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### Against Eurocentrism and Nativism: A review essay on Samir Amin's Eurocentrism and other texts

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# *Against Eurocentrism and Nativism: A Review Essay on Samir Amin's Eurocentrism and Other Texts\**

*Val Moghadam*

## *Samir Amin's Project*

Samir Amin, the Egyptian Marxist economist who is now living in Senegal as director of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and director of the Africa Bureau of the Third World Forum, is best known for his studies of imperialism and underdevelopment.<sup>1</sup> In his previous works such concepts as center/periphery, unequal development, and tributary mode of production are important elements of his theory of historical development, shifting geographic power centers, and the structural inequalities of the world system. He continues to subscribe to the "blockage" thesis associated with the dependency school - i.e., that dependent capitalism entails underdevelopment rather than internally-oriented and genuinely articulated economic development - but his work is also compatible with the world-system perspective developed by Immanuel Wallerstein.

In 1986, shifting his emphasis somewhat, Amin presented a paper at an international conference on socialism (held annually in Cavtat, Yugoslavia) entitled "Culture and Development: Reflections on Arab-Islamic Thought." He explained to me at the time that the paper was his contribution to an ongoing debate among Arab intellectuals around epistemological issues related to development and change, and the extent to which "the West" and its conceptual systems were responsible for the Arab world's cultural and economic stagnation. In retrospect, it is evident that the paper represented a transition in

*\*This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the Socialist Scholars Conference in April 1989.*

Samir Amin's work from a concentration on economic relations and structures to a new focus on cultural, intellectual, and epistemological problems. In his recently published book, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), he offers a critique of Eurocentrists and their mirror opposites, nativists (or as he calls them "inverted Eurocentrists"). It is a daunting project, not fully achievable in a short book (152 pages) written not so much in an academic style as with intense emotional involvement in the issues. But given the present political climate, in which secular and Marxist thinking is under siege in the Middle East, and in which values and concepts associated with the Enlightenment are being called into question in the West, it is an extremely important book, one which ought to receive careful attention from leftists everywhere.

In what follows, I offer a review of Samir Amin's book and an extended argument of my own on problems arising from the indiscriminate rejection of modernity, secularism, and Marxism, which is currently in vogue within certain Left circles in the United States and Europe. In the process, I will refer to other writings that relate to the interconnected issues of orientalism, feminism, Eurocentrism, anti-colonialist discourses, and universalism.

*Eurocentrism* accomplishes two admirable tasks: (a) it deconstructs the bourgeois discourse on civilization and historical development, exposing it as pseudo-universalist and imperialistic, and (b) it suggests elements of an alternative paradigm, a universalist discourse and a truly universal social science based on historical materialism. In the process Amin periodizes Eurocentrism, tracing its emergence in the Renaissance and its crystallization with the consolidation of capitalism in the nineteenth century. As such it complements Edward Said's celebrated *Orientalism*<sup>2</sup> while offering a friendly critique and a research agenda different from that of Said. The argument is also consistent with Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*,<sup>3</sup> which Amin cites approvingly.

In his Introduction Amin discusses and critiques economic reductionism in Marxism. He reminds us that historically, capitalism inverted the order of the relationships between the realm of the economic and the politico-ideological superstructure, by making the market generalizable and creating the need for analysis of the system's "hidden objective forces" (p. 2). For this reason, Marxists focused on the economic and tended to neglect cultural issues.<sup>4</sup> Like E. P. Thompson, Peter Worsley, Eric Hobsbawm and others, Amin suggests an alternative method in which cultural analysis is linked to

economic relations but not in a mechanical fashion. The mode of production, he argues, shapes and constrains modes of thought, ideologies and conceptual frameworks. He illustrates this by discussing the intellectual climate in the Mediterranean region during the medieval era, when what Amin calls the tributary mode of production predominated.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the fact that the dominant ideational system among scholars at that time was scholasticism (or what he calls medieval scholastic metaphysics), there was also considerable interaction between thinkers from both sides of the Mediterranean. At that time, he writes, "it is indeed difficult to qualify ibn-Rushd as Moslem, Maimonides as Jewish, and Thomas Aquinas as Christian. They... understand one another, critique one another, and learn from one another wholeheartedly" (p. 134). During the period when Islamic culture was at its peak, from the 8th to the 11th centuries, scholars read and debated one another and engaged each other's ideas in serious and fruitful ways.<sup>6</sup>

Amin points out that in Europe, nascent capitalist relationships of production called the tributary ideology into question. Eventually, during the Renaissance a complete break occurred. One of the consequences was that the Christian world experienced a "revolution" in thought and in its socio-economic system which made possible capitalist expansion. It was at this time that the discovery of the New World heralded the rise of Eurocentrism and the gradual decline of the Islamic world (even though the Ottoman Empire continued as a world power until the early 20th century).

In contrast, the Islamic world in the 12th and 13th centuries began to experience increased militarization and shrinking trade. Gradually, the tolerance for philosophical and theological inquiry that characterized the previous centuries waned. Centralized authority in the more advanced Islamic world precluded the disparate economic activities that could be found in less developed Europe. Amin feels that the control and inflexibility of "centers" contribute to their decline. Thus did Europe and the Islamic world go separate ways. The former center, the Islamic world, became part of the periphery, while the former periphery, Europe, became the world center. Later, the relationship between these two areas, and world-historical developments generally, were rewritten from a Eurocentric standpoint. Eurocentrism was formulated and perfected "scientifically" in the nineteenth century.

