BEYOND ESSENTIALISM

Who Writes Whose Past in the Middle East and Central Asia?

Inaugural Lecture by Dr Touraj Atabaki, Extraordinary Professor of the Social History of the Middle East and Central Asia in the University of Amsterdam, delivered on Friday, 13 December 2002

by

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Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus,
Geachte leden van het bestuur van de Stichting Internationaal
Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis,
Geachte leden van het curatorium,
Zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,
Dear friends and colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen

To Begin With

When in 1554 Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq travelled to Istanbul in his capacity as ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire to the Sublime Porte, he displayed his disappointment on many occasions. One such occasion was when he made the acquaintance of a certain mystic dervish who narrated stories for Busbecq about the eternal Khidr and his immortality. In one such story, the dervish made reference to Alexander the Great as a companion and friend of Khidr. Such popular narratives by a wandering dervish soon led Busbecq to draw the following conclusion:

> The Turks have no idea of chronology and dates and make wonderful mixture and confusion of all epoch of history; if it occurs to them to do so, they will not scruple to declare that Job was master of the ceremonies to King Solomon, and Alexander the Great his commander-in-chief, and they are guilty of even greater absurdities.[1]

Such accounts of Busbecq's acquaintance with a Turkish dervish, whose ignorance of chronology resulted in the traveller's cynicism, gradually evolved into the European portrait of Ottoman society: a society plagued with "silence and lack of rational curiosity", "decline", and "disintegration". However, it is interesting to note that almost one-and-a-half centuries prior to Busbecq's visit to the Sublime Porte, Ottoman historiography was an established trend initiated by such men of letters as Ahmadi. In the *Iskandernameh*, in which in addition to narrating the Islamic period Ahmadi also narrates

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1. *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq,* translated by E.S. Forster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 55.

the pre-Islamic history of the world, he includes a lucid reference to the expedition of Alexander of Macedonia.[2]

Discovering the Orient was not confined to learning about the aptitude of some of its individuals. Orientalist travellers often endeavoured to present a portrait of collective character and national identity based on a portrait of the individuals or groups with whom they came into contact. The authority of their narratives was based on a process of recasting themselves against the "Others". Such cultural, temperamental, and often racial characteristics of different national entities soon turned into degenerated, self-perpetuating clichés, legitimizing the colonial practices.[3] While Busbecq labelled the Ottoman territory as a region "notorious for the barbarity and savagery of [its] inhabitants",[4] in his *Voyages d'une Faux Derviche dans L'Asie Centrale* Arminius Vambery, the famous nineteenth-century British agent and Hungarian Orientalist, presents a dark portraiture of the Orientals in the following words: "The Oriental is born and dies in a mask; candor will never exist in the East."[5]

Although British politicians praised Vambery for profoundly influencing the ideas of Englishmen and adding significantly to European understanding of Central Asia, it is interesting to recall that it was Vambery himself who betrayed his hosts and deceived all of them from Tehran to Bukhara by presenting himself as an Ottoman dervish on a pilgrimage of holy shrines.

Thus during the eighteenth century, Orientalism as a new European academic inquiry gradually established itself as a result of the initiatives of early travellers such as Busbecq and Vambery, who were obsessed by the ideology of "circumstantial inferiority" in their personal appraisals and who provided Europe with the images of the "Others" it needed to recast European self-images, and to enter the new age of modernism. This age saw rational and scientific Europe

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2. Iskender-Name Ahmadi (ed.), *Ismail Ünver* (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu Yayinlari, 1983). For a detailed study of early Ottoman historiography see Halil Inalcik, "The Rise of Ottoman Historiography", and V.L. Ménage, "The Beginning of Ottoman Historiography", in Bernard Lewis and P.M. Holt (eds), *Historians of the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 152-167, 168-179.

3. For a study of national character see Ali Banuazizi, "Iranian 'National Character': A Critique of Some Western Perspectives", in L. Carl Brown and Norman Itzkowitz (eds), *Psychological Dimensions of Near Eastern Studies* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1977), 210-239.

4. *The Turkish Letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq,* 76.

