for if he has never heard of the Crusades or the Thirty Years War I would be in utter shock) refusal to acknowledge this fact is sloppy analysis at best. Emran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells illustrate this quite clearly by giving some examples of the violent tendencies written into Christian and Judaic religious script in their editorial introduction to the book “The New Crusades,”

The Moses of the Christian and the Jewish Bible carried out divine commands to destroy God's enemies and his successors waged holy genocide against the Canaanites. While the Christian Gospels contain injunctions against violence, they also contain passages that validate the Promised Land, threaten nonbelievers with eternal torment, blame Jews for the death of the redeemer Son of god, and envisage cosmic war against the forces of the Antichrist. All of these themes have been used to generate ideologies of violence. Christianity's history of inquisition, pogrom, conquest, enslavement, and genocide offers little support for

assertions that Islam's sacred text or its prophet entail a propensity for violence greater in degree or different in kind. (Q & A, p. 4)

Lewis does not even touch on these topics; hence he fails to consider the propensity for violence within other religious traditions. Without these comparisons, how can one reach the definitive conclusion that Islam is a religion more particularly aggressive or intolerant than others?

In response to these considerations, clash theorists would keep the idea of Western superiority alive by arguing that although Christianity may have been intolerant and violent in the past, today's secular and enlightened society has brought about reform within the Christian churches. Thus the idea of a backwards and fanatical Muslim community is kept animate through the invocation of nationalistic and highly embedded dispositions concerning the greatness of Western secular society for its subscription to the values of freedom, liberty, and peace; ideologies believed to be highly opposed within the Islamic world. This is once again misleading on the part of clash theorists. Religious intolerance was not at all necessary towards the occurrence of multiple conflicts since the beginning of the post-Enlightenment world; i.e. the colonial conquest, both World Wars, Vietnam, the nuclear arms race and numerous minor skirmishes and proxy wars performed by Western secular powers around the world. However, it is surprising and illuminating that many of these situations utilized a missionary appeal that verified the work required towards their goals. The "superiority" of Christianity justified the forcible conversion of indigenous peoples during colonial expansion while state apartheid and the destruction of African civilizations in South Africa "was carried out with bibles open" (Qureshi & Sells, p. 8). Clash theorists influenced by the work of Lewis currently utilize similar appeals to the supremacy of Christianity and Jesus in order to illustrate the moral

and spiritual degeneracy or inferiority of Muslims'. For example, Andrew Sullivan in his piece entitled "This is a Religious War" states,

This is why this coming conflict is indeed as momentous and as grave as the last major conflicts, against Nazism and Communism, and why it is not hyperbole to see it in those epic terms. What is at stake is yet another battle against a religion that is succumbing to the temptation Jesus refused in the desert – to rule by force. The difference is that this conflict is against a more formidable enemy than Nazism or Communism. (Sullivan)

What interpretations like this effect are the promotion of prejudice and the elevation of Western religious values and rational into a moral high ground over Islam and the East that leaves little room for the consideration of Western fault for the tensions.

Though it is my belief that these modern notions of cultural superiority are informed by the ideologies of colonial expansion, I would argue that they are quite different in their methods for justifying the assumed necessity of physical confrontation. In order to show this I will demonstrate how the Orientalist discourse within the colonial context has created ideas of group identity that correlate to desired political actions and how that has translated into the modern context.

### **The Academics of Racism**

Edward Said has argued that Orientalism as an academic, literary, and philosophical endeavor executed by Western intellectuals "responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object" (Said, p. 22). The result of this is a "highly internalized" and consistent group of concepts and viewpoints articulated by the dominant culture that surrounds Orientalism. In other words, knowledge of the Other is constructed in ways more meaningful to the observer than to a real discussion about the Other's identity as they know it. Thus, ironically, it defines the observer and their identity more than the Other that it desires to understand. Rather than being an honest

and non-political academic endeavor, this knowledge becomes more a product of the observer's cultural situation than a veritable discourse about another group's societal norms as they interact with them. The consequence is therefore a misrepresentation of the other that has resulted in a tendency towards enormously flawed and painfully general assumptions about every individual that comprises an alternate society.

