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Islam and Capitalism. Considerations on the Construction of the Idea of a Western 'Modernity'

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Abstract

This review essay aims at highlighting the continuity of the relation that has been established between Islam, capitalism and modernity (or the lack of it) from the time of Weber's theses on Islam in Sociology of Religion to more recent works of social science thinkers such as Eisentstadt and Gellner. This exercise does not aim at being a refutation of Weber's theses on the ground of social science arguments or historical analysis. Its scope is first of all to demonstrate the influence and the many reverberations of Weber's theses into social sciences, and from there into history. Thinkers such as Gellner and Eisenstadt have had a great impact on the way historians have understood the modern Middle East, and dealt with concepts such as tradition, modernity and nationalism. It is helpful to establish the genealogy of the relation between an 'un-modern' Middle East and the founding fathers of social sciences, to show the power that this paradigm has had up to the present day.

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Introduction

Whether Islam can be compatible with capitalism is *not* the type of question that historians usually ask, because they are generally more concerned with the historical unfolding of phenomena, and less accustomed to engaging with wide, opaque categories such as "Islam" and "Capitalism" outside their historical context. However, social theory debates on Islam, capitalism and modernity unveil the intimate relationship between history and social theory, not only *from* history *to* social theory - because social theory makes ample use of historical arguments – but especially the other way around. As I will discuss in this paper, certain important branches of social theory provide validation for the belief that the West represents the most developed area of the world; this knowledge in turn affects history as an academic discipline in subtle ways.

The debate on the relationship between *Us* and the *Other,* and in our case more specifically the relationship between *Us* and the *Islamic Other*, is profoundly shaped by the way in which the founding fathers of social theory defined it a century ago or more. Max Weber certainly occupies a crucial place among them, both as a founding father of the sociology of religion, and because of his definition of Western modernity as being in an oppositional relationship to Islam. Weber was certainly neither the first not the only thinker to express this view; however, because of the place that Weber's theses occupy at the very heart of the construction of Western identity – with regard first and foremost to the question of what modernity is – his discussion of why «Muslims are not like us» has had endless reverberations.

It is important at this point to clarify the limitations and the scope of this contribution. This article is not so ambitious as to attempt a deconstruction of Weber's thesis, either by using the tools of historical criticism or from a historical point of view, or to provide a sociological critique of its main arguments; these are tasks that have been amply performed both by historians and social scientists [1]. My concern here is to discover some examples of the use by historians of the many 'irradiations' of Weber's thesis on Islam, and thereby to give an idea of to what extent discourse about "the Muslim world" is still trapped within it [2]. For instance, the underlying thesis that Islam endemically impairs the "Muslim world" from developing is, perhaps, the key issue of the sub-discipline known as Sociology of Islam [Masud, Salvatore, van Bruinessen 2009]. Another case in point which I shall discuss in this article is represented by the most well-supported and best-known rebuttal of Weber's thesis on Islam, namely Maxime Rodinson's essay *Islam et capitalisme* [1996]. As we shall see, although it is an erudite and articulate attempt to engage with Weber's thesis, this work remains closely within the paradigm presented by the former. The consanguinity of Weber and Rodinson is striking, and it will be the subject of the second section of this work.

I am well aware that with this contribution I am venturing well outside my comfort zone, as I am an historian of colonial North-East Africa by training. In addition, I am stepping into an extremely heated and highly political debate, as is demonstrated by the dozens of titles which pertain in particular to the question of modernity and Islam, to which I will not be able to add a great deal [3]. However, my purpose is not to contribute to these debates, but rather to demonstrate how reflections on them are both necessary and crucial for historians. In fact, in spite of the wide differences in methodologies, scope, and aims between history and sociology, there is a distribution of "geopolitical knowledge" in these two disciplines, as there is in many others, which is made up of a few fundamental hegemonic assumptions which lie at the very core of the Western identity. The association between modernity and the West is one of them, but for so long as these assumptions run deep and undetected at the very heart of the historical discipline, it is more difficult to address them. This paper therefore hopes to contribute towards a greater awareness of the effects of the Eurocentrism of a certain social theory on historical methodology.