5. Arminius Vambery, *Travels in Central Asia, being the account of a journey from Teheran across the Turkoman Desert on the Eastern shore of the Caspian to Khiva, Bokhara, and Samarcand* (London: John Murray, 1864), 288.

being juxtaposed with the irrational and intuitive Orient: the Middle East or Central Asia.

In the eighteenth century, the reconstructed image of the East was gradually altered from a less dominion, reciprocate perception to an authoritarian, patronizing and denigrating discernment. Writing the "national history" of Turks, Arabs, Persians and Indians became a new profession for a group of European adventurous travellers and diplomats who, having spent some years studying "Oriental languages" but without having any historical training, provided the foundations for the Orientalists' claim to creativity and authority usually by assembling homeless texts. It is not my intention here to discuss the Middle-Eastern contribution to making Orientalism an area of academic inquiry. Credit for an original study on this subject should go to my colleague and friend Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, whose fascinating study of "Modernity, Heterotopia and Homeless Texts" vividly demonstrated the Orientalists' selective amnesia, and their denying creativity and originality to the Arab, Ottoman and Iranian intellectual labourers.[6]

What was significant in these assembled histories was an essentialist approach in writing about the East. For instance, Sir John Malcolm, the author of an influential nineteenth-century Orientalist history of Persia and a man fascinated by ancient world history, observed when travelling through Iran:

> Though no country has undergone, during the last twenty centuries, more revolutions than the Kingdom of Persia, there is, perhaps, none that less altered in its condition. The power of the sovereigns, and of the satraps of ancient times; the gorgeous magnificence of the court; the habits of the people; their division into citizens, martial tribes, and savage mountaineers; the internal administration; and the mode of warfare; have continued essentially the same: and the Persians, as far as we have means of judging, are at the present period, not a very different people from what they were in the time of Darius, and the Nousheervan.[7]

Like Hegel, Malcolm viewed the history of Persia as "unhistorical history", a mode of life unaltered by the passage of time. It is interesting to note that in Iranian nationalist historiography, Oriental-

6. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (New York: St Antony's/Palgrave, 2001), 23.
7. John Malcolm, *The History of Persia from the Most Early Period to the Present Time* (London: John Murray, 1815), vol. 2, 621.

ists' comments such as Sir John Malcolm's remark become a point of reference for their nationalist agenda, showing an uninterrupted link between present and pre-Islamic Iran. However, continuity and glorification of the past is not always the common ground that brings together Orientalists and native narratives.

In Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian historiography the main criteria anchoring the narratives of Orientalists, nationalists, Islamicists, or Stalinists are their exclusive approaches to history from an elitist perspective. By assigning the agency in history to an elite that in its multiplicity could be clerics, secular intelligentsia, colonialist and social or political institutions, they not only deny the agency of subaltern and its autonomous consciousness but also by adopting an essentialist approach they dehistoricize the process of social and cultural changes. In India the historiography of Indian nationalism also suffered from these deficiencies. Indeed, it was in reaction to such historiography that the school of subaltern studies was shaped in the early 1970s by Indian historians.[8] Although the subaltern historians launched their project by criticizing the historiography of Indian nationalism, over the past twenty years it has evolved into a critique of historiography itself. An essential criterion of such criticism then became its counter-essentialist approach to the process of social and cultural changes and the question of identity in writing the past.

Karl Popper was the first to define essentialism by conceptualizing it as anti-nominalistic theory.[9] Essentialism in the historiography of the Middle East and Central Asia is, in my usage, an indication of false universalism: the characteristics of the dominant subset of a group or a society being attributed to all members of the group or other societies either by over-generalizations or by unstated references.

In this lecture I will confine myself to the historiography of modernization and modern nation-state building. It is, indeed, within these boundaries that essentialism as a methodology enforces its authority more than in other spheres. Narratives of reception and rejection of modernity in the Middle East and Central Asia both by native and non-native historians are exclusively dominated by essentialism. The three fundamental expressions of essentialism which separately or

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8. For a history of subaltern studies, see Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism", *American Historical Review,* vol. 99, no. 5 (1994), 1475-1490.
9. Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 27.

concurrently present themselves in the Middle-Eastern or Central-Asian historiography are over-generalization, Eurocentrism and reductionism.