Mahmood Mamdani has argued that the Culture Talk of modernity has led to a similar situation of cultural awareness. He has proclaimed that ideas of the Other come in large "geo-packages" that articulate alternate groups based on a quota of similarities that include religion, ethics and geography. This awareness is a form of generalized knowledge concerning another culture that is the consequence of highly politicized versions of Culture Talk. Mamdani describes Culture Talk as a product of post war globalization marked by "the ascendancy and rapid politicization of a single term: culture". Culture Talk is predicated upon "the assumption that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence" (Mamdani, p. 17). However, I believe that Culture Talk is more historical than Mamdani suggests as can be illustrated by Said's analysis of Orientalist endeavors in the colonial context. Edward Said describes the particular geo-package constructed by the Oriental academic lineage as something that has solidified into positivity. This is to say that the cultural "facts" become unquestioned and taken for granted: a phenomenon that Said has termed "latent Orientalism." He writes,

The differences in [nineteenth century writers] ideas about the Orient can be characterized as exclusively manifest differences, differences in form and personal style, rarely in basic content. Every one of them kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; this is why

every writer on the Orient, from Renan to Marx (ideologically speaking), or from the most rigorous scholars (Lane and Sacy) to the most powerful imaginations (Flaubert and Nerval), saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption. The Orient existed as a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce (Said, p. 206).

Observe the implication of the cohesion between philosophical, academic and literary work. This suggests that the entirety of the oeuvres concerning the Orient endorsed and reinforced the major underlying assumptions about Oriental culture. The very large mass of writers on the Orient (including fields as varied as poetry, political theory, economy, and imperial administration) accepted the basic distinctions between the East and the West as “a starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, “mind,” destiny, and so on” (Said, p. 2). These works inter-permeated each other so thoroughly that conjecture and speculation became objective and identifiable truth. In other words, the modern Cultural Talk that Mamdani claims to explain various cultures in generalized geo-packages is no new form of cultural analysis. Perhaps more correctly, it is the continuation of an ideological tool utilized towards the justification of specific political interests during times of deep insecurity: “that is when people seem particularly close to and thrust upon each other, the result either of expansion, war, imperialism and migration or as the effect of sudden, unprecedented change” (Said, p. 72 CoD).

This construction of knowledge as an ideological tool is well depicted in Said’s milestone book *Orientalism*. He contends that since knowledge is in fact a construction of the imagination it can be stylized as a means towards any end that the producer desires, whether consciously or not. In effect, “knowledge” of the Orient had a tendency to become more motivated by the goals of the perceiver than by objective analysis about

the social environment, ideologies, and stimuli of Near Eastern civilizations. He has proposed that this knowledge was based less on factual information about the Other than on an imaginative framework of imagery and vocabulary, based on history and tradition of thought that gave the represented a reality and a presence. That is to say that there was an internal consistency within the European discourse over the Orient that lacked a genuine correspondence with the “real” Orient (Said, p. 5). Furthermore, it is Said’s contention that the concept of the Orient must be studied with consideration for the configurations of power existent during the creation of that knowledge.

It is my contention that many of these themes are in full force today and that the understanding of Otherness through the eyes of both the East and West is informed by similar relationships of power. For this reason, I believe that it is useful to examine a few more arguments proposed by Said so that we may better understand how knowledge and identity can be informed by one’s political context.

He argues that “no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances” (Said, p. 11). In other words, there is the claim that detachment from personal experience (a job, a social position, a set of beliefs etc.) continue to bear on one’s professional work, and although it is possible to produce knowledge that is less partial than the individual, it is still impossible to completely eradicate these affects. These arguments construct a theoretical framework from which Said makes the claim that Occidental historical and social meaning was created through the struggle of defining and representing the Orient to Western consciousness. The power relationship that existed between the two entities dictated which subjects were chosen to be represented and agreed upon and what

conceptual model of the Other was to be constructed. Consequently, Oriental knowledge becomes “more valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a verdict discourse about the Orient” (Said, p. 6). Since this relationship was one of European political and territorial dominance over the Orient, its rhetoric was more suited towards the sustenance of those political endeavors. Therefore, a careful examination of the Orientalist methods of representation expresses more the desire to understand a relational situation of dominator over dominated than a desire for purely descriptive analysis. To understand this concept better I will look to the colonial concept of civilizational superiority that justified colonial conquests.