This article proposes two examples of how Weber's thesis on Islam has been incorporated into works of social theory that have been authoritative and influential well beyond the scope of their own discipline, particularly in the historical domain. This is the case with Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities and Gellner's discussion on nationalism and modernity. Both Eisenstadt and Gellner are profoundly influenced by Weber's sociology of religion, and they both make the claim that the legitimacy of their theory rests on the reformulation, revision and reinterpretation of this founding father's sociology. The influence of Weber in shaping their most innovative theories has also been analysed by a number of authors. such as Hefer [2008], Spohn [2001] and Mabry [1998].

The decision to discuss Eisenstadt's and Gellner's theories here is not motivated by the fact that their models represent the last word on what modernity is, but because of their importance in the discipline of history. For instance, no serious historical work on nationalism can avoid engaging, either directly or indirectly, with Gellner's most influential *Nations and Nationalism* [1983], a work that postulates the existence of a Western modernity. Similarly, Eisenstadt's multiple modernities have been considered a powerful way of theorizing on the historical evolution of the "Orient", as compared with Europe [Hefner 1998; Sahin 2006 and, to some extent, Watenpaugh 2006]. This choice is naturally arbitrary, but it is something with which I am very familiar from my work with both nationalism and North-East Muslim Africa.

Part I

On the connections between capitalism and modernity

Before I begin, I would like to dedicate a few words to explaining why this discussion of Islam and capitalism becomes a discussion on Islam and modernity. I will not even attempt to provide a definition of either capitalism or modernity here, and not only because the debate on the definitions and concepts associated with these two terms is immense, starting with Marx and Hegel in the nineteenth century to Bauman, Lyotard, Zizek, Habermas, Mouffe, Chakrabarty and so on in the twenty-first. My aim is much more modest, and is simply to explain why I will use the terms "capitalism" and "modernity" interchangeably in this essay. I am aware that there is a difference between the two, but if we explore all the classical theories of modernity of the founding fathers of sociology, such as Weber, Durkheim, Simmel and Marx, we see that all of them associate the coming of modernity with industrialization and capitalism in a way that makes it impossible to make a clear distinction. Thus, in the Durkheimian theory, the coming of modernity coincides with a "structural differentiation" created by the new division of labour born out of the industrial system [Durkheim 2003]. Similarly, for Weber, Man becomes modern when he interiorizes the rational, but atomized, system of the industrial machine. For Marx, it is industrial capitalism, rather than modernity, which is at centre stage in the evolution of history, yet the question of modernity returns in his description of world history as being characterized by the gap between a 'backward' pre-industrial stage and the modern stage characterized by the class struggle [Marx, Engels 1981].

One might argue that there can be capitalism without modernity, but for the classic theories of sociology, there can be no modernity without industrial capitalism, and therefore, for a long period, any discussion on the possibility of a capitalist system developing in the Middle East, such as Rodinson's, had included an underlying implication regarding the general potential of the Oriental Other to become modern. The inability to make the economy capitalistic was the economic angle which, taken together with political and historical aspects, demonstrated the inherent inability of the lands of Islam to be 'like us'.

Weber and Islam

The following short treatment of Weber's position on Islam is an extrapolation of his lifelong reflections on the connection between religion, culture and modernity. I am fully aware that I am not doing justice to the complexity of Weber's thought, but this is quite deliberate. I am reading in Weber's text what many of his commentators found justified the incompatibility between Islam and modernity. It is precisely this selective and unsubtle reading that interests me here.

As Salvatore and Turner have pointed out [Salvatore 1996; Turner 1998; 2010], Weber's sources for his interpretation of Islam were classical German Orientalist works, because he was not himself an expert on the Orient. Even if he had been, it is doubtful that he could have escaped – to use Said's definition once again – from that «distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts» [Said 1978, 12] that was Orientalism. Weber's interest in Islam was a function of his wider project on comparative religion and his theory on the development of Western modernity and its Calvinist roots. His aim was to find a system which explained why Christianity and Islam provided such opposing outcomes in terms of societal organization, the former leading to 'Oriental despotism', and the latter giving rise to capitalism and modernity. Weber's theory on Islam was therefore subsumed into his general theory, first that modernity was a march toward rationalization, and second that it was shaped as much by cultural and religious values as by economic processes [Weber 1964, 1992].