Essentialism One

To elaborate this argument, let me first refer to a certain pattern in Middle-Eastern and Central- Asian studies where such over-generalization is more vivid. The analytical models variously described as feudalism, the Asiatic mode of production or oriental despotism endeavour to present an inclusive picture of the long-term social and political development of Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian societies. However, as we know, the theoretical model of feudalism was based on European medieval society, a product of the demise of the Roman Empire. Amongst the main characteristics of Central-European feudalism is the existence of contractual rights and obligations between various classes and also between the state and the people. However, because of differences in environmental conditions, the land-owning system in the Middle East was unlike the European feudal system. The *aridisolatic* character of the greater part of the Middle East and Central Asia never provided the background of a performance of contractual rights between various classes, or between the individual and the state. The arbitrary nature of power did not tolerate a functioning contractual right.[10]

Karl Wittfogel's model of oriental despotism is no less essentialist than the acceptance of feudalism. This model is based on the assumption of the existence of hydraulic societies, in a vast region from Asia to North Africa and even as far as the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies of Latin America. According to this model, in all these regions the control, provision, or allocation of water was realized by the state and the existence of an extensive bureaucracy, eventually paving the way for the emergence of a political system Wittfogel referred to as "Oriental Despotism".

> The hydraulic centres of Peru, Egypt, and Lower Mesopotamia all gave birth to compact system of hydraulic agriculture, whereas many of the territorial states of India and China and, for that matter, Mexico relied on loose or marginal types of Oriental agriculture… In many

10. For a detailed study of the failure of these models, see Homa Katouzian, "The Aridisolatic Society: A Model of Long-Term Social and Economic Development in Iran", *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* vol. 15 (1983), 259-281, and Homa Katouzian, "Arbitrary Rule: a Comparative Theory of State, Politics and Society in Iran", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1997), 49-73.

hydraulic civilizations the agromanagerial apparatus state, while keeping the bulk of the cultivable land from becoming private property, did not so seriously restrict the growth of nongovernmental property-based professional handcraft and commerce.[11]

Interestingly enough, what made Wittfogel pursue oriental despotism was his relentless criticism of nineteenth-century European theories of social development. Nevertheless, his essentialist methodology of generalizing the notion of hydraulic societies and hydraulic economy and applying it from China to Latin America amounts to nothing less than falling into the same pit into which his foes had fallen earlier.

Essentialism Two

The study of the Middle-Eastern or Central-Asian mode of production is not the only field where essentialism dominates the theoretical approach. Another example of the essentialist approach is the reference to our common perception of nation-state building in the region. The Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian twentieth-century historiography on nation-state and nationalism has been shaped, to a large extent, by a Eurocentric ethno-linguistic discourse, where "ethnicity and language become the central, increasingly the decisive or even the only criteria of potential nationhood",[12] or as Karl Renner asserts:

> Once a certain degree of European development has been reached, the linguistic and cultural communities of people, having silently matured throughout the centuries, emerge from the world of passive existence as people (*Passiver Volkheit)*. They become conscious of themselves as a force with historical destiny. They demand control over the state, as the highest available instrument of power, and strive for their political self-determination. The birthday of the political idea of the nation and the birth-year of this new consciousness is 1789, the year of the French Revolution.[13]

11. Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 257-258.
12. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 102.
13. Karl Renner, *Staat und Nation* (Vienna, 1899), 89, quoted by Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 101.

What has been largely neglected, however, is that the construction of a bounded territorial entity, or what is generally referred to as nation-state building, has often entailed components other than ethnic or linguistic attachments. Collective imagination, political allegiance, reconstructing and reinterpreting history, the invention of necessary historical traditions to justify and give coherence to the emerging modern state – all these often became major factors in bringing groups of people together and in strengthening or even forming their common sense of identity and political solidarity. In some cases the mere application of ancient, historically resonant names and traditions is enough to evoke a consensus of political legitimacy. Consequently, the social connotations of certain key socio-political phrases and geographic terms became an important element in reshaping the geographic boundaries of emerging sovereign states.