### **The Noble Mission**

The nineteenth century’s international competition for colonial spaces gave rise to a multitude of Euro-American justifications for the plunder of “newly discovered” territories. However, the main idea of these justifications remained similar: that is that the force exercised over colonial subjects was a means toward a noble end. As stated before, these theories were founded upon notions of civilizational superiority in which the aggressor was conceptualized as a benevolent actor who was bringing a better mode of life to the conquered. The rhetoric of these justifications was bound within ideas of advanced technology, religion, and even morality. In this manner, its perpetrators saw the colonial conquest that was in fact motivated by decades of international competition between the great European and American powers as a veritable favor to the colonized. The act was conducted with fervor and gusto for it was believed that they were bringing not only technology and light to the world’s downtrodden and backwards people, but spiritual salvation as well. They were bringing civilization. In this sense, concepts like

the French civilizing mission, *la mission civilisatrice*, nurtured the idea that certain races and cultures have a higher aim in life than others. Thus, it was not only their right to conquer and plunder, but also their duty as a more enlightened group of people. The brute force that that conquest required was therefore the product of a patriarchal yet noble ideal (Said, CoD 73). Edward Said, in his essay entitled the Clash of Definitions has quoted a small sample from Joseph Conrad's famous story *Heart of Darkness* that gives insight into the enactment of this thesis. Conrad's narrator Joseph Marlow reflects – “ the conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.”

So the hypothesis is that nineteenth century conceptions of Oriental backwardness and degeneracy were heavily influenced by the political motivations of European colonial expansion. European superiority was widely accepted as empirical truth and associated with the epochal ideas about the biological basis of racial inequality. The concept of racial classifications felt very comfortable in the framework of understanding that is latent Orientalism and to these ideas were added Darwinian justifications that accentuated the “scientific” division of the races into advanced and backward, “or European-Aryan and Oriental-African” classifications (Said, p. 206).

I believe that there is a similarity in the modern discourse about the Orient within Western culture. That is to say that there is a blatant and overwhelmingly consistent undercurrent of latent racism against and between the cultural, indeed the moral, values

of the Islamic-Arabic world and the Western; the likes of which are informed by colonial history. However, I am not by any means making the claim that there is a common or well-received concept of biological and scientifically provable racial inequality today for those concepts have not held up to scientific scrutiny. Yet these historical power dynamics amid the Middle East and the West have had a significant impact on modern perceptions of the other. During colonialism, a crucial feature towards these ideologies was the empirically demonstrable superiority of Western technology and industry which in turn gave reification towards the Western belief in the truth of Christianity. Therefore the spread of Christianity became a huge motivational and moralizing factor towards many of the more brutal aspects of colonialism. Today a similar version of this train of thought can be seen through the ways in which the media has represented Muslim culture, particularly of the Arabian ilk. Visual representations of the most “traditional” and fundamentalist people of Middle Eastern culture dominate the news. These displays of radical Islamic groups are often outside of modernity, shown in the barren and harsh environments of the Afghanistan Mountains or the Arabian deserts carrying all forms of small arms weapons and wearing conventional Muslim garb. The women are most often shown fully veiled or at the least with head-scarves.