Modernity for Weber was a synonym of rationality, but with religious roots. According to Weber's famous thesis, Calvinism, with its moral values of asceticism and restraint, and its salvation doctrine which provoked a "salvation

anxiety" in believers, created the conditions for the emergence of a new sense of time, space and work ethic which lies at the base of the current capitalist system [Weber 1964]. With time, this led people to question their religious beliefs, in a process known as 'disenchantment'. This may be described as the movement from a magic-religious understanding of reality to one inherently characterized by a rational – and thus critical – vision of the world. This is why modernity came to coincide with an increasingly rational, functioning, individualistic society, in which religion progressively lost its significance. Yet modernity was fraught with contradictions: the individual is both free and imprisoned in the "iron cage" [4] of the modern bureaucratic state.

As a monotheistic religion, Islam could have represented a similar movement towards overcoming magic and the supernatural as meaningful factors in explaining social facts. Islam was inherently different from Christianity, however. As Weber wrote in *Sociology of Religions*, in Islam there was no sense of sin, and no striving for perfection:

> Islam was never really a religion of salvation; the ethical concept of salvation was actually alien to Islam. […]

> [T]he original Islamic conception of sin has a similar feudal orientation. The depiction of the prophet of Islam as devoid of sin is a late theological construction, scarcelywhich is only barely consistent with the actual nature of Muhammad's strong sensual passions and his explosions of wrath even over very small provocations. Minor provocation. […] Wealth, power, and glory were all martial promises, and even the world beyond is pictured in Islam as a soldier's sensual paradise [Weber 1964, 263-264].

For Weber, the reason was to be found in the origins of Islam and the nature of the first religious community which gathered around Muhammad, from the so-called Medinan period. As Muhammad had to struggle not only for the affirmation of his prophecy, but for the very physical existence of the first community of the converted, the questions of protection of territory and war became primordial and embedded in the very formulation of Islam [Weber 1964, 264-66]. This is why, for Weber, Islam was an essentially political religion.

Later, Islam managed to capture and convert the masses through mystical Sufism, which for Weber had an affinity with pre-Islamic polytheistic religious, and which was a drive towards transcendence which bore no resemblance to the Protestant quest for salvation:

> this search of the dervishes for salvation, deriving from Hindu and Persian sources, might have orgiastic, spiritualistic, or contemplative characteristics in different instances, but in no case did it constitute "asceticism".

> Islam was diverted completely from any really methodical control of life by the advent of the cult of saints, and finally by magic [Weber 1964, 182, 266].

Finally, Weber added an economic argument to his discussion: capitalism did not develop in the Islamic world because of the patrimonial nature of the state, which was run through a large patrimonial bureaucracy that exploited the masses. In addition, a ruler depended on a powerful class of warriors in order to rule. Every attempt by independent social groups to defy the system was curbed by violence, or, alternatively, these groups were co-opted into the state and were assigned high positions in the bureaucracy or in the military. This prevented the development of the civil institutions which were necessary for the promotion of capitalism within an absolutist state [Turner 2010, 148]. In short, Islam obstructed modernity.

It is evident that this view of Islam as a deterrent to the development of capitalism, albeit well-known, and much older than Weber's time, has laid the foundation for many of our present perceptions of Islam: for instance, the commonly-held idea that in Islam, religion and politics are inseparable, or that there is an affinity between Islamic religion, underdevelopment, and being 'traditional/un-modern'.

Islam as the cradle of capitalism: Rodinson

Rodinson, a Marxist scholar based in France, published his work *Islam et Capitalisme* for the first time in 1966 (it had to wait twelve years to be translated into English). Thus, the work was conceived during the first phase of the Cold War, at a time when discourse on the so-called Third World was completely intertwined in the ongoing ideological debate. The analysis of the connections between Islam and capitalism reflected an intention

to place the Islamic world somewhere between the Socialist Soviet Union and the Capitalist West, at a particularly important juncture, ten years after the end of the colonial empires, when there were still high hopes for what was seen as the impending development of the postcolonial world. The question that Marxist and liberal thinkers faced at that time was how development was to be understood in non-Western countries, whether it had to be in socialist or liberal terms, or whether there was the possibility of an 'authentic third way'. Rodinson wrote his book before the so-called 'Islamic revival', and did not see the Iranian Revolution or the development of the oil economies in the Arabic peninsula. His preoccupation was to place Islam in the trajectory of capitalist development and class struggle, and demonstrate that the possibility of social change could only be ascribed to Marxism.

