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ERNEST GELLNER, "ISLAM" AND "MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES"
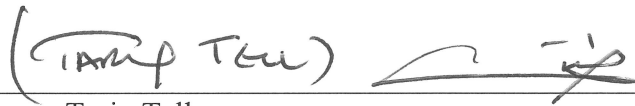

by
RICHARD HARRY LE VAY

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

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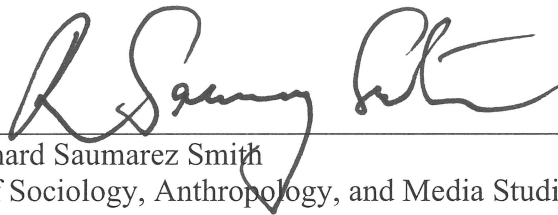STUDIES"

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Richard Le Vay   for   Master of Arts
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Title: Ernest Gellner, "Islam" and "Middle Eastern Studies"

The thesis takes as its starting point the famous dispute between Edward Said and
Ernest Gellner over the former's postcolonial approach to Islam and Middle Eastern
Studies and the alleged 'Orientalism' of the latter's approach. The intellectual history of
Gellner's work on these topics – drawing from an interdisciplinary background and
combining philosophy, sociology, and anthropology – is then set out and the merits and
drawbacks of Gellner's ideas, particularly his strong functionalist approach, are
analyzed. It is argued that the 'exceptionalism' attributed to 'Islam' by Gellner is more
due to political factors than due to the 'essence' of the religion than Gellner believed.
The later application of Gellner's 'Muslim Society' thesis to the entire 'Muslim World'
prevented a satisfying reconciliation of the theory with Gellner's more celebrated
language and ethnicity based nationalism thesis, despite the many similarities between
the two theories.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The TLS Debate

Ernest Gellner's dispute with Edward Said can be said to have secured his position as a controversial and divisive figure, despite being an outsider to the discipline, in Middle Eastern Studies. Gellner had immediately gained an iconoclastic reputation with the publication of his first book, *Words and Things,* in 1959 and had done little to dispel it in the intervening years. Gellner's review of Said's *Culture and Imperialism,* which was the lead article of the *Times Literary Supplement* on the 26th January 1993, sparked a heated debate between the two scholars – others eagerly piled in – that quickly deteriorated into cutting mutual *ad hominem* remarks in both public (via the *TLS* letters page) and private correspondence.[1]

The tone of Gellner's writing – authoritative, fond of irony and put-downs – can be seen as a part of his reaction against relativistic arguments, typically dense and hermeneutic. This tendency had again begun with *Words and Things,* a scathing attack on the 'Oxford Philosophy' of the 1950s, long before the 'postmodern turn', and was often deliberately provocative. His review of *Culture and Imperialism* was thus always likely to be somewhat acerbic. In it Gellner proved receptive to the idea of historic and

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[1] 'Gellner to Said' and 'Said to Gellner', October 1993, Gellner Papers, London School of Economics (LSE). After Gellner attempted to offer a truce of sorts in view of his and Said's scheduled appearance at a conference in Barcelona, Said wrote that he was "surprised at how craven your response was…I will seek to pursue my differences with you at every opportunity!" In the public letters, Said described Gellner as a "Rumplestiltskin, stomping his little feet when he doesn't get his way". Gellner was generally more tactful, if heavily condescending, describing *Orientalism* as having been "quite interesting but intellectually insignificant". This did not stop a colleague writing to Gellner gleefully, thanking him for his review of "that obnoxious near charlatan Edward Said", "a loathsome pseudo-scholar who takes them in over here easily enough but has no honesty within him" (Gellner Papers, LSE, Middleton to Gellner (27/08/93). Such correspondence evokes the strength of feeling on both sides of the debate.