These representations distance the entirety of enormous groups of people in that they serve towards the construction of the “geo-package.” They are furthermore encouraging towards distortions in that these images enforce a pre-established notion of Islamic culture as backwards and dangerous. The men with beards and weapons portray a violent religious fervor that is antithetical to the Western conceptions of freedom of choice and rational behavior while the covered women exemplify “inferior” ethics in that

women are not treated equally. However, even if these images were in fact indicative of the entirety of Islamic culture, the West must heed well the fact that women were not even allowed to vote until less than a century ago. Yet, nonetheless, there is the patriarchal assumption that the values and ideologies of the West are more advanced and civilized than those of the East. It is not even a disposition lurking beneath the surface of speech, as is demonstrated when people speak about the military expeditions in the Middle East. How many times has there been an interviewed soldier of the Iraqi war on television that has made the earnest proclamation that they are happy to be bringing democracy and help to the downtrodden people of the geography? It is blatantly stated and wholeheartedly agreed upon by the majority of people in the West that the bombings and occupations of Middle Eastern territories are done in the interests of those people. The West becomes justified in its actions because it is assumed to be doing them a favor, to be bringing them a better way of life. They are performing a noble mission. Is this so dissimilar from the justifications of the colonial conquest?

However, this new version of patriarchy is also very different in that rather than promoting the idea of the “noble” dissemination of knowledge or true faith to the Other, it is assumed that the Other is already aware of these “facts” and is unwilling, indeed unable, to change due to their embedded traditions and history. In this sense the moralization for the conflict becomes more blame oriented than the historical version. In other words, during colonial expansion it was the assumption that colonized peoples were uncivilized and backwards due to simple ignorance or biological inferiority whereas it is currently the assumption that the Other is irretrievably vested in a dogma that necessitates the destruction of “inferior” civilizations. More than viewing the Other as a group that

necessarily wants the benefits of a enlightened society, they are also viewed as a threat. It becomes required that one readies its defenses, or even strikes preemptively, in order to protect themselves from the supposed encroachment of alternate values onto their existence.

I have illustrated that there is an obvious hostility between the assumed identities of the East of and West which would suggest that the disposition of cultural superiority exists within both groups among those who would heed the call to violent action. This has been the product of recent historical events. In the case of the West there is the general disposition that the East is to blame for the hostility and tensions due to their inherently violent and intolerant attitude towards other groups. They are assumed to hate Democracy and as President Bush has so eloquently put it “our freedom”; perceptions that have become extremely exacerbated in the post 9/11 situation. Additionally, the Western lopsidedness of coverage on Arab/Islamic suicide bombings and passionate rallies against Western society, rather than on the millions upon millions of Muslims’ who wish to peacefully and logically express their concerns and desires, make mute the media’s disclaimers that these stories are not indicative of all Muslim people. Indeed, if it weren’t already assumed that the West envisages Islamic people as analogous to those images, why would the disclaimer even be necessary? In the case of the East, they see much of the violence and political upheaval in their region as a result of Western actions. The Israeli army is well known to be funded by the U.S. and their less than lenient attitudes towards the Palestinians gives the entirety of the West a visage less compassionate and gentle than the majority of the West assumes itself to have. Also, the U.N. imposed trade sanctions designed to keep Iraq from becoming a new threat to the

region after the Gulf War did not do anything to ease tensions between the two groups in that they proved particularly deadly to the Iraqi demographic because of the war's destruction of the country's physical infrastructure. In order to sate the desire to look compassionate but firm the U.N. devised a faulty program that revolved around the concept of oil-for-food aimed towards the maintenance of this punishing embargo while also helping the people. The problem was that it did not come along with any evaluative component that would force a response if conditions in Iraq worsened. Therefore it took some time before the outside world became privy to the fact that mortality rates among children under five years of age "more than doubled" in central and southern Iraq after the War (Mamdani, p. 189). As a result, contempt for the Western powers in whose name the sanctions were enacted was bred among the Muslim community. The point of this is to illustrate that each community points the finger at the other and that there has become little room for middle ground among those who subscribe, even unknowingly, to the dogmas of Clash theory.

This attribution of blame towards the other only serves as a self-fulfilling theory that maintains and prolongs conflict. What is needed is an examination of political policies and historical analysis that will illuminate the how's and why's of global tensions. Towards this end, I would like to look at how U.S. foreign policy has been critical towards the inflammation of the Islamic religious extremism that is now seen as the most central threat to the West.