If Marxism represented the largest framework of his study, Rodinson was more specifically replying to Weber's analysis of Islam, and in particular to Weber's argument on the incompatibility between Islam and capitalism. Weber did not consider trade to be a relevant characteristic of Islam, which was judged to be an incidental, and not fundamental, trait of this religion. Instead, Rodinson emphasized that it was impossible to disconnect the origins of Islam from trade. The Prophet Muhammad came from one of the most important trading ethnic groups in Mecca, the Quraysh, and he himself was a trading manager working for his future wife, and first convert, the widow Khadija. Commerce was perhaps the *raison d'être* of a city like Mecca, and the whole Arabic peninsula was a trading platform relying on Asia and Europe. These and other historical facts were discussed at length in Rodinson's work. He did not rebut Weber's thesis on historical grounds alone, however, but went back to the sacred texts of the Quran and the Sunna, looking at the way these texts sanctioned aspects that were seen by Weber as necessary conditions for capitalist developments. First, Rodinson demonstrated the importance of rational thinking and reason in the Quran, which assigned a place to reason that neither the Old nor the New Testament ever had, in contrast to Weber's thesis on the irrationality of Islam. Rodinson also demonstrated that the Quran never forbade such things as accumulation, striving for profit, private ownership, or inheritance, and therefore had elements in common with a capitalist ethic. Even though Islam imposed restrictions on the use of owned items and capital (such as the prohibition of usury or the imposition of alms), it had always been possible to circumvent them. In addition, these restrictions were only palliative remedies for socio-economic inequalities, and therefore there was no fundamental break between the economic systems of the pre-Islamic and Islamic communities. The compatibility between Islam and capital accumulation was evident, because Islam never represented an obstacle to economic injustices and exploitation, and allowed the accumulation of immense fortunes. In short, Islam was no communism and Muhammad was no Marx. Finally, the late arrival of the Islamic world compared with the West was explained not in religious and cultural terms, but by contingent and historical conditions that made the Muslim world a prey to the economic hunger of the Western markets.

The first problem related to this approach is that Rodinson continually shifted from the level of the "Islamic essence" (that of the Quran and the Sunna) to that of "historical development": in other words, the historical facts that led to an interpretation of the texts as being favourable towards certain forbidden forms of accumulation. There is no methodological sensibility for the fact that the two plans should remain distinct, but this is again, perhaps, a characteristic of his profoundly ideological times.

There are other important limitations of this work, to which researchers should by now be more sensitive, after thirty years of post-colonial studies, but which are not always acknowledged, as demonstrated by the fact that similar approaches are still in use today. The problem arises from Rodinson's analysis of "Islamic essence", his reading of the sacred texts and what they say about capitalist formations, and the fact that his own interpretation stands as a basis for arguing that Islam is compatible with capitalist accumulation. It seems that this analysis is primordial to the historical one, as the holy texts are the essence; that is, what is immanent beyond historical change. Rodinson does not seem struck by the idea that similar discussions had already taken place within Islam, and for centuries. In his argumentation, what is absent are both the classical and centuries-old scholarly Islamic interpretations, debates and disputes on this topic – in other words how the problem of the relationship between profit and belief has been posed by Islamic scholars throughout the centuries -; and more specifically, the way in which capitalism in its modern form has been understood by Muslim intellectuals since the nineteenth century. During the whole period from the Tanzimat to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire engaged in heated discussions about the meaning of modernity, capitalism, and the relationship between Western economic hegemony and Islam. Some examples of this debate are richly illustrated in recent scholarship, such as Tripp's *Islam and the Moral Economy: The Challenge of Capitalism* [2006].

Rodinson was searching in the Quran for the "real" relationship between Islam and capital accumulation, and noted a cause and effect relationship between the existence of certain religious rules and the coming into being of the phenomenon known as capitalism, using a methodology, in fact, which was not very different from Weber's own approach. The immense tradition of exegesis in Islam, and its many, at times violent, debates on interpretation

do not affect the Rodinson's text, as they did not affect Weber's. This is the same problem which bedevils those Western commentators on Islam who search in the Quran for the reasons behind the present day "evils" of the Middle East, from the status of women to terrorism, ignoring the fact that holy texts are always placed into a hermeneutical tradition, however open the relationship between the person and the sacred text may be. We cannot ask the question whether Islam has hampered or favoured capitalism. We can ask instead how religious interpretations have been integrated into – and have had a dialogue with – the various cultural formations that constitute this phantom entity called the "Islamic world" in different eras.