ongoing inequalities being reflected in culture, yet he disapproved of the over-emphasis of 'culture' as essential to imperialism in general: "the industrial/agrarian and Western/Other distinctions cut across each other, and obscure each other…"[2] Said's reply to the review depicted Gellner as an arch-Eurocentric apologist for colonialism with an "obsessive revulsion for 'Islam', whatever that is or may be…one cannot be neutral about imperialism, one is either for it or against it."[3] Since Gellner had highlighted what he saw as increasingly widespread Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa, Said countered that Egypt, despite the rise of Islamic groups, was still an essentially secular nation, with its notable women's movements and the all-pervasive armed forces. He was concerned about the "colonial" idea of seeing Muslims as inevitably "regulated by some inexorable machine."[4] Gellner wrote back that Said's approach was "silly but fashionable",[5] later mocking him and the post colonial school in general, by imagining that colonial authorities in British India were chiefly concerned about when the latest literature review magazine was being published as opposed to what nationalists were planning.[6] Gellner also insisted: "The point which was in fact being made [by himself] was a criticism of the West for failing to understand Islam. So Said and I seem to be actually converging."[7] Both scholars also successfully pointed out factual errors made by their counterparts in these exchanges.

In his first public letter of reply to Gellner, Said had also accused Gellner of lacking the credentials to conduct the North African fieldwork that had inspired his significant output on the Middle East and Islam (although Gellner did speak French and

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[2] Ernest Gellner, ''The Mightier Pen?' Edward Said and the Double Standards of Inside-out Colonialism', *TLS*, 19/02/1992, p4
[3] Said, 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS*, 19/03/93
[4] Said, 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS*, 02/06/93
[5] Gellner 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS*, 09/04/93
[6] Gellner, 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS*, 09/06/93
[7] Gellner, 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS*, 09/04/93

Berber), and a more general arrogance in extrapolating his theory of Islam over so much of the globe. However, he missed the point somewhat when criticising Gellner for "claiming to speak for a billion Muslims".[8] In Gellner's *Plough Sword and Book,* Gellner is in a sense 'speaking for' the whole of humanity from the Neolithic period until the present day, since he believed that the intellectual tools of the enlightenment were sufficient to analyze the whole gamut of humanity. Instead, Said's criticism was at its most effective when he was attacking Gellner's more general complacency about 'modernity' and 'industrialisation', usually written about as natural forces, when others might prefer to use nouns such as 'capitalism' and 'imperialism'. Even so, this was something that Gellner was deliberate about, and was borne out of Gellner's determination to explain things in terms of models and general narratives, something that stemmed from his interest as an anthropologist in the structural functionalism of the 'British' tradition. History had at times been an inconvenience for luminaries of this school; the complexities of real life provide exceptions to any rule that can only be explained if the functionalist is willing to accept the political agency of individual actors. David Davies picked up on this in his *TLS* letter, claiming that Gellner's review had been "grossly misleading suggesting that Muslims turned to fundamentalism following liberation in 1962", and that the methodology of Gellner's social anthropology was to blame for his alleged assumption that this was the case.[9]

Gellner, in his conclusion to the *Culture and Imperialism* review, wrote: "Truth is not linked to political virtue (either directly or inversely). To insinuate the opposite is to be guilty of the sin which Said wishes to denounce." For Gellner, "cultural nuances in the agrarian world…are like raindrops in a storm, there is no counting of

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[8] Said, 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS*, 20/04/93
[9] David Davies, 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS,* 19/03/93

them…when they all fall on the ground…they aggregate into a number of distinct, large, often mutually hostile puddles."[10] It will be argued that this "austere world"[11] is the perspective through which Gellner's work on Islam was undertaken (and through which it should be assessed), as opposed to one more suspicious of sinister motives. The animosity between Gellner and Said can best be ascribed to the conflation of two differences – one in theory and one in academic politics – that led to both having somewhat cartoonish impressions of each others' worldviews: Gellner as one of the many Western scholars seeking know thy enemy, eager to roll back Islam, and Said as someone overly eager to "bring Arab and Third Word readers to his side" through the conflation of his work with burning issues such as imperialism and Israel-Palestine in an "intellectually poor manner."[12] As the above exchanges suggest, the discussion ostensibly over the merits of *Culture and Imperialism* (described in Gellner's review as "Son of Orientalism"), was in fact more a result of pent up disagreements that had followed the publication of Said's *Orientalism* in 1978.