Drawing from the work of Martin Bernal, Amin identifies four elements of the Eurocentric construct: 1) it removes Ancient Greece

from the very milieu in which it unfolded and developed - the Orient - and arbitrarily annexes Hellenism to Europe; 2) it is racist; 3) it interprets Christianity, also annexed arbitrarily to Europe, as the principal factor in the maintenance of European cultural unity; 4) it concurrently constructs a vision of the Near East and the more distant Orients on racist foundations and by employing an immutable vision of religion (p. 90).<sup>7</sup>

In challenging the Eurocentric version of world history, Amin, like Bernal, calls for the valorization of Ancient Egypt and the Phoenicians, and an acknowledgement of their encounter with and influence on Greek culture. The ancient Greeks themselves freely acknowledged their indebtedness to Near Eastern cultures. No doubt this was understood in the Mediterranean world in the early medieval period, too. But in the wake of European expansion, the rise of racism, the triumph of Romanticism and the foundation of the modern university altered the meaning of Greek civilization and brought new meaning to "the West." European racists could not countenance the idea that Greece, now seen as the wellspring of European civilization, could have been the product of the encounter between native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites. Thus was history rewritten to conform to the self-definition of the new "center."

Amin defines Eurocentrism as (a) a theory of world history in which Europe is unique and superior, and (b) as a global political project which legitimates expansionism and such notions as "manifest destiny" and "the white man's burden" (p. 74). One might add that colonialism and imperialism have at their core the unshakable conviction of the superiority of their cultural and political systems. Indeed, imperialist aggression is inherent in the Eurocentric worldview. Amin suggests as much in his reference to Nazism and fascism (p. 114), the "logical" albeit extreme extension of Eurocentrism. The rhetoric of the Cold War and the language justifying American aggression in Vietnam (and elsewhere) also evince the Eurocentric worldview as delineated by Amin. The belief in the innate moral superiority of the United States and its historical role as the global champion of "freedom" motivates people like Oliver North and, together with economic interests, underlies American foreign policy.

Amin finds some Eurocentric elements in Marxism as well, notably the concept of the "Asiatic" mode of production and the theory of successive modes of production, which derived from the

European experience. As mentioned above, Amin's own theoretical formulation is the tributary mode of production, which he argues characterized the societies of Europe and the Near East from the end of Antiquity to the 16th century, when the modern capitalist world-system emerged. As an alternative to both capitalist Eurocentrism and to the Eurocentric aspects of Marxism, Amin suggests an historical materialist paradigm predicated upon the concepts of unequal development and the centers-periphery distinction. These concepts help explain shifting power centers and structural relations between regions and nation-states, such as the relationship between Europe and the Islamic world and between Japan and Imperial China. Amin believes that his theory of the progression from communal, tributary and capitalist modes of production provides greater explanatory power and generalizability than the idea of a European trajectory versus an Asiatic trajectory.<sup>8</sup> As mentioned above, he recognizes that Marxism "was formed both out of and against the Enlightenment" (p. 119) and that it acquired Eurocentric aspects; this critique is contained in his chapter "Marxism and the Challenge of Actually Existing Capitalism." Nonetheless, he defends the historical materialism of the Marxist tradition and argues that utilizing its concepts and analytic framework ultimately transcends Eurocentric visions because of its fundamental critique of capitalism.

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In the current post-Marxist, post-modernist and post-structuralist mood, universalist discourses, methods and visions are under attack. It has been argued, quite correctly, that W.W. Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth* also offers a universal theory of growth. Moreover, feminists and others have pointed out that universal liberal discourses about "the rights of man," notions of equality, and ideas about democracy were not extended to women, blacks, and other marginal and powerless groups. More to the point, they underscore the very real gender, class, and cultural differences existing among people which all-encompassing universal discourses ignore or deny. In response, Amin would call Rostow's work "pseudo-universalism," as it projects onto the world a prescription for "economic growth" (read: capital accumulation) derived from the experience of England. As for liberal discourses, Marxists have long realized their limitations and obfuscations. This recognition, after all, is the basis for the terms "bourgeois rights" and "capitalist democracy," for socialist suspicion

of nationalism (as an ideology that obscures real social divisions), and for the longstanding socialist concern with "the woman question."

Increasingly, however, Marxism is being made to look like a nineteenth century relic with an outdated and discredited vocabulary.<sup>9</sup> Some incautious critiques of Eurocentrism, orientalism, and colonialist discourses not only inappropriately include Marxism under this broad rubric of ideological ills, but also lend themselves to reactionary purposes at a time when fundamentalism and cultural revivalism in the Middle East and South Asia have put the socialist and secular projects at risk. It is outside the scope of this paper to explicate and defend the Marxist method and vision, but I will briefly take up the issue of Marxists and Marxism in the Third World. This is in response to the charge that Marxism is "Orientalist" and a mere "Western ideology." This discussion is also a transition to the subsequent sections of the paper, which elaborate and extend Amin's criticism of those mired in the discourse of nativism.

In a recent article and exchange in *Zeta* magazine,<sup>10</sup> Juliet Schor asserts (without elaboration) that on the issues of orientalism and racism, Marxism's influence "has been nothing short of invidious." This derives in part from the fact that Marx and Engels were "White Men." In response, a reader asks rhetorically whether Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Patrice Lumumba, Amilcar Cabral, Che Guevara, R. Palme Dutt, and Fidel Castro can be called "White Men."<sup>11</sup> Schor's unfortunate and unreflective answer is that these and other anti-imperialist leaders "have adopted Marxism, a Western ideology . . . [because of] the tremendous power that colonialism imparted to Europe and European ideas . . . I do believe that Third World Marxisms have been heavily influenced by Orientalist ideas of the superiority of the West."<sup>12</sup>

There are at least four problems with the above statement. The first is its patronizing stance, a "lesson" in culture and ideology from a Western leftist to Third World leftists. The second is that the author confuses Orientalism (the scholarly study of the Orient) with orientalism (the target of Said's attack) and conflates orientalism with colonialism, collapsing the two distinct categories such that it leaves an impression that orientalist discourses were pervasive vis-à-vis Africa and Latin America as well as "the Orient" proper. Third, it denies real reasons (other than the omnipotence of racist and orientalist ideology) for the appeal of Marxism in the Third World: widespread desire for social justice, and yes, for progress and for science,<sup>13</sup> as well as a coherent alternative to communalist, sectarian,

reactive praxis. Fourth, it shows a disregard for the serious difficulties faced by those espousing secular and universalist goals (usually Marxists) in many Third World and especially Middle Eastern and South Asian countries, where fundamentalist and communalist movements hold sway. Here notions of "authentic" vs. "alien" put socialists, feminists, and secularists in an extremely difficult position.