Such universalism chiefly manifested itself as Eurocentrism and comes into focus when we examine the studies of modernity and the process of modernization in the Middle East and Central Asia. The general perception of modernity as Max Weber perceived it was a product of occidental rationality, with a general mandate regarding its applicability all over the world irrespective of geography, time, environment, social order or social practice. Accordingly, the modern history of the Middle East begins in 1798, when the French Revolution, in the person of General Napoleon Bonaparte and his expedition, arrived in Egypt. By concurrence, in the Caucasus and Central Asia the beginning of modernity dates back to the Tsarist Russian arrival in the region in the early and mid nineteenth century. The immediate consequence of such a periodization is the acceptance of Europe as a "silent referent" in non-Western historical knowledge. Borrowing Dipesh Chakrabarty's words:

> For generations now, philosophers and thinkers shaping the nature of social science have produced theories embracing the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind – i.e. those living in non-Western cultures. This in itself is not paradoxical, for the more self-conscious of European philosophers have always sought theoretically to justify this stance. The everyday paradox of third-world social science is that *we* find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of "us", eminently useful in understanding our societies.[14]

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14. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?", *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992), 1-26.

Therefore, while Third-World historians feel a need to refer to works on European history, historians of Europe do not need to reciprocate. Consequently, "a third world historian is condemned to knowing 'Europe' as the original home of the 'modern', whereas the 'European' historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the pasts of the majority of humankind."[15]

In order to exemplify how Europe as a referent has been presented in modern Middle-Eastern historiography, by both native as well as European historians, let me contrast Bernard Lewis's assertion of Middle-Eastern familiarity with Europe with the account of Fereydoun Adamiyat, a prominent and prolific Iranian nationalist historian whose works are still referent to many Iranian historians. According to Bernard Lewis,

> [Middle-Eastern] history primarily meant political and military history, much of it in the form of biography. There was no great interest in that, and none of anything else. [Middle-Eastern] readers knew for example nothing of the Renaissance and precious little even of the Reformation.[16]

Although Fereydoun Adamiyat often expresses his unbending criticism of the Orientalists' historiography, he too candidly considers Europe as his referent in writing on Iranian history:

> Very few of our historians are familiar with [European] sociology and philosophy. In their works, no reference can be found to the ideas of Plato on the reason for the decline of the Achaemenidian state, or to the analysis of Hegel on the nature of history of Iran, or the writings of H. J. Muller, author of the *History of Freedom in the Ancient World.*[17]

Therefore, the essentialist approach perceives modernity as a homemade product of European rationality, universalized by modernization theorists.

> The universalist claims of European enlightenment have blackmailed non-European modernity and debilitated its historiography by engendering a tradition of historical writing that used a dehistoricized and decontextualized "European rationality" as its scale and referent. Iranian historians and ideologues, like their Indian [and Central-Asian] and Ottoman [Turkish] counterparts, developed a fractured conception of

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15. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History", 21.
16. Bernard Lewis, *What Went wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 145.
17. Fereydoun Adamiyat, "Problems in Iranian Historiography", *Iranian Studies,* vol. 4, no. 4 (1971), 145.

historical time that viewed their contemporary European societies ahead of their own time. This conception of historical time parallels the time-distancing devices of European anthropologists who denied *coevalness* to their contemporary non-Western societies. Such a *schizochronic* conception of history informs the nationalist historiography of Iranian [Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian] modernity, a historiography that assumes the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous Iranian [Middle-East and Central-Asian] and European societies.[18]