Orientalism

In *Orientalism* Said famously deconstructs the idea of an essential 'Orient' and 'Occident', posing the question whether or not it is it possible to divide human reality into separate regions, races and societies yet still come away humanely. For Said the context of the British and French Orientalists who formed the bulk of his study was crucial. As the West's relationship with its neighbours and longstanding cultural contestants became one increasingly characterized by power and hegemony,[13] "political

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[10] Gellner, *Nationalism*, (London: Wiedenfield and Nicholson), 1997 pp33-34
[11] John Hall, *Ernest Gellner: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Verso), 2010, p382
[12] The opinion of Abdullah A. Yateem, Yateem to Gellner (17/09/95), Gellner Archive, LSE
[13] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Penguin), 1995, p5

culture" and "civil culture" inevitably intertwined, and scholarship of the orient became more than just a framework for 'dealing with' the Middle East descriptively; it was for "teaching it, settling it, ruling over it, and restructuring it."[14] The essentialism was key to this process, since it provided justification for 'enlightened' political interference. Understanding one Arab Muslim's mind – likely to be prone to decadence, cruelty, irrationality and despotism – meant understanding them all.[15]

Crucial to the above was the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge. However, such an equation does not consider the extent to which Orientalism is "dialogic and relational",[16] meaning that the 19th century orientalism extrapolated from by Said in his conclusion is not the same as that practiced in a post World War II, increasingly globalised, and intellectually more disorientated, world.[17] *Orientalism* had the effect, of "taking on a life of its own" in terms of the focus of Said's followers,[18] and was less successful as a proscriptive work for those still concerned with producing knowledge about the Middle East in a fairer way. Without doubt Said's intervention was a vital one given the toxic political atmosphere that existed in the immediate post-imperial era, which saw an intertwining of traditional orientalist approaches and a rising tide of anti-Arab sentiment in the West in the context of growing American influence in the region, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, and OPEC's formation. This had resulted in the work of orientalist scholars such as Bernard Lewis on topics such as medieval Islamic guilds suddenly transcending space and time (with Lewis' approval) so that a sentence such as "In the Islamic lands, one finds hardly a trace of what might called a civic

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[14] Ibid, pp9-11
[15] Ibid, pp3-4
[16] Bryan Turner, 2000. 'Introduction', *Orientalism: Early Sources,* Vol 1: Readings in Orientalism, London: Routledge, p*9*
[17] Ibid. p8
[18] Fawwaz Traboulsi, 'Edward Said's *Orientalism* Revisited: Translations and Translators', *The Translator,* Vol. 15, no.1 (2009), p179

spirit",[19] became an unquestioned empirical fact in mainstream political analysis. Such attitudes had surely contributed to an excess of victim-blaming when the Western analysts considered the ills that beset the region. Said's exorcism meant that, at least in progressive academia, the burden of proof was now on any scholar who continued to look at exceptionalism, be it cultural, geographic or economic. This being said, the idea that one is "either for imperialism or against it" remains problematic in that all positions can be reasoned as 'on the right side'. Gellner – for whom "whether there is a unique or identifiable entity called "Islam" depends on your metaphysics"[20] – himself deployed the charge of 'ethnocentrism' against those who believed that identity was primarily something people cultivated in resistance to hegemony.[21] For Said, however, this was inevitable, since "imperialism is the export of identity."[22]

Surprisingly, Gellner did not publish a review of Said's opus upon its release, and there is no direct mention of it in his archived papers from that period, although he did discuss other critiques of Orientalism (*Orientalism,* mostly written over 1975-1976, did not emerge into a vacuum; attempts to 'de-colonise' Middle Eastern studies had been ongoing throughout the 1970s) and was involved in the debates that emerged in the 1980s. Gellner himself mocked the disconnect that characterised many traditional philology and text-focussed orientalists,[23] but always claimed to be wary of the extension of the term as general pejorative, said to result in "the underlying alignment