It should be noted that before Amin's Eurocentrism, even before Said's *Orientalism*, there was Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi*. This polemical piece against westernization, written in the mid-1960s by Iran's well-known populist writer, became enormously influential especially during the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution.<sup>14</sup> The term *gharbzadegi* has been variously translated as occidentosis, westoxication, euromania. It is in all events a kind of illness, a plague from the West that turns domestic intellectuals into alien-sounding effete snobs. It is worth pointing out that Marxists, who identified with the poor, the working class, and the oppressed, and who were proscribed during the Pahlavi era, were not the focus of Al-e Ahmad's disdain. Rather, he condemned the foreign-educated intellectuals throughout the official institutions who reviled their national traditions and were completely immersed in the culture and vocabulary of Europe and the United States. While there are brilliant insights in Al-e Ahmad's critique, he goes too far in his denunciation of the West, falling into what is called today an essentialist characterization, and lending his argument to an indiscriminate labeling of all non-indigenous and non-traditional vocabularies as alien and dangerous.<sup>15</sup>

Can one avoid orientalism without falling into the trap of Occidentalism, or what Amin calls "inverted Eurocentrism," and what the Syrian philosopher Sadeq Jalal al-Azm called "orientalism-in-reverse"?<sup>16</sup> It is indeed difficult to avoid the we-they distinctions that Edward Said condemned in his book. James Clifford has suggested that perhaps all forms of thought and representation for dealing with the alien are problematical, and that in the process of making interpretive statements about foreign cultures and traditions, dichotomizing and restructuring are inevitable.<sup>17</sup> In a recent essay, Mona Abaza and Georg Stauth discuss the trend of "going native."<sup>18</sup> They argue that within this "indigenous discourse" are found Third World sociologists, anthropologists and foreign students of local cultures, who provide a new imagination of what is supposedly the "essence" and the "real" of the culture of the Other (or of their own cultural traditions). This kind of nativism can be expected in areas which have had unpleasant encounters with the outside. In the Middle East,



where legitimate grievances exist toward the Western powers, it has become all too easy to slip into a nativist mentality that privileges difference and sets up absolute oppositions. Thus in response to colonialist and imperialist (and Zionist) practice, as well as insufferable Western mainstream intellectual currents (not Marxist), a kind of defensiveness and insular thinking on the part of many Middle Eastern intellectuals has developed. This has ramifications for both practical politics and intellectual work. In this new nativist discourse, cultural dependence, orientalism, neo-colonialism and cognitive imperialism are blanket terms for any concept, practice or institution that originates in "the West." What is privileged is "authenticity," what is sought for is "identity." This is often translated into a rejection - as alien and culturally inappropriate - of Marxism, feminism, democracy, socialism, secularism. What is indigenous and therefore good? "Islam." This is exactly the argument of the ideologues of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>19</sup>

#### *The Nativist Discourse*

In the second part of *Eurocentrism* Amin tackles the new anti-universalist notion of "the right to difference," which he calls "provincialism." This discussion is found in the chapter entitled "The Cultural Evasion: Provincialism and Fundamentalism." Here he also critically discusses "inverted Eurocentrism," the mirror image of Eurocentrism, and a kind of cultural nationalism. Finally, he refers to cultural relativists who find it difficult to be critical of oppressive structures and relations when they occur in Third World countries. Let us first examine the nativist discourse.

In response to the attempt by First World politicians, ideologues and social scientists to impose a Western, disguised as universal, point of view, Third World intellectuals have sought alternatives in particularist conceptual models and in cultural particularism. The indigenization of the social sciences is certainly needed, but the idea as developed by Third Worldist intellectuals seems to be cultural and conceptual particularism - that is, another form of ethnocentrism - rather than the development of concepts of general applicability or those conducive to cross-cultural communication.<sup>20</sup> For example, in the Middle East, in the place of Western sociology, a demand for Islamic sociology is made; instead of Western economics, Islamic economics; instead of Western psychology, Islamic psychology. Indigenization is no doubt needed in order to make the social sciences truly universal and representative; this will be discussed at more

length presently. But should the response to Western parochialism (lack of knowledge about the Middle East, or misrepresentation of it) be a turning inward? Should the response to pseudo-universalism be a rejection of all concepts and categories associated with the West? Some Middle Eastern intellectuals apparently think so. Here we will briefly consider some arguments.

Anouar Abdel-Malek, an Egyptian intellectual and former communist now living in France, was perhaps the first critic of Orientalism.<sup>21</sup> But although his insights are profound, he goes too far. He has criticized many concepts as Western and thereby inappropriate to the specific cultural and political developments and actions of Third World and especially Islamic societies.<sup>22</sup> He is also convinced that there is a major "civilizational confrontation between the Orient and the Occident." Similar views are held by Mahmoud Dhaouadi, a Tunisian sociologist. In a recent essay, Dhaouadi criticizes theories of underdevelopment that focus on economics, and sets out to "operationalize psycho-cultural underdevelopment" in the Arab world.<sup>23</sup> He underscores the widespread use of English and French and the "inferiority complex syndrome," especially vis-à-vis Western science and knowledge, as indicators of this underdevelopment. Echoing Ali Mazrui, who argues that one of the greatest dilemmas of today's Africa is "a direct consequence of the fact that its institutions and ideologies are alien, lacking any African roots whatsoever," Dhaouadi asserts that "what is at stake here is the clash between tradition (Third World cultures) and modernity (the new cultural values and visions of Western civilization since the 19th century.)" Note that "Third World cultures" is synonymous here with "tradition."