Part II

Modernity and Islam in the post-Cold War era

The question of economic, social and political development in the Middle East and North Africa has never ceased to be one of the most central issues of the study of this region, even more so, perhaps, since the rise of "political Islam" [5] or "Islamic fundamentalism" and "global terrorism", as is obvious from the significant body of literature produced on this issue, in particular since 9/11. From the point of view of Western social theory, these politico-religious developments appeared even more interesting, as they defied all those sociological predictions, rooted once again in Weber, according to which 'modernization' would necessarily entail secularization and the end of religion. Instead, religiosity has appeared to increase, and not decrease its political and social impact in the Middle Eastern and North Africa region. This, in turn, seemed to confirm the hypothesis of some that development in that part of the world did not correspond to that of the West (an approach which ignored the increasing role of religious identification which is taking place in the West as well, see Hefner [1998]). Anxiety over new forms of Islam which are perceived as more fundamentalist, and the presence of Islamic religious communities in a secular Europe, have prompted questions such as whether the Muslim world will be a part of Western-led globalization of if they will always resist it, or if Islam is compatible with values such as the free market economy, human rights, gender equality, secularization and democracy [Looney 2007, 344-5].

Islamist revolutions and the rise of political Islam coincided with the end of the Cold War. This led to the mainstream developmental theories which had been popular during the Cold War period, both socialist and secular, being questioned. New theories were to be formulated to justify a new global configuration, often defined as hegemonic-multipolarity, with the US as a weak hegemon at the centre of a more multipolar world [Keohane 1984; Mouffe 2004]. In this context, two mainstream modernity theories emerged in the fields of political sciences and international relations, which, in spite of their lack of nuance, are still routinely cited in academic circles as well as in the media. The first is Fukuyama's thesis of "the end of history" [Fukuyama 1992]. The end of socialism, Fukuyama maintained, was the end of history because it allowed the release of liberalist values which had previously been constrained by the socialist bloc. The capitalist system of free markets and secular individualistic liberal modernity would have been able to absorb those areas, and modernity, finally, would have truly become a convergent phenomenon all over the world. The second is the equally popular Huntington's thesis of the *Clash of Civilizations* [1996], according to which patterns of development are different in every part of the world because they are isomorphic with the 'civilizations' to which they correspond. Civilizations do not share the same values and world view, and for this reason, must either learn to cohabit or will end up destroying each other (such as "Islam" and the "West").

Social theorists who were dissatisfied with these explanations – the inherent universalistic Western-centrism of the former, and the equally ahistorical racist pluralism of the latter – have tried to develop alternative interpretations. We shall consider two influential theories here: Eisenstadt's multiple modernities and Gellner's analysis of Islam. While different, they share a common starting point, which is the rejection of both neo-Marxist and postmodernist/ postcolonial approaches. They also attempt to offer interpretative frameworks to Islam within the liberalist tradition, and thus aspire to being "non-ideological", yet universalistic.

Eisenstadt's Multiple Modernities

Shmuel Eisenstadt, an Israeli sociologist, worked on the concept of multiple modernities throughout his life, in numerous books, articles and chapters [6]. It is therefore difficult to give a consistent summary of this concept, as its formulation varied according to the period, his public, and the angle of analysis [Spohn 2001]. I shall therefore consider here only Eisenstadt's most widely known version, which is included in his article entitled *Multiple Modernities*, published in *Daedalus* in 2001. Again, the objective here is not to offer a comprehensive vision of

the changes and transformations in this theory, but to consider only its most influential and ubiquitous position, the one that would be most likely to influence scholars from disciplines other than the theory of sociology.

In the *Daedalus' Multiple Modernities,* the author defines modernity as the set of specific historical circumstances that occurred in the West when «the unquestioned legitimacy of a divinely preordained social order began to decline» [Eisenstadt 2000, 4]. Eisenstad defines modernity as a "cultural program" centred on the following values:

> an emphasis on the autonomy of man […]. In the continuous expansion of the realm of personal and institutional freedom and activity, such autonomy implied, first, reflexivity and exploration; second, active construction and mastery of nature, including human nature. This project of modernity entailed a very strong emphasis on the autonomous participation of members of society in the constitution of the social and political order on the autonomous access of all members of the society to these orders and to their centres [Eisenstadt 2000, 5].