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[19] Bernard Lewis, *Economic History Review,* vol.8 (1), 1937, p20
[20] Gellner, 'Review of Ernest Mortimer *Faith & Power', The New Republic,* 22/11/82, p28
[21] Gellner, 'Identity, Symbolism and Politics', Unpublished Essay, 1998, Gellner Papers, LSE: "There is something dreadfully ethnocentric about pretending something which characterises most of mankind – the acceptance of a *socially imposed* identity – is morally pathological, and that we alone in our special isolation our saved." The point here being that identity is not chosen in the abstract, it is constrained by economic factors, personal ties, etc.
[22] Said, *On Late Style,* (London: Bloomsbury), 2006, p85: "The logic of culture and of families doubles the strength of identity… the stronger culture, and the more developed society, imposes itself violently upon those who, by the same identity process, are decreed to be of a lesser people." Here the conceptions of the two scholars are the same, but only the emphasis different, with Gellner focusing on constraints internal to a society and Said those external.
[23] Gellner, *Muslim Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1981, p99

of goodies and baddies."[24] He also expressed concerns about unsatisfying definitions of Orientalism, which to him seemed at times include an assumption that all work which attempts to examine social development resulting from traits internal to a society as orientalist.[25] Gellner also defended his allegedly Eurocentric views on modernisation by insisting that:

> *Industrialism was not written inevitably into the destiny of all agrarian society, but only emerged (like life itself perhaps) as a consequence of an accidental and most improbable concatenation of circumstances which, it so happened, came together in the West.*[26]

Thus it is said to be possible for one to see a certain amount of relative "stagnation" as the norm in both Orient and Occident, rather than as a result of particular cultural constraints or, heaven forbid, essences: it was a miracle *in* Europe, *not* a 'European Miracle.'[27] Gellner retained faith that concerns about Orientalism are less important than attempts to figure out "what the actual structure or structures of Muslim societies really were or are like."[28] This was the real impetus of Gellner's critique of Said – that his approach obfuscated more than it redressed imbalance – rather than the simplistic charge often levelled at Said that he "defended" Islam.[29]

As we have seen, even if at times it seemed that he was willing to countenance an element of relativism, Gellner saw the deconstructionist, 'cultural' approach of post-colonial and post-structural studies that had exploded in the 1980s, and taken

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[24] Gellner, 'In Defence of Orientalism', *Sociology,* No. 14 (May 1980), p295
[25] Ibid, p296, p300
[26] Ibid
[27] *Plough Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History,* (London: Collins), 1988, p19
[28] Ibid
[29] See Said, 'Afterword' (1994), *Orientalism,* p333 The afterword sees Said backtrack slightly with regard to the all-encompassing phenomenon of Orientalism, which helps save him from charges made by the likes of Robert Irwin (*Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and its Discontents,* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press), 2006, i.e. that Orientalists were distorting an objective reality whose very possibility was later denied, or that Homer and Aeschylus were partaking in a phenomenon elsewhere characterised as distinctly modern and tied up with the modern imperial project. Said was never an apologist for fundamentalism, or a proponent of uncritical nationalism or identity politics (even if that is how the book often played out in the climate of geopolitical turmoil in the decade that followed its publication, beginning of course with the Iranian Revolution) – but nevertheless one would, as Gellner points out, have had to look elsewhere for an attempt to explain these phenomenon.

Orientalism with them (even when this was "divorced from the rest of [Said]'s life and intellectual development"),[30] as anathema. The simplistic catchall condemnation of Imperial rule apparent in *Culture and Imperialism* demonstrated that "the problem of power and culture, and their turbulent relations during the great metamorphosis of our social world is too important to be left to lit crit."[31] Meanwhile, Said later reflected that the task of the critical scholar is to connect the struggle for territory with the struggle for historical meaning.[32] It could be argued that what this boiled down to was that Gellner looked at things the other way round, trying to explain the struggle for historical meaning as resulting from the former, material, struggles for territory. Were the two really so different? Further insight into the heated nature of the debate can perhaps be gained from briefly looking at the intellectual and political correlates of others who were either on Gellner's 'side' or his opponents.