### **The Red Scare Turned Green: Cold War Politics Boomerang**

The fundamentalist groups that are conceptualized by the vast majority of the West as historical and static entities in constant opposition to Western ideals

were in fact developed, organized and funded by U.S. and ISI (Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence) policy makers. Some of the particulars of how this was achieved are illuminating towards the refutation of the Western conceptions that Islam is an irrational and intrinsically violent religion in opposition to the rational and modern West. These ideas that have been proposed by the aforementioned and highly influential cultural analysts Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, who do not take into consideration the dynamics of "opposing" cultures, let alone the "rational" West's role in creating and sustaining the image of an extremist and intolerant Islam. It is the West's role in the creation of these groups and a few of the particulars of that history that I would like to examine in the following paragraphs. My goal is to call into question the latent and blatantly racist assumptions of the majority of Westerners by illustrating how the West molded these Islamic fanatics into their present incarnation as well as into the Western psyche.

In order to understand how Islamic extremist groups were born from the Afghani war one must look at the political milieu between the two superpowers competing for supremacy during this high point in the Cold War. This battleground not only constituted the struggle for control over territory, but also an ideological combat zone in which the Soviets utilized nationalistic fervor while the U.S. fanned religious extremism for political ends.

The Cold War left the U.S. as the world's sole superpower but the cost of this victory has been high. This is due in part to the Reagan administrations global perception of the Afghan conflict. As pro-Soviet forces gained favor in

Afghanistan through a series of political coups it became evident to U.S. policy makers that intervention in the name of preserving Democracy was necessary in order to counter the spread of Communism around the world. Like in Vietnam, there were once again anti-Communist legitimizations for the Reagan administration to claim that, “the defeat of U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Third World was evidence that the Soviet Union was on a roll” (Mamdani, p. 120). Therefore, Reagan demanded that “all possible resources be marshaled to “roll back” the Soviet Union, by all means necessary” (ibid).

The pre-Reagan administration of Carter focused less heavily on Communist “roll back” within the Middle East but more on containment and coexistence through negotiation. However, the Carter administration paved the road for subsequent covert military operations in the Afghani theatre. The seizure of CIA and State Department documents from the embassy takeover in Tehran reveal that the U.S., under the Carter administration, had begun quietly meeting Afghan-rebel representatives in Pakistan eight months before Soviet military intervention in their country (Mamdani, p. 123). This was confirmed by President Carter’s national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in an interview with the Paris-based *Le Nouvel Observateur* (January 15-21, 1998):

Q: The former director of the CIA, Robert Gates, stated in his memoirs [From the Shadows] that American intelligence services began to aid the Mujahidin in Afghanistan 6 months before the Soviet intervention. In this period, you were the national security advisor to President Carter. You therefore played a role in this affair. Is that correct?

Brzezinski: Yes. According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahidin began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec. 1979. But the reality,

secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise: Indeed, it was 3 July 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention. (Mamdani, p. 124).

This marked the beginning of covert U.S. operations in Afghanistan against the Communist parties. However, the Carter administration, unlike Reagan, was willing to approve only moderate levels of covert support for the anti-Communist allies while simultaneously searching for a negotiated settlement to “contain” the Soviets. It was the Reagan administration, and its determination to “roll back” and even payback the Soviets for the political embarrassment and financial expenditures of Vietnam that truly exacerbated the shift in U.S. policy from holding the Soviets at bay to bleeding the Soviets white on Afghani soil. The real task of U.S. forces in Afghanistan therefore became the “killing of Russians” and the CIA was determined that nothing come in the way of this objective (Mamdani, p. 124).

The arrival of Communism in Afghanistan was helped along by the government of Pakistan. After the Afghan king was deposed of in a bloodless coup in July of 1973, a new nationalist government was founded by the former Prime Minister Mohammed Daud. The new government supported the popular case of the Pashtun’s who not only comprise roughly half of the Afghani population but also have millions of members in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. Fearing that these new nationalists would be mobilized in order to create a new homeland for themselves, the Pakistani

government openly supported the antinationalist forces of Afghanistan, comprised of “Communists and Islamists, mostly university students and professors who were strongly international in their outlook” (Mamdani, p. 125). Political unrest and the support of Pakistan against the new nationalist government led to a second military coup that occurred on April 17, 1978, in which the ideology of Communist internationalism won respect over Islamist internationalism. In other words, one of the U.S.’s worst fears was realized: That is a nation in sway of a new and politically motivated power with the agenda of spreading Communism to other nations. Islamic internationalists were subsequently labeled subversive and they fled Kabul University for refuge in Pakistan, whose government had become as interested in squashing the new regime of Afghanistan as the U.S.