I think it is worth digressing for a moment to consider Michel Foucault's response to the Iranian Revolution, which may be linked to the sentiments referred to above and below on the essential difference exhibited by the Iranian masses and expressed in the religious discourse of the anti-Shah movement. Foucault's journalistic writings on the Iranian Revolution in 1978 and 1979 expressed his deep admiration for what he called a new "spiritual dimension in the political life." In an interview, he said that the idea of "collective will" was a myth, but that it was at work in the Iranian Revolution. The role played by Islam in the Revolution, he said, was not the opium of the people but "l'esprit dans un monde sans esprit." Impressed by the Islamic ideology, he believed that the Revolution was not the result of an alliance of different political forces, or a compromise between

social classes; it was not about class struggle or even about internal societal contradictions. For Foucault, the revolutionary forces created by this religious spiritualism have marked a new stage of resistance against modern rationalism and power based on science and technology.<sup>24</sup> This is not the place to counter Foucault's early views of the Iranian Revolution. However, one realizes with consternation that Foucault interpreted mass resistance against a coercive military machinery in terms of the religious spirituality of the East.

Adil Hussein was previously a Marxist economist who wrote a widely read book about Egypt's dependence on the world market. He now declares himself to be part of the "Islamic current" and argues that there exists an epistemological and conceptual break between the East and the West.<sup>25</sup> This break runs parallel to the break between Islam and secularism. In defining this break, Adil Hussein sees "faith" as the primary differentiating category between East and West. Accordingly, he believes that Islamic faith can be the guiding principle both for economic development and for the control of consumerism. Hussein also argues that Western social theory's claim to universality is actually spurious, and therefore Muslims need to develop their own concepts. As such he makes an argument similar to that of Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Iran's former (and first) President, who has written a treatise entitled *Eghtesad-e Towhidi*, or Islamic economics.<sup>26</sup> There Bani-Sadr posits an Islamic economic system which is free of exploitation and consumerism, derived from the Islamic concept of *towhid*.

Adil Hussein's thesis of the materialist West and the spiritual East is not new, of course. It underlies all arguments which attempt to reverse the orientalist perspective. His charge that social science is not universal may be disputed (see Zubaida's response below), but it is true that there are ethnocentric and parochial tendencies in Western, and especially American, social science.<sup>27</sup> If the goal of social science is to develop a truly universal discourse and set of methodological tools, then Bani-Sadr is not wrong to utilize an indigenous concept for analysis. Assimilating into social science concepts derived from diverse cultures, experiences and histories should be part of the movement toward a genuinely universal social science.<sup>28</sup> However, these concepts would need to be rationalized and secularized in order to be useful outside the group of believers. Otherwise, they constitute a particularist research agenda which hardly contributes to cross-cultural communication, interaction and understanding. An example we might consider is the difference between a sociology of the Middle

East and an Islamic sociology. In the former, common concepts and methods are used for the study of different societies. It may have its deficiencies, such as the ethnocentrism inherent in such concepts as "the family," as though only one type existed. These concepts need elaboration, clarification and revision to account for differences. Still, in a universalist social science project, the uniqueness of every society or of historical developments is not denied; rather it is argued that this uniqueness can be identified in terms of general concepts which can specify ranges of forms of difference. By contrast, a particularist social science requires distinctive concepts and methods to suit cultural/historical particularities (Islam, Shiism, Arabism etc.). Worse, particularist paradigms cannot fully communicate with each other and cannot, therefore, identify differences systematically. They can only proclaim absolute difference.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Anti-Colonialist Discourse and Women*

For the provincialists and inverted Eurocentrists, everything that is indigenous and traditional is good, while "the West" is represented in the same essentialist manner that typifies Eurocentrists.<sup>30</sup> The inverted Eurocentrists and fundamentalists also conjure up an image of sexual depravity in the West to justify rigid morality codes, gender segregation and the veiling of women.

Consider the following, as exemplifying what Amin calls inverted Eurocentrism. It also illustrates the limits of the anti-colonialist discourse, particularly when it involves "the woman question." In Iran, the most vocal and eloquent female exponent of Islamic rule is Zahra Rahnavaard, the wife of Prime Minister Mir Hossein Musavi, a former journalist and now political science professor and the author of ten books. She maintains that "the women of Iran are among the freest in the world" and that the chador (the floor-length veil, usually black) is "the greatest thing the Islamic revolution did for women. It took them away from being mere sex objects and made them intellectually and spiritually valued people . . . The women in Iran today worship God. They do not worship the U.S.; they do not worship cosmetics; they do not worship consumerism."<sup>31</sup> While there is a certain defiant pride in her statement which is appealing, her characterization of Iranian women as "free" must be called into question. If women are so free, why is veiling compulsory? Why is there punishment for "mal-veiling", i.e., insufficient covering of the hair?

A brief digression from our central focus to deconstruct the discourse on veiling might be helpful since it is pertinent to our

discussion below of cultural relativists, for whom traditions and local customs are either described or defended, never criticized. In Islamic Iran, the preoccupation with women's appearance and the obsession with women's bodies signifies the central responsibility assigned to women in the Islamist restructuring of power, of culture and of society. It is women who are made to be the carriers of cultural values and indigenous norms as they are defined by the ruling elites. It is the unveiled woman who is regarded as the embodiment of *gharbzadegi*.

A number of Iranian feminists have pointed out the centrality of "the woman question" (*masale-ye zan*) in the process of Islamization. In a recent paper, Afsaneh Najmabadi has discussed an editorial that appeared in the April 7, 1984 issue of *Zan-e Ruz*, a weekly women's journal published in Tehran.<sup>32</sup> The passages are remarkable for their illustration of how the problematics of *gharbzadegi*, anti-imperialism, anti-feminism, and essentialism are interconnected.

Colonialism was fully aware of the sensitive and vital role of woman in the formation of the individual and of human society. They considered her the best tool for subjugation of the nations. Therefore, under such pretexts as social activity, the arts, freedom, etc., they pushed her to degeneracy and degradation and made of her a doll who not only forgot her human role, but became the best tool for emptying other human beings of their humanity . . .

In Western societies where capitalism is dominant . . . women's liberation is nothing but the liberty to be naked, to prostitute oneself . . . Women's freedom means the freedom to use women for all the dirty and ominous aims of the powerful and the rich . . . The depth of the tragedy is that this same woman, through sickening and horrible films, fashion magazines and deviationist and lowly journals, is presented to the rest of the world as a model for women to copy.