By mentally accommodating the European-made modernity, the new tasks of the historiography became to portray the pre-modern history of the Middle East and Central Asia as a dark period of decline and ignorance. This new perception of the past not only corresponded with the colonial claim of civilizing and modernizing the East, it was also in harmony with the native nationalist historians who joined the new campaign of promoting authoritarian modernization. According to such historiography, prior to Russian expansion into Central Asia, the Khanates of Central Asia were in total disarray. The inter-ethnic conflicts and political rivalries in the region were so deeply rooted that people welcomed the Russian advancement in the region. Turkey was the "sick man of Europe" whose sultan Abdul Hamid reigned for over thirty years (1876-1909) "as a terrified animal, fighting back blindly and forcefully against forces that he could not understand". Then "he was thrown into a panic by Turkish reformers and Westernizers, who became increasingly terroristic in the face of his opposition."[19] The Egyptians, according to Lord Cromer, a British administrator with several years' service in India, were blamed for never being able to improve their lot until they had mastered the way of the West, and for this they required a long apprenticeship under the enlightened tutelage of European countries like Great Britain.[20] And finally the Iranians, going through a period of disintegration of *bikhbari* (or ignorance) marked by the reign of the "despotic," "corrupt", and "irresponsible" government of the Qajar, who "was deservedly the most prominent locus for blame". It was indeed by such conceptualization that the domino process of military defeat, leading from diplomatic concessions, to commercial capitulation, to economic penetration, and finally to class dislocation, was perceived even by some Marxists histori-

18. Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran,* 4.
19. Robert Roswell Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World since 1815* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 657.
20. Willem L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2000), 103.

ans.[21] The references included above are drawn from historians of different political ranks, from Marxists as well as non-Marxists. They include a reference to my own Ph.D. supervisor, Ervand Abrahamian, who taught me to look critically at historical narratives, including his own work. By referring to these interpretations by historians with colourful political affiliations, I intend to show how prevailing Eurocentrism is a common denominator anchoring Marxist as well as non-Marxist historians in their interpretations of life and time in pre-modern Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian societies.[22]

The question remains whether these narratives are valid, and whether in their pre-modern period these societies were indeed suffering from corruption, ignorance and stagnation. The multiplicity in existing narratives of this period is worthy of note. As Erik Jan Zürcher has observed in his comment on Ottoman historiography,

> [Hamidian] rule has been the subject of great controversy. Nineteenth-century Europeans came to see him, especially towards the end of his rule, as a bloodthirsty and reactionary tyrant… The historians of the Turkish Republic, which itself was the legacy of the Young Turks who forced Abdul Hamid from power in 1908-9, likewise see him as a reactionary, who for a generation halted the regeneration of the empire. Modern historians of Turkey since the 1960s have drawn a different picture, emphasizing the way in which his reign marked a continuation, or even the culmination, of the *Tanzimat* and the benefits it brought to the empire and its population.[23]

In Iranian historiography the post-Constitutional Revolution (1905-1909) period, which was followed by World War I and the rise of the Reza Shah, is generally presented as the period of disintegration. Interestingly enough, and contrary to general perception, it was during this "chaotic period" that a political community gradually emerged, and the first momentous measures towards the formation of a modern state and the modernization of the country's administrative machinery were adopted.

Essentialism Three

21. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 52.
22. For an alternative approach to the study of essentialism in Marxism, see Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Open Court, 1985).
23. Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: Tauris, 1993), 81.

The concluding criterion of essentialist methodology in Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian historiography is reductionism, that is the reduction of all other identities such as class, ethnicity, gender, religion and political allegiances to one inclusive identity. The rise of Islamic studies in Europe is the most recent representative manifestation of this enduring essentialism.

Every political era is remembered in terms of its defining myth, and Islamic revivalism is no exception. And every revolution faces an identity crisis, and the Iranian Islamic revolution is no exception either. Establishing the supremacy of the clergy in a society with, albeit, no long background of secularism was not the only achievement of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 also changed international academic discourses and interests. Since the early 1980s, the study and understanding of every individual society in Asia and Africa has been bound up with the new icon of Islamic studies. Islamicism as a new academic vocation attracted many anthropologists, sociologists and historians. While convert-historians began to Islamicize the history of African and Asian societies, the initiated anthropologists and sociologists attempted to recast a new Islamic identity anchoring the people of Southern Africa to their co-believers in South-East Asia.

Interestingly enough, it was here in the University of Amsterdam during a symposium on Islamic Studies organized by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences in 1973 that an Orientalist/Islamicist, referring to the expansion of modernization through Africa and Asia, questioned whether Islamic studies could still be regarded as a discipline within Middle-Eastern/Arabic studies. I think our Islamicists should thank Ayatollah Khomeini for his innovation and inspiration in promoting Islamic studies as a field of academic inquiry. Here, it would seem appropriate to draw an analogy with the popularity of Soviet studies in Western academia during the Cold War period.