In this perspective, the individual is the agent of his or her own destiny, and can shape the future through his/her agency.

Because of this set of unique characteristics, however, modernity is neither an easy process nor one without contradictions or moments of immobility. In fact, perhaps the most essential characteristic of modernity is its «potent capacity of continual self-corrections» [Eisenstadt 2000, 12]. Very much in line with the Weberian metaphor of the "iron cage", modernity is characterized by the fundamental opposition between universalistic totalitarian tendencies and the pluralistic visions of society that challenge them, between the push for freedom of the individual and the constraints that limit him or her because he or she is a part of modern society and its institutions, as the project of modernity is also a project of control of the self. This is why "aberrations" such as Fascism, Nazism, Socialism and the Holocausts should not be seen as phenomena outside modernity or failing in it, but rather as a full part of the process of construction of modernity and its inner connection with the questioning, debate, criticism, and revisions of the rational and critical mind.

For Eisenstadt, modernity developed in the West and expanded to the Other through colonization and conquest [Eisenstadt 2000, 13-15]. As soon as it touched different environments and cultures, however, it developed into new forms which were different from, but parallel to, the Western version. Thus, if modernity in the West is defined as a process of secularization, modernization, structural differentiation and capitalist development, once modernity is grafted on to the Other, it does not necessarily assume the same shape. Multiple modernities are defined as the outcome of this process of – at times violent – encounter. Thus,

> [t]he appropriation by non-Western societies of specific themes and institutional patterns of the original Western modern civilization societies entailed the continuous selection, reinterpretation, and reformulation of these imported ideas. […] The cultural and institution programs that unfolded in these societies were characterized particularly by a tension between conception of themselves as part of the modern world and ambivalent attitudes toward modernity in general and toward the West in particular. [Eisenstadt 2000, 14]

Such appropriation implies also «attempts at "de-Westernization," depriving the West of its monopoly of modernity» [24].

Like Nazism or Fascism, political Islamist movements and terrorism are not outside modernity, the outcome of the battle between tradition and its opposite, but phenomena which lie at the very core of modernity itself, springing from its inner dynamic of the perpetual re-discussion of social structures and their basis of legitimacy, and from the battle between orthodox universalism and heterodox utopianism.

Before discussing the limitations of this approach as it applies to the Muslim world, I shall first summarize Gellner's reflections on modernization and Islam, so as to be able to better perceive the convergences between the two.

Gellner, modernization, nationalism and Islam

Sociologist, philosopher, anthropologist and eclectic thinker, Ernest Gellner has been one of the leading figures in nationalism studies. His work, *Nations and Nationalism* [1983], is considered one of the most authoritative theories on the formation of nationalism in the West. Gellner is also known for his anthropological studies on

Morocco (see for example *Saints of the Atlas*, 1969, *The Concept of Kinship and Other Essays*, 1986). But it is mostly in his later work, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* [1992], that he attempted to create a broad theory on modernity, religion, Islam, postmodernism and 'reason'. In this book, he argued that since the end of the Cold War, the world had been facing three ideological options: a return to faith, which for him was the solution embraced by people in the Muslim world; a postmodern option, which was a sort of indulgent subjectivism; and finally, a sort of third way that he defined as "subjective relativism". His discussion of Islam cannot be disconnected from a general discussion of post-Cold War modernity, in the same way as for Weber the discussion of Islam was subsumed to a discussion on Western modernity, even if, unlike Weber, he actually had 'first-hand' knowledge of the Muslim world.

But what is modernity for Gellner? In short (and simplifying once again), Gellner shared with Weber and Eisenstandt the belief that modernity was a product of the West, which spread across the rest of the world through the "ghastly tidal wave" of industrialization. Industrialization affected different places unequally, but in every place it reached, it dissolved existing social structures [Gellner 1983, 112; Mabry 1998, 65]. For Gellner, industrialization and technological changes have had a direct influence on the way human beings have perceived themselves, and thus on the process of modernization in general, so that in modern society, people have become increasingly anonymous and modular, and nationalism has become a necessary ideology in order for this anonymous mass of atomized subjects to be bound together. The condition of modernity required «an anonymous impersonal society, with mutually substitutable atomized individuals, held together by a shared culture» [Gellner 1983, 57].