In the underdeveloped countries, in addition to the above role, women serve as the unconscious accomplices of the powers-that-be in the destruction of indigenous culture. So long as indigenous culture persists in the personality and thought of people in a society, it is not easy to find a political, military, economic or social presence in society . . . And woman is the best means of destroying the indigenous culture to the benefit of imperialists . . .

In Islamic countries the role of woman is even more sensitive. Islamic belief and culture provides people of these societies with faith and ideals . . . Woman in these societies is armed with a shield that protects her against the conspiracies aimed at her humanity,

honor and chastity. This shield is verily her veil. For this reason, in societies like ours, the most immediate and urgent task was seen to be her unveiling, that is, disarming woman in the face of all the calamities against her personality and chastity. Then she became the target of poisonous arrows of corruption, prostitution, nakedness, looseness, and trivialities. After this, she was used to disfigure the Islamic culture of the society, to erase people's faith and push society in her wake toward corruption, decay and degradation . . .

It is here that we realize the glory and depth of Iran's Islamic Revolution. This revolution transformed everyone, all personalities, all relations and all values. Woman was transformed in this society so that a revolution could occur.<sup>33</sup>

This is a powerful, complex and sophisticated statement. It would take a much longer article to probe and elaborate upon all its implications, but it should be clear to the reader that the Middle Eastern feminist, socialist, and secularist is faced with a difficulty of enormous proportions. It should also be evident that facile dismissals of Marxism as orientalist and Eurocentric, uncritical acceptance of all anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist language, and the celebration or defense of the indigenous, native, and traditional by Western leftists are quite compatible with the point of view of the contemporary Islamist ideologue.

If Zahra Rahnavard's insistence on the superiority of the Iranian Islamic cultural and political system, and of its emancipatory essence, represents inverted Eurocentrism, perhaps her "Other" is Juliette Minces, who argued in her controversial book that "the ideal in most Muslim societies remains the incarceration of women."<sup>34</sup> Here is a characteristic passage: "Can the evolution of the condition of women in the Arab world be evaluated by the same criteria as in the West? Is it not Eurocentric to put forward the lives of Western women as the only democratic, just and forward-looking model? I do not think so. The demands of Western feminists seem to me to represent the greatest advance toward the emancipation of people." How countries where the feminization of poverty, rape, the degradation of women in most pornography, and widespread unemployment and underemployment of women can constitute a model of emancipation remains a problem which Eurocentric feminists would do well to ponder. A universal model of emancipation cannot arrogantly assume for itself a Western (or American) point of view. At any rate, even within Western countries there are different conceptions of emancipation. These class and cultural differences must somehow be

considered and integrated into the model. Perhaps dialogue and (undistorted) communication is one way forward.

Socialists must take care not to go overboard in charging other leftists with orientalism. In a recent exchange in *New Left Review*, Mai Ghoussoub, the Palestinian author of an article on Arab women,<sup>35</sup> was taken to task by her critics for her presumed orientalist approach.<sup>36</sup> Their major criticism of Ghoussoub was "the orientalist conceptualization of Islam at the center of her argument"; "the absence of a notion of class in her work"; "a narrow definition of feminism specific to the lives of bourgeois women." They reject as essentialist and reductionist her discussion of an "Islamic attitude" toward women.

Ghoussoub is not the only Middle Eastern feminist who feels there is an "Islamic position" on women. The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi is the most prominent one who holds this view.<sup>37</sup> This has also been illustrated in a short study of erotic and religious texts, which reveals a preoccupation with woman as an "omnisexual" creature.<sup>38</sup> Hammami and Rieker deny this, however, and point out that women's status is variable in the Islamic world. They would also probably agree with the anthropologist Talal Asad, who points out in a recent paper that the legal reforms in Muslim countries first instituted several decades ago during the era of liberalism, laws which restricted the traditional rights of men in Muslim family law, were "imposed upon the people from above."<sup>39</sup> The Western categories which abolished child-marriage were imposed by force, he notes. Well, yes, one wonders, but does this mean that they should not have been introduced, because they were Western?

Hammami and Rieker are correct to argue for a class analysis rather than one that confines itself to Islamic texts and doctrine, or is concerned exclusively with the problems of the educated elite. But there is a tendency to think that once you have analyzed a problem it goes away. We can clean up our own act methodologically, but the fact remains that binary oppositions are very much part of the dominant ideologies (and popular ones, I might add - common-sense notions of what it means to be male or female) in the Middle East. When the "essentialists" decry Islamic texts and Islamic laws (which form the basis for the "Islamic attitude"), they are taking seriously the intentions and rhetoric of the policy-makers and ideologues who themselves speak and formulate policy in essentialist terms. The problem is that Islamic law itself is constituted more by gender categories than class categories.<sup>40</sup> Islamic law itself creates a unitary

category, "woman," to which are applied the personal status precepts (divorce, child custody, court testimony, polygamy, veiling). All women are subject to these regulations and laws. You cannot circumvent them the way you can abortion restrictions in the United States, that is, with enough money. So yes, we do need to deal with Islam, which is to say political Islam. We have to face the fact that the imposition of Islamic law is inimical to women's emancipation and social progress. The solution, as I see it, is a secular state and autonomous institutions of civil society, especially women's organizations and socialist parties. I am convinced that it is not being Eurocentric or westoxicated to take this position.