The current field of Islamic studies suffers from essentialism. By imagining an Islamic "essence", the Islamicists craft a fixed, unique, undivided, and a-historical identity bringing together all Muslims worldwide. Consequently, they absolutize the differences between those who belong to different identities and *naturalize* their differences. However, to accomplish this process they first Islamicize the history of societies. Islam is presented as the "historical impulse", an authentic and the sole surviving identity, marginalizing such other identities of the subject population as ethnicity, class and gender. Hence, social as well as political development is explained almost

exclusively within the boundaries of Islam.[24] In modern Islamicist historiography, the subjectivity is defined as underprivileged declassed urbanites, while the agency is monopolized by clerics. Politics is brought to the declassed impoverished urbanites exclusively by clerics.[25] With such a definition of agency and subjectivity, the Islamicists' historiography denies the importance of the agency of non-clerical, secular elites or subaltern groups in history. Neverthe-less, in their narrative, whenever they are confronted with non-clerical representation the Islamicist historians tend to marginalize certain forms of social or political movement that counter their religiosity-driven goals. By calling it "back to the roots", they provide an appropriate justification for such historicism. For example, Bernard Lewis in his latest book *What Went Wrong?* – which is a recycling of stories of the so-called failure of modernization in the Middle East – concludes his observations on the hindrances confronting the consolidation of democracy and civil societies in the Middle East with the following:

> The absence of a native secularism in Islam, and the widespread Muslim rejection of an imported secularism inspired by Christian example, may be attributed to certain profound differences of belief and experiences in two religious cultures.[26]

The reincarnation of contemporary Islamic studies as a sphere of academic inquiry is founded on historical amnesia. In the Islamic reading of history the emergence of political Islam in the twentieth century is connected to the crisis of the twentieth-century modern secular state, or "state exhaustion", and the failure of such replicas as secular nationalism and socialism. Thus, the resentment of the masses, who were misguided by a diminutive group of "Westoxicated" elites, eventually ended with the revival of Islamic accepted wisdom and the mobilization of those masses. Why then did such replicas fail? According to Islamicists, the reason for the failure of secular nationalism and socialism in the Middle East lies in the incompatibil-ity of these ideas with Islam. However, the history of the Middle East in the twentieth century could be narrated differently.

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24. See for example Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
25. For a critical study of Islamicizing school textbooks in Iran, see Sussan Siavoshi, "Regime Legitimacy and High-school Textbooks", in Saeed Rahnema and Sohrab Behdad (eds), *Iran after the Revolution* (London: IB Tauris, 1996), 203-217.
26. Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?*, 100.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Middle East witnessed the spread of secular social movements presented within the ideological bodies of nationalism and socialism. In Turkey in the 1940s the labour union in Istanbul had 72,000 members.[27] When in 1952 the Turk-Iş) was set up the number of organized labourers who were members climbed to 150,000.[28] The Kemalist regime's response to the organized labour movement was preventive and harsh. In the early 1940s many labour activists were arrested and given long sentences in prison or sent for years into internal exile. Even after the establishment of the multi-party period in 1945, martial-law authorities dissolved many labour organizations.[29] Furthermore, it was during the 1950s and 1960s that anti-labour, anti-left Islamic pressure groups such as *Komünizmle Mücadele Derneği* [Society to Fight Communism], *Kuran Kurslari Dernekleri* [Qu'ran Courses Societies], and *Aydinlar Ocaği* [Enlightened Society], sponsored by the state, and some conservative political parties such as *Adalet Partisi* [Justice Party] launched a widespread campaign against labour and leftist movements.