An alliance formed between the CIA and Pakistan’s ISI who shared two main objectives. The first objective was to recruit the most radically anti-Communist Islamists to Afghan and second was to equip these loosely-aligned Soviet opposition troops known as the mujahideen with maximum firepower. It is well worth noting that these mujahideen were proclaimed to be “freedom fighters” by the Reagan administration, “defending principles of independence and freedom that form the basis of global security” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mujahideen>). They were therefore significantly armed, financed, and trained by not only the United States, and Pakistan, but Saudi Arabia and even China as well. These dual objectives not only flooded the area with numerous and varied weapons but affected a huge influx of the most radical Islamic recruits into the region.

The training and support given by the CIA and ISI gave right-wing Islamism “not only the organization, the numbers, the skills, the reach, and the confidence but also a coherent objective” (Mamdani, p 129). Prior to this conflict, right-wing Islamist extremists did not have the power to draw strength from any significant number of the Muslim community. Yet the new objective towards the idealization of the war as Islamic and the utilization of Islamic symbols to create networks and communities sympathetic to the extremist cause saved these groups from their minor position. A new infrastructure of communication and a privatization of many of their dealings born from the necessity of the CIA to keep their machinations covert granted these groups the freedom to act independently. From this dynamic emerged the forces that eventually carried out the operation the West knows as 9/11 (Mamdani, p 131).

It is clear then that the radical Islam that Clash theorists would contend to have been existent and in opposition to the West since the invention of Islam has been born out of a direct political circumstance directed by the very powers that it is in opposition to. Alongside these considerations, notions of intrinsic opposition between cultures do not hold up and it is even clearer that group identities are influenced by their historical occurrences. It can be seen then that identity is a conglomeration of the multiple responses to social contests and that we have a choice in how we wish to affect that.

### **Identity is a Product**

Terms such as “Orient” and “Occident” are not so much geographical and political facts, but rather “an odd combination of the empirical and the imaginative” (Said, p 331). In other words concepts of nation, cultural solidarity and even ethics develop meaning only in that we invest time and effort into those definitions. Without

the imagination a political boundary would never have been drawn, an anthem would never have moved its subject and the considerations of justice, morality and even good and evil would be empty. The argument is that human beings make history and that these histories encompass not only territorial disputes, but also ideological inventions, literary themes, academic “knowledge” and corporate institutions created for dealing with the constant challenges presented to society. If one separates these struggles one veils their codependence.

The notion of identity as a product of these interconnected struggles has been to critically analyze how it has served the purposes of imperialism, nationalism, and the legitimization of violence and insurrection in the Middle East. In theorizing on the origins of identity, Edward Said argues that the “development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another, different and competing *alter ego* (Said, p 332-333). Identity for every culture, while being a “repository” for unique group experiences, involves the construction of “others” or opposites that are subject to continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of the other groups differences. Therefore each generation is constructing its identity with fluidity in a reactive interpretive process designed to sate the needs of urgent social contests. The interpretations are necessarily reactive due to their connection with the justification of action. In other words, if it is true that ideology is born out of biased interpretation and that any action can be justified with an ideology that correlates to a desired action, then it is also true that constant reinterpretation (or reinvention of self/societal values) can be used as a powerful social tool. In other words, any political endeavor can be justified as long as one can imagine

that endeavor as justifiable; a conceptually simple idea, but very powerful as the not too distant situation of Nazi Germany suggests.

It is the connection between identity and action that make the interpretation of self crucial towards the preservation of the numerous things that are dear to us; not the least of which include basic freedoms, preservation of a mode of living, or even life itself. It is ironic then that the will to preserve necessitates ideological adaptation to shifts in condition, or in other words, the will to change.