Gellner and his Opponents

Clifford Geertz's call for ethnographers to shift attention away from fieldwork and towards consideration of their roles as writers, and the difficulties that this produces, was met with dismay by Gellner, who claimed that the book should be "locked up" by heads of anthropology departments.[33] The focus on the dilemmas of the hand wringing ethnographer and not the subject itself – however problematic this relationship could be – was too much for Gellner. Gellner remained satisfied that phenomena that didn't follow the cold logic of the enlightenment such as 'magic' could

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[30] Fawwaz Traboulsi, 'On Said's Late Style', *Journey of Ideas Across: In Dialog with Edward Said,* 2014 http://journeyofideasacross.hkw.de/edward-said-in-the-here-and-now/fawwaz-traboulsi.html (Accessed 19/08/14)

[31] Gellner, 'The Bogey of Imperialism: Review of *Culture and Imperialism*', *Times Literary Supplement (TLS),* 26/01/93 (Proof Copy), Gellner Archive, LSE

[32] Said, 'Afterword' (1994), *Orientalism,* p332

[33] Gellner, 'Review of Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist As Author*', *TLS* 1988 (Proof Copy), Gellner Archives, LSE

be explained in terms of function as well as meaning, and always felt the urge to take a stand against excessive focus on the latter. Such views were most obviously laid out in Gellner's *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992). Unhelpfully, this book also featured Gellner's most sweeping statements about 'Islam', with little or no distinction made between contexts as varied as North Africa and South East Asia, in spite of the caveats of his earlier theory.

In his *TLS* review Gellner had also attacked Said's use of Franz Fanon, celebrated champion of anti-colonial struggle and later 'Third Worldism', reiterating a chapter of *Muslim Society* that described Fanon as "hardly known in the country whose struggle he celebrated."[34] Instead, 19th century Muslim reformist Ben Badis[35] is said to have been "a theoretician and a social thinker…who *was* capable of making a profound impact on the minds of the masses of a Third World country"[36]. This insinuated that Gellner's grand theory of Islam could explain politics 'from below' more effectively than a cultural approach that focused upon domination by hegemonic elites (even if Said obviously wrote with sympathy for the suffering of ordinary people). Against this, Eqbal Ahmed wrote to the *TLS* emphasising Fanon's popularity and influence in Algeria. His letter, however, is more effective in defending Fanon's tireless efforts to help the Algerians affected by the war as a doctor rather than in providing examples of his lionization in Algerian society at large post-independence; there appears to be limited literature on this topic. Whilst Gellner is certainly guilty of underplaying the impact of Fanon in influencing other 'Third World' intellectuals, such as Kenyan author

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[34] Gellner, *Muslim Society*, p150
[35] Abdelhamid Ben Badis is a favourite of Gellner. After teaching orthodox Islamic theology alongside Arabic literature and language, Ben Badis was a founder of the Algerian Muslim Congress and strong critic of maraboutic, "folk Islam" practices. As will be seen, these attributes made Ben Badis a natural subject of inquiry for Gellner.
[36] Gellner, *Muslim Society*, p150

and decolonization activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o,[37] as well as Fanon's own observations of Algerians adopting un-puritanical cultural practices – crudely denounced as savage by France – as a means of resistance (although Fanon certainly underplayed resurgent Islam instrumentalised for the same purpose in what he saw as "the heyday of the Franco-Moslem period"),[38] Gellner also scored a point. For Gellner, it would be folly to look at the 'Moslem' solely through his intersection with the 'Franco', since the religious discourse of a given population is bound to not merely be an abstract culture, but a culture that to some extent (to a very large extent in Gellner's view) serves that population's social and material requirements.

These exchanges are demonstrative of the intellectual correlates of Gellner and those he saw as opponents. Gellner, a self-proclaimed devotee of what he liked to call "Enlightenment Rationalism Fundamentalism"[39]saw himself as on the side of the West in Cold War – Perry Anderson even deduced a Tory vote in '79,[40] an opinion shared by Gellner's daughter[41] – whereas many academics in Gellner's fields of anthropology, philosophy and political science were far more ambivalent with their politics and their work saw them invested in Third Wordlist narratives in combination with a post-structuralism highly suspicious of the claims made by the likes of Gellner that 'essentializing' grand narratives can explain the changing world. However, distrust of post-structuralism and sympathy for the Third World were hardly mutually exclusive.