In the Muslim world, however, nationalism never had the same impact as it did in the West. Gellner affirmed that in the Muslim countries, religion, rather than nationalism, had been a more significant agent of identification among modular citizens, as a consequence of the identification of the elites with it. The perpetuation of the so-called "high Islamic culture" and of political Islam was secured by the preservation of power elites. For Gellner, among all religions, «fundamentalism is at its strongest in Islam» [Gellner 1992, 2], in the sense that in a contest between reason and faith, faith wins [Mabry 1998, 70]. For Gellner, religious fundamentalism meant the inability to find forms of softening and re-interpretation of the Scriptures, which were read in their literal and puritanical form. The reason behind the strength of Islam as an identification element was to be understood as a reaction to the loss of superiority of the Islamic world, and to imperialism and the conquest of Muslim territories by the West. In this situation of inferiority, the elites who dominated Muslim societies through their monopoly of high Islamic culture (which means a monopoly of religious authority, literacy and identification of the group with Islam [Gellner 1983, 76]), refused to follow the foreign path of secularization, and "corrected" the culture of modernization by introducing autochthonous elements. Thus, while other aspects of the industrialization process were accepted, secularization was refused, and instead «a vehement affirmation of the puritan version of its own tradition» was adopted [Gellner 1992, 11]. Islam was not contradictory to capitalism; on the contrary, for Gellner, «Islam is a religion well suited to an industrial social structure» [Gellner 1981, 7], because of the nature of the Islamic *umma*, and its characteristics of literacy, identity and egalitarianism. In the Muslim world, however, capitalism, literacy, and rationalism did not give rise to a move towards secularism and the modular individual that needs nationalism as a form of identification, because identification was already provided by Islam. In a way, one may conclude, the Muslim citizen can be capitalist or rational, without being modern.

Whose modernity?

The discussion of these two approaches to the question of Islam and development shows the extent to which the discourse has been unable to detach itself from the original Weberian formulations on Islam. Although Weber only had German Orientalist texts at his disposal, the last theories discussed above were produced during or after that revolution in the "*us* and the *other*" way of thinking, as represented by postcolonial studies. Aside from the question of being a supporter of this trend or not, it is beyond any doubt that this scholarship has had a profound impact on the way we conceptualize the West and the Rest, and should – at least in theory – have provoked a rethink of the way we write about this. Yet the juxtaposition of Weber's theses on Islam with Eisenstadt's and Gellner's demonstrates the difficulties involved in departing from a strong Eurocentric standpoint. None of these theories manage to question the assumption that modernity is – at least originally – Western, and erase the very possibility that non-Western worlds have contributed towards shaping what today we call modernity.

It is quite paradoxical that historical works have demonstrated over and over again the connections between the Rest and the West, the profoundly capitalist nature of the pre-colonial Middle East, and its intellectual vibrancy, but yet this discourse appear to have had appallingly little impact on the theorization of modernity. The theses

studied seem to assume that Europe functioned in a sort of intellectual vacuum during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, and was cut off from the rest of the world. That certain parts of Europe and America became the world's hegemon from the 16th Century onwards is an historical fact. By eliminating the relational aspects, or rather the complexity of the relations that have characterized the exchanges between the West and the Rest, however, we are in fact distorting the specific position of the West (or rather, the Wests) in the world.

Eisentadt and Gellner blatantly ignore the presence, world view and structural agency of anything which is not Western. The world outside Europe is depicted as a 'receiver' – or at best a transformer – of Western modernity. In their work, Africa and the Middle East are insignificant in the ideology of the construction of this modern – positive – space. It is a question in itself why these authors seem to 'forget' that this Other never lived outside modernity, but was always an integral part of it, especially since the period when certain areas of Europe formed a hegemonic world economy, which corresponds to the time when the idea of modernity arose. Why would the Enlightenment, the Greeks and the Judeo-Christian tradition have created the idea and space of modernity, but not the Black Atlantic, Indian Ocean trade, and finally colonialism? One blatant example is the question of slavery: for Gellner, industrialization "atomized" Man; but then, what was the impact of centuries of slave trade on 'Man'? What did slavery do to the societies affected by it, what intellectual consequences did it have on the formulation of "modernity"? Similarly, are we really ready to define the political and economic reforms that took place in the 19th Century Ottoman Empire from the period of the Tanzimat as having been 'grafted' upon it by the European spirit of Capitalism?