In order to clarify the theoretical notion of self knowledge as fluid and reactive some tangible examples of its occurrence should be offered. The societal contests that provoke it include “such concrete political issues as immigration laws, the legislation of personal conduct, the constitution of orthodoxy, the legitimization of violence... the character and content of education, and the direction of foreign policy, which very often has to do with the designation of official enemies” (Said, p 332). One need not look so far to see how issues of this kind have affected giant shifts in popular opinion. For instance, the preservation of the U.S. ideal of equality and liberty for all could not be justified after the Civil Rights movement criticized the hypocrisy of segregation; the French hostility towards immigration, which was welcomed in the 20’s and 30’s due to concerns of population maintenance, has become quite vehement in the face of high fertility and unemployment rates giving right wing politicians more support than they have had for decades; and finally, the increase of Muslim extremists (conceptualized by the vast majority of Westerners as historically static and representative of Islam) has in fact arisen from the political machinations of Soviet and U.S. powers during the final

stages of the Cold War. In any case one can see that cultural interpretations are in constant motion, adapting to circumstance with the desire of affecting it.

The actuality of this constant formation and reformation of self knowledge is difficult for most people to accept due to the desire to believe that human identity, the very essence of who and what we are, is natural and stable thus impossible to construct or invent. In effect, considerations of identity as reactive and unstable undermine traditional notions of culture. They challenge the idea that there is a “certain positivity and unchanging historicity of a culture, a self, a national identity” (Said, p 332). Therefore, the epistemological error of fundamentalism and Clash theorists alike is their inability to recognize that nothing is immune from the interpretive contest and that no one person, authority, or institution has total control over cultural definition.

### **Conclusion**

The large, vague and easily manipulable abstractions of other cultures as proposed by Clash theorists have not been edifying towards the amelioration of conflict. Why, then, do the policy makers of the Western governments support it? Do we really want to create a justification for conflict that will inflame the fervor of those who are already in opposition to Western values?

As I hope that I have thus far shown, I would argue that the supporters of Clash theory do in fact wish to enliven the spirit of discord and encourage nationalistic passions of hostility. The section on the impetus and rationalization for colonial expansion was presented so that I might show that Clash theory is serving to dignify the practice of competition and clash that supports the desires of self-aggrandizement, power, conquest, treasure, and self-pride that are wrapped up in the politics of the theory. In effect, similar

to historical missions like manifest destiny and *la mission civilisatrice*, Clash theory is creating a cultural destiny that justifies political actions abroad.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the Clash theorists is that they skew the opposing cultures in order to maintain a sense of difference and superiority, indeed a continued dominance over non-Western societies. But these theories won't stand up to even a small amount of criticism and they will do nothing but enrage the groups of people that they intend to control. No longer can an imperial power grasp control of foreign territories like in the days of old colonialism and to occupy foreign places will be costly in lives and money; and these actions are the necessities implicit in the rhetoric of Clash theory.

Rather, there needs to be a realization in the West that there is an inter-permeation of cultures that goes far beyond the notion of watertight and compartmentalized groups of people. No culture is purely one thing, insulated from all others as is demonstrated by the large amounts of immigrant populations in many different parts of the world. Because of this, we need to look towards more integrative approaches to cultural definition. Through hard work under the values of cooperation and concern for our fellow human beings we may be able to reach a sense of global community and care between people that will serve the ends of peace. First, however, we must not think of the Other as the Other, but as a dynamic group of *human beings* not too dissimilar from ourselves. We must humanize each other and Clash theory has not been at all edifying towards this goal. Furthermore, why must we believe that there is no room for the victory of all cultures and people in the future? Would the ideas of individual rights and freedoms have seemed so daunting a task to pre-enlightenment European

society as the idea of a cohesive global structure based on so many of the ideals that the U.N. purports to have? The point is this, if we can think it, we can achieve it, but we must learn to look at things more critically before we can proceed. We must ask ourselves what we really want; to work for a more integrative approach that recognizes the hybridity of cultures and their lack of truly definable contours, or to work towards the destructive idea of separateness.

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