Can one avoid Eurocentrism without falling into an extreme position of cultural relativism? Should oppressive and reactionary practices be ignored because the language needed to critique them is Western, or because they are irrelevant to the principal goal of "national liberation," or because these are time-honored customs and practices? A brief look at Afghan studies will illustrate the problem of the absence of a critical stance, especially regarding gender relations and theocratic structures. What we hear in seminars and conferences, and read in the literature, is that the veiling and seclusion of refugee women in Peshawar strengthens the fighting men's will to resist;<sup>41</sup> that the *jihad* (holy war against the Marxist government) has brought forth a "new political institution," the Sharia (Islamic canon law);<sup>42</sup> that refugee girls and women in Peshawar are not allowed to go to school or even to clinics for "fear that they might fall under the gaze of strangers";<sup>43</sup> that traditional gender relations are essentially harmless; that gender relations are not an appropriate subject for discussion and study by others.<sup>44</sup> At a panel on Afghanistan at the 1986 Socialist Scholars Conference, Swedish Social Democrats arguing for military aid to the Mujahedeen responded to my query about why socialists should support a putative national liberation struggle predicated upon the subordination of women with these words: "Well, we don't share their values or their views of women's place, but that is their culture." And this from members of a culture known for its egalitarianism, extensive social rights, and personal freedoms! While cultural relativism, as an alternative to ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism, has its sophisticated and well-intentioned variant, the foregoing statement represents its vulgar version, one devoid of any critical content. As Abaza and Stauth put it, Western social scientists and intellectuals, impressed by Islamic revivalism, "have too crudely



and too quickly evoked perspectives and arguments aimed at a decomposition of secular intellectualism in the Middle East."<sup>45</sup>

The critique of Eurocentrism and orientalism, the wholesale rejection of "Western political thought," and the emphasis on "difference" has resulted in an epistemological crisis in which, at least for the moment, anything goes. Among other things, this has led to the emergence of some voices within Middle East women's studies that call into question the ability and indeed right of "outsiders" to analyze and make judgements about gender relations in the Arab world. It leads to the view expressed by a New York-based Algerian feminist who holds that writing about women is a form of oppression because it denies those women the right to speak for and about themselves. Liberating women includes liberating them from being the objects of other people's studies, she insists, and therefore Arab women must struggle for the right to write about themselves in order to create an authentic account of the lives of Arab women.<sup>46</sup> There is a point to be made about the incessant voyeurism of outsiders - tourists, photographers, anthropologists - but surely it is not that all outsiders should forfeit the right to study or represent others, or that empathy is impossible. Surely one's stance, motivation, and purpose are important criteria and justification in such endeavors. Lila Abu-Lughod, who has criticized the reification of the Self/Other distinction, writes that "to recognize that the self may not be so unitary and that the Other might actually consist of many *others* who may not be so 'other' after all is to raise the theoretically interesting problem of how to build in ways of accepting or describing differences without denying similarities or turning these various differences into a single, frozen Difference."<sup>47</sup>

#### *Against "Difference" and For a Universalist Discourse*

Does a critique of orientalism and of Eurocentrism mean a hands-off attitude toward the cultural artifacts of non-Western and/or Islamic countries? Amin chides Edward Said for disapproving of a European Orientalist who compared Islam to the Christian Arian heresy.<sup>48</sup> Amin calls this provincialism. Can Islamic texts not be the subject of analysis and critique? Or, if they are, can they only be studied appropriately by Muslims? (I should say, at this point, that Edward Said's vigorous defense of Salman Rushdie would seem to invalidate the charge of provincialism. But one wonders what Said's response would have been had Rushdie not been of Muslim background).<sup>49</sup> Amin's view is that "if the goal is to advance the project of

universalism . . . it is a right and a duty to analyze texts, whether or not they are considered sacred, and to examine the interpretations that different societies have made of those texts. It is a right and a duty to explore analogies and differences, suggest origins and inspirations, and to point out evolutions. I am persuaded that no one's faith will be shaken as a result" (p. 103). Perhaps Amin is being too modest here; people's beliefs have been shaken as a result of study and scientific knowledge (certainly mine were). But his main point is well-taken: the texts and discourses can and ought to be analyzed and critiqued, by anyone. (Incidentally, this whole discussion, found on pp. 102-103, anticipates the Salman Rushdie affair).

Samir Amin rejects cultural nationalism in favor of a Marxian-inspired universalism. Critical of notions of "incommensurability" of different cultures, and opposed to insider/outsider distinctions, Amin writes in his final chapter: "It is necessary to pursue debate and not to avoid it on the grounds that the views that anyone forms about others are and always will be false: that the French will never understand the Chinese (and vice versa), that men will never understand women, . . . that only Europeans can truly understand Europe, Chinese China, Christians Christianity, and Moslems Islam; . . ."

And how will this understanding be carried out? I think Amin would agree with Sami Zubaida's point that though the objects and concepts specific to the social sciences were developed in Europe (Britain, France, Germany, Italy), this fact was part of a complex of social and intellectual developments which included at an earlier point in time the contributions and innovations of Arab and Persian philosophers and thinkers, and of the ancient Greeks. (Bernal and Amin would add the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians). At each of these conjunctures, Zubaida argues, the world of thought was and remains "universal." He adds:

Universal in the sense of generating forms of knowledge, thought and argumentation which were drawn upon by intellectuals from different cultures and religions to formulate problems and solutions relevant to their particular contexts. Social theory and the social sciences today are universal in a similar sense (whatever one may think of their value or validity). Ethnocentric conceptions, as well as cultural nationalisms, may be formulated in their terms, but so can the devastating critiques of ethnocentrism and nationalism. Nationalistic cultural sentiments should not be allowed to obscure the necessary universality, not only of science but of thought.<sup>50</sup>

To me this does not mean that social science is frozen, or that its universality cannot be constantly expanded and refined. The application of Western concepts and methods by non-Westerners may be done in concert with the employment of indigenous concepts and methods, rigorously tested and developed. As Syed Farid Alatas has argued, a universal social science is necessary if scholars from different cultures are going to communicate with each other. He adds: "Universalization should not be confused with generalization. Concepts or theories may refer to the general or the particular but social science is universal in so far as concepts and theories developed in one civilization are available to scholars in another civilization."<sup>51</sup>

The Marxian social scientific paradigm has already shown itself to have wide appeal and application. It is also far more flexible than its critics aver. Refining its concepts, recasting its definition of culture, the political, and ideology in light of experiences in various Third World countries, honing its explanation and critique of religion will contribute even more to its universality. Combining the Marxist method with the political goals of socialism and democracy and with the discourse of equality and human rights - a universal discourse if there be one - is a powerful alternative to Eurocentrism, orientalism, and the nativist reaction.