There is an intrinsic positivism in the definition of modernity that I have analysed above, in spite of "certain reserves" about modernity which have been expressed by all the sociologists I have discussed, which can be condensed into the metaphor of the Iron Cage. The manner in which modernity is too closely conceptualized by them resembles a Eurocentric, self-congratulatory way of talking about ourselves – constructing a moral order that extrapolates moments of history as constitutive elements of modernity (the Greeks, the Judeo-Christian tradition), and considering the blind spots of the modern world as a sort of 'tragic consequence' of our own greatness [Eisenstadt 1999, 2000, 2003].

Conclusion

The presence of the Other in creating modernity is a blind spot of many social science reflections about modernity, and reveals the strength of European ideological hegemony. By erasing all trace of the presence of the Other in making the West, and of the West in making the Other, without recognizing the importance of their interactions and mutual shaping from the ideological, material, cultural, and religious points of view, the definitions of modernity and capitalist development analysed here in fact erase the very presence of the Other in world history, deprive the West of the possibility of a deeper understanding of its ideological processes, and allow it to continue repressing a part of itself.

This argument is far from new; it runs through the writings of various post-colonial thinkers, from Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* [2000], to Aimé Cesaire's *Discourse sur le colonialisme* [1989], in which he famously argued that the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust in Europe were possible because Europeans had learned from colonialism to close their eyes to bloodbaths where they concerned the Other.

However, if the historical assumptions of the most influential social theory are flawed, and if the centrality of Europe in shaping modernity has been questioned over and over again, how is it that this idea constantly returns in historiography? There are certainly many possible answers to this question, such as the embeddedness of history as an academic discipline and the hegemonic construction of the nation through historical mythologies. Indeed, it would be a strange sight to see historians from any European university fight for greater recognition of the Islamic Golden Age in the making of the Renaissance, or for the compulsory teaching of Ottoman nationalism as a full contemporary of the movements for national liberation in Europe.

This is why the kind of exercise proposed here is important: there is a tendency to forget to what extent the structure of academia in the discipline of history is also influenced by an unconscious "geopolitical awareness" of Western supremacy. Similarly, our research questions are generated and oriented in reaction to a more or less unconscious collective belief in the superior modernity of the West. This is the mechanism at work when historians are asked to explain, justify, and help their students and readers to understand the historical reasons behind the supposedly unachieved and failed modernity/development/capitalism of the Oriental Other, or when we feel called upon to explain why the Oriental Other is not, after all, as un-modern/underdeveloped/resistant to capitalism as he or she is believed to be.

At the same time, historians, more than the practitioners of any other discipline, are especially well placed to see that modernity does not belong to one place, but is an ambiguous, uneven, and at times bloody, process whose agents were all the global partners that contributed, as dominated or dominators, as subalterns or hegemons, to the rise of a capitalist system. By engaging with social theory, instead of rejecting it, as it is often the case, historians should and could contribute to a renewal of the type of questions that social sciences pose to the history of the Middle East.

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Notes

[1] As to the refutation of the theory of "decline" of Middle Eastern economy and society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see: Gran P. 1979, and the foundamental Inalcik H. and Quataert D. 1994. See also Owen 1993, Pamuk 1987, 2006. These are the most fundamental among dozens of studies on the economy of the Near East from the Middle Ages to the present. Some specialized studies on Islam and Weber: Turner 1998, 2010; Huff T. E., Schluchter W. 1999; Schluchter W. 1996; Salvatore 1996.

[2] For criticism to the notion of "Muslim world" see: Zubaida 1995 and Schulze 2000, in particular the Introduction: 1-13.

[3] The relation between modernity and Islam, especially on the wake of 9/11 is enormous, and there is no place here but to mention some guides to the debate: Masud M. K., Salvatore A. and van Bruinessen M. 2009; Salvatore 1999; Höfert A., Salvatore A. 2000. For some perceptions from the part of Muslim intellectuals: Cooper J., Nettler R. L. and Mahmoud M. 1998. For a particularly conservative position, see Lewis 2002.

[4] In Weber's famous words: «For the 'last man' of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: "Specialist without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of humanity never before achieved"» [Weber 1904-05/1992, 182].

[5] I define "political Islam" as those political movements that claim an Islamic puritan ideology, with reference to the first community of believers.

[6] See also Eisenstadt 1999, 2000, 2003.