For Iranians, the outbreak of the War and the abdication of the king was more than simply the end of sixteen years of autocratic rule by Reza Shah. The rapid politicization that took place from 1941 was unlike anything Iranian society had experienced before. The emergence of political parties and trade unions in the big cities raised the level of people's political awareness and increased their class – as well as their ethnic – consciousness. The newborn trade unions, with 275,000 members, organized seventy-five per cent of the Iranian industrial labour force[30] and during the first nine months of 1946 led over 160 successful strikes for higher wages.[31] In the oil industry, the labour union called for higher wages, better housing, an eight-hour working day, and a comprehensive labour law. At one of their gatherings they even urged the takeover of the Anglo-Iranian Oil

27. *Türkiye Işçi Sinifi ve Mücadeleleri Tarihi* (Ankara: Tüm Iktisatçilar Birliği, 1976), 105.
28. D. Shishmanov, *Türkiye'de Işçi ve Sosyalist Hareketi* (Sofia: Narodna Prosveta, 1965), 130.
29. Feroz Ahmad, "The Development of Class Consciousness in Republican Turkey", in Donald Quataert and Erik J. Zürcher (eds), *Workers and the Working Class in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, 1839-1950* (London: IB Tauris, 1995), 75-94.
30. For a short survey of the labour movement in Iran in 1941-1946, see Touraj Atabaki, "L'Organisation Syndicale Ouvrière en Iran de 1941 à 1946", *Sou'al*, vol. 1, no. 8 (1987), 35-60.
31. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 354.

Company (AIOC). This was probably the first time that a public audience had heard demands for oil companies to be nationalized.[32]

The Iranian government's reaction to the escalating labour movement was cautious but abrasive. While urging a compromise, it did not hesitate to promote Islamic pressure groups to crack the labour movement. Sponsored by the Shah's court and some conservative political parties such as *Hezb-e Eradeh Melli* [National Will Party], in the 1940s a variety of Islamic societies were formed with the main task of castigating the labour, secular-nationalist and left-wing movements. These included societies such as *Tablighat-e Eslami* [Islamic Propaganda], *Jam'iyat-e Mobarezeh ba Bidini* [Society Fighting Atheism], *Jam'iyat-e Fadaiyan-e Eslam* [Islamic Fedaiis Society], and *Jam'iyat-e Moravejin-e Mazhab-e Ja'fari* [Society for the Propagation of Ja'fari Religion].[33] The confrontations between Islamic groups and the secular labour unionists and political-party activists were not confined to the Iranian parliament, and soon the streets of big cities turned into an arena for bloody confrontations between Islamic and non-Islamic groups. It is interesting to note that many Islamicist politicians in Turkey and Iran today were amongst the early recruitees of these societies.

Conclusion

The amnesia of Islamicist historiography of the post-World-War-II period and the denial of agencies and subjectivities of classes and groups other than *umma* and *ulama* leave the Islamicists with perplexing political circumstances. If one considers even just the recent growth of the labour, women's, ethnic, religious, and student movements and their demands for political, social and cultural changes in Iran, in a self-proclaimed unitarian (*towhidi*) society, then the dimensions of such a dilemma become more obvious. The immediate consequence of these movements has been the rejection of the clerics' theocratic and exclusionist definition of insiders and outsiders by accepting the notion of citizen-subject with expanded boundaries of social space. The return of the trade-union movement in Iran and the growing number of strikes against rising prices, wage and

32. Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 361.
33. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Bahaii-setizi va Eslamgeraii", *Irannameh*, vol. 19, nos 1-2 (2001), 91.

allowance reductions, cuts in consumer subsidies and government interference in union affairs are beyond the unitarian model of social engineering that the ruling clergy has pursued during the last twenty years in Iran.[34] The ongoing disputes amongst the various factions within the clerical hierarchy in post-revolutionary Iran, the roots of which evidently go back to the country's pre-revolution history, is a direct rejection of essentialism in understanding and presenting such societies past and present.

In the post-colonial historiography of the Middle East and Central Asia the essentialist approach, either from Muslim societies or outside, denies the inclusion of identities based on class, ethnicity, gender or religion. It also renounces the paradoxical and even contradictory social practices within the same social/cultural identity in Muslim societies. Instead, crafting an "essence" of identity categorizes people according to binary categories – believers and sceptics, radicals and moderates, revolutionaries and compromisers. Categorizing people in this way deepens the problem of false universalism,[35] and eventually dehistoricizes history.

34. For a recent study of social activism in Iran see Asef Bayat, "Activism and Social Development in the Middle East", *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* vol. 34, no. 1 (2002), 1-28.
35. Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 129.