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## NOTES

1. Among Amin's best known works are *Accumulation on a World Scale: A Critique of the Theory of Underdevelopment* (Monthly Review, 1974), *Neo-Colonialism in West Africa* (Penguin, 1974), *Unequal Development: Social Formations at the Periphery of the Capitalist System* (Monthly Review, 1976), *The Arab Nation* (Zed Press, 1978), *Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis* (Monthly Review, 1980), *The Arab Economy Today* (Zed Press, 1982), *Déconnexion: Pour Sortir du Système Mondiale* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), *The Crisis of Arab Society* (In Arabic, 1986). See also "Expansion or Crisis of Capitalism?", *Third World Quarterly* (vol. 5, no. 2, April 1983), "Income Distribution in the Capitalist System," *Review* (Summer 1984), and "Democracy and National Strategy in the Periphery," *Third World Quarterly* (Vol. 9, No. 4, October 1987).

2. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (NY: Vintage, 1978).

3. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

4. For an extended argument about the Marxist neglect of culture and an alternative framework which gives attention to the cultural matrix, see Peter Worsley, *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), especially the Prolegomena.

5. In Amin's theory, the concept of tributary mode of production replaces both feudalism and the Asiatic mode of production. Readers may refer to Amin's *Unequal Development* (1976) for his theory of pre-capitalist "tribute-paying" or tributary societies.

6. At this time, Greek philosophy was highly influential and affected religious thinking among the cultural elite on both sides of the Mediterranean. In the Islamic world, two celebrated thinkers were the philosopher and physician Abu-Ali Sina (Avicenna), who recognized that disease could be spread by drinking water and whose Canon remained a medical bible in Europe for a longer period than any other work, and ibn-Rushd (Averroes), who felt that the truth learned from rational study and philosophy was also revealed to less sophisticated people through the symbolic language of religion. As sophisticated Christians were to learn to do with the Bible, these thinkers interpreted the Quran "allegorically" when they found it to be in conflict with reason (Paul Siegel, *The Meek and the Militant: Religion and Power Across the World* (London: Zed Books, 1986, p. 179). Razi (Rhazes) went beyond this. Another philosopher-physician, he opposed the acceptance of miracles and prophets. Although he was a deist, he "maintained that all misfortunes came from tradition and custom, that religion was the cause of wars and was hostile to philosophy and science. He believed in the progress of science and he considered Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates much greater than the holy

books" (Maxime Rodinson, *Marxism and the Muslim World* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1981, p. 64). Such an attitude was inconceivable in 10th century Europe.

This was happening at a time when the Islamic world constituted a "center." Islamic civilization was the richest and foremost in the world from the mid-8th to the mid-11th century, reaching its highest point in the 9th century. Compared to it, the commerce and culture of Europe lagged far behind. Highly urbanized, with a sophisticated financial and commercial system, agriculture was neglected, which may be one reason for its later decline, as Perry Anderson has argued (*Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London: New Left Books, 1974, p. 502).

An excellent source on Islamic civilization, its periodization and its interactions with the West is Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (University of Chicago Press, 1974). See also his germinal essay, "The Interrelations of Societies in History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (vol. 5, 1963, pp. 227-250).

7. What Amin means by "an immutable vision of religion" is a view of religion which is essentialist, that is, which regards each religion as consisting of intrinsic properties that distinguish it from another. Moreover, this view tends to attribute excessive explanatory power to religion.

8. This has been put forward by, among others, Perry Anderson. See *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: New Left Books, 1974).

9. The monthly magazine *Zeta* combines exemplary politics with a hostility to Marxism which is becoming a litany in the columns of editor Michael Albert. Another example, also from the magazine, is Juliet Schor, "Why I am No Longer A Progressive" (*Zeta*, April 1989), and her response to two critics (*Zeta*, June 1989).

10. See note above.

11. See letter by Anatole Anton, *Zeta*, June 1989, p. 3.

12. Response by Juliet Schor, *Zeta*, July 1989, p. 4.

13. It may interest readers to know that one of the leaders of the Beijing student movement, Wuer Kaixi, was reported as saying that "We have to be responsible in our struggle for democracy and for science." See "A Call to Arms," *Time*, July 10, 1989, p. 32.

14. Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Westoxication: A Plague From the West*. Translated by R. Campbell.

15. For further discussion of Al-e Ahmad's work, see Brad Hanson, "The 'Westoxication' of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrang, Al-e Ahmad, and Shariati," (*International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, February 1983, pp. 1-23), Yann Richard's chapter on Iranian intellectual thought in Nikki Keddie, *Roots of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); see also the relevant chapter in Hossein Bashiriyeh, *The State and Revolution in Iran* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

16. Sadeq Jalal al-Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism-in-reverse" (*Khamsin*, 1981). (Reprinted in Jon Rothschild, ed., *Forbidden Agendas: Intolerance and Defiance in the Middle East* (London: al-Sasqi Books, 1984). This term refers both to the approach to works on the Middle East/Islamic world as undifferentiated and uniformly questionable in scholarship (which is al-Azm's critique of Said's approach to Orientalist scholarship), and to the mirror-image of the Western Orientalist, the Islamist, for whom the East is fundamentally different from and superior to the West. The orientalist-in-reverse has his own highly questionable representation of the Western "Other."

17. James Clifford, "On Orientalism," ch. 11 in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 261.

18. Mona Abaza and Georg Stauth, "Occidental Reason, Orientalism, Islamic Fundamentalism," *International Sociology*, vol. 3, no. 4, December 1988, pp. 343-364.

19. The texts and authors are legion, but they include Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Motahhari, and Ayatollah Nouri. Their writings and thought can be found in the voluminous scholarship on the Iranian Revolution.

20. See the Symposium on Indigenization or Universalism of the Social Sciences, in *International Sociology* (vol.3, no. 2, June 1988). Here, however, universalism is equated with positivism (particularly in the article by Peter Park, "Toward an Emancipatory Sociology: Abandoning Universalism for True Indigenisation") and indigenization is presented as the solution.

21. Anouar Abdel-Malek, "L'orientalisme en crise," *Diogene* 24: pp. 109-142.

22. It is necessary to say that at a conference in Yugoslavia in October 1986, Anouar Abdel Malek criticized my presentation, which offered a Marxian analysis of the Iranian Revolution and a critique of desecularization and Islamization. He felt that the concepts I had deployed could not capture the true meaning of the momentous events and developments in the region. For him, an important dimension was spiritual, as well as the self-assertion of a Middle Eastern people. I accept the latter, and have in fact discussed it, but cannot extend it to a hands-off approach to the crimes of the Islamist regime. As for the spiritual dimension, I have to admit that it is indeed not part of my

vocabulary. For further examination of his work, see *Social Dialectics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1981).

23. Mahmoud Dhaouadi, "An Operation Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Other Underdevelopment in the Arab World and in the Third World." *International Sociology* vol. 3, no. 3 (Sept.), pp. 219-234.

24. Michel Foucault, "A quoi rêvent les Iraniens?" *Le Nouvel Observateur* (16 Octobre 1978), pp. 48-49; "L'esprit dans un monde sans esprit", Interview with Michel Foucault, in Claire Briere and Pierre Blanchet, *Iran: la Révolution au Nom de Dieu* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), pp. 227-241; "Lettre Ouverte a Mehdi Bazargan," *Le Nouvel Observateur* (9 Avril 1979); "Inutile de se soulever?" *Le Monde* (11-12 Mai 1979).

25. For a discussion of Adil Hussein's recent work, see Sami Zubaida, "Islam, Cultural Nationalism and the Left," *Review of Middle East Studies* (London), 4, 1988. See also Abaza and Stauth (op. cit.).

26. The exact translation is Unitary Economics; the title has also been translated as Monotheistic Economics. The concept *tawhid* is an Islamic concept meaning spiritual unity.

27. Hanna Papanek, "The World Is Not Like Us: Limits of Feminist Imagination." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, IL, August 17-21, 1987. Peter Evans and John Stephans, "Development and the World Economy," Working Paper No. 8/9, Center for Comparative Development, Brown University, March 1987, p. 1.

28. I am indebted to Syed Farid Alatas, who in a personal communication directed my attention to this.

29. I am indebted to Sami Zubaida (personal communication) for clarification of this idea.

30. This point has also been made by Mona Abaza and Georg Stauth (op. cit.) whose article is an incisive critique of nativism as the response to orientalism. In particular, they are critical of the impact of Said's *Orientalism*. They write: "... we attempt to demonstrate how a reductionist Foucauldian discourse on epistemes of cultural classification of the Other, his paradigm of knowledge/power and attempts at better and deeper understanding of the Other, and thus of doing less injustice to the local, indigenous people, brings about a false framework of indigenous culture and religion which denies a long history of productive cultural exchange" (p. 344). It also tends toward apologetics for fundamentalism. Here they agree more with al-Azm's critique of *Orientalism* (al-Azm, op. cit.).

31. Quoted in *World Press Review*, Oct. 1988, p. 40.

32. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Power, Morality and the New Muslim Womanhood." Paper presented at the MIT workshop on Women, the State and the Restructuring of Society in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, April 25, 1989. To be published in conference proceedings, edited by Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner.

33. Quoted in Najmabadi, *ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

34. Juliette Minces, *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society* (London: Zed Books, 1982), p. 75.

35. Mai Ghoussoub, "Feminism - or the Eternal Masculine - in the Arab World," *New Left Review* 161 (Jan-Feb. 1987).

36. Reza Hammami and Martina Rieker, "Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Marxism," *New Left Review* 170 (July-August 1988).

37. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (new edition, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987). See especially her Introduction.

38. Fatma Sabah, *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (NY: Pergamon, 1986).

39. Talal Asad, "Conscripts of Western Civilization," in Christine Ward Gailey, ed., *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond* (forthcoming, Florida University Press), p. 10.

40. This is in contrast to bourgeois law, which is predicated upon class or property distinctions.

41. Kathleen Howard-Merriam, "Afghan Refugee Women and Their Struggle for Survival," in Grant Farr and John Merriam, eds., *The Afghan Resistance: The Struggle for Survival* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987).

42. M. Nazif Shahrani, remarks at MIT workshop on the State and Restructuring of Society, seminar on political culture, May 10, 1989. In fact, sharia is not new at all, much less something to be impressed about. For an historical elaboration of the longstanding conflict between the religious establishment and modernist forces, refer to Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: The Politics of Modernization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, 1974).

43. Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, "The Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: A Nation in Exile," *Current Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 2, Summer 1988, p. 80.

44. For a comparative study of women, revolution and the state in Iran and Afghanistan which also discusses the asymmetrical treatment of the subject



of women and Islamization in the two cases, see my essays, "Revolution, the State, Islam and Women: Sexual Politics in Iran and Afghanistan," *Social Text* 21, Spring 1989, and "Revolution En-gendered: A Comparative Study of Women and Politics in Iran and Afghanistan," (mimeo).

45. Abaza and Stauth, *op. cit.*, pp. 354-355.

46. See the article on Columbia University conference on women in the Third World, *The Guardian*, March 29, 1989, p. 9.

47. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Anthropology's Orient: The Boundaries of Theory in the Study of the Arab World" (forthcoming in *Theory and Method in Modern Middle East and Islamic Studies*, edited by Hisham Sharabi), p. 16. In a footnote she explains that she is drawing from Arjun Appadurai's discussion of comparison and of freezing in his discussion of the anthropological construction of "natives." The source is "Putting Hierarchy in its Place," *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1): pp. 36-49.

48. Amin, p. 103; Said, pp. 62-63. For a further discussion of the antinomies of Edward Said, see James Clifford, *op. cit.*

49. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the Salman Rushdie affair, which is also tied up with questions of identity, orientalism, eurocentrism, representation, etc. In my view, however, the Rushdie case cannot be reduced to a question of "free speech." The modernist, secular, socialist project needs to be advanced with care and attention to sensibilities.

50. Zubaida, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

51. Syed Farid Alatas, "Reflections on the Idea of Islamic Social Science," *Comparative Civilization Review*, 17, 1987, pp. 68-69.