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[37] Tracey Nicolls, 'Franz Fanon' *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* *http://www.iep.utm.edu/fanon/#H5* *(accessed on 08/04/14)*
[38] See Franz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, London: Grove Press, 1967, p65
[39] Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion,* London: Routledge (1992), p80
[40] Perry Anderson, 'Science, Politics, Enchantment', in Jarvie and Hall (eds.), *Transition to Modernity*, p206
[41] *London Review of Books,* Vol.33 No.16, 25/08/2011. It will be argued instead that Gellner's attitude towards certain intellectual and political "fashions" affected his work, particularly in terms of tone.

The work of the late Fred Halliday, for example, is perhaps the best example of what might be called 'Enlightenment Rationalism Third Worldism'.[42]

Orientalism and Area Studies

In a 1986 debate with Bernard Lewis, Said cast Gellner and (Baghdadi Jew and fellow professor at LSE) Elie Kedourie as being complicit in the mainstream Western (especially American) media's grossly biased representations of Arabs in the years since the 1973 oil embargo,[43] a charge repeated in the *TLS* with regard to Gellner's writing for *The New Republic*, a political magazine whose editors were at that time publicly pro-Israel.[44] When Gellner reviewed books on the Middle East and Islam for the *New Republic,* he enjoyed trolling "the tortured WASP radicals".[45] A penchant for politically incorrect deployment of irony (which Said didn't seem to get) such as "Arabs have always been a nuisance" also didn't help Gellner's reputation – one he made little attempt to dispel – for being an anti-Islamic scaremonger. In reality he preferred to believe, perhaps naively, that he could avoid mixing up research and politics.[46] In a context where *Orientalism* had made the whole enterprise of Middle Eastern 'area studies' problematic, Gellner's work was inevitably subjected to Saidian critique.

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[42] See Danny Postel, 'Who is Responsible', an Interview with Fred Halliday, *Open Democracy,* 29/04/2010 and Colas, Alejandro and Lawson, George (2010) 'Fred Halliday: achievements, ambivalences and openings', *Millennium - journal of international studies*, 39 (2). pp.235-258.

[43] Irwin, p302

[44] Said, *'Letter to the Editor' TLS,* 19/03/93

[45] Bernard Lewis, quoted in Gellner's review of *Semites and Anti-Semites* for *The New Republic,* 16/08/82

[46] Gellner deliberately shirked the 'duty' of an academic to campaign for a better world to the extent that he became vocally critical of 'public intellectuals' such as former friend Noam Chomsky. This was something Gellner apparently felt quite strongly about, even risking upsetting his patron Bertrand Russell by refusing to sign a CND petition upon Russell's request in 1961, claiming that: "In part, my foreign origin would make me reluctant to be active: if the English prefer to be dead rather than red, it seems wrong for one who has voluntarily chosen to live in their country, just because of its liberal institutions, to urge them to change their mind." (Quoted in Hall, *Ernest Gellner*, pp114-115) It is interesting that Gellner chose to designate himself as a voluntary immigrant rather than a refugee from an occupied homeland. Gellner clearly had a love for an abstract ideal of England, in spite of his disappointment in the reality's shortcomings. See also Gellner, 'La trahison de la trahison des clercs' in Ian Maclean, Alan Montefiore and Peter Winch (eds.), *The Political Responsibility of Intellectuals*, (Cambridge: CUP), 1990, p25: "Our world is now so interdependent that it is impossible to specify the limits of one's responsibility".

Nevertheless, it is also worth considering Gellner's work in the context of other critiques of 'Orientalism', such as those typified by Bryan Turner, whose criticism focuses less upon the Orientalists' reliance upon texts, philology and cultural assumptions, but a reliance on internalist theories of the region, notably the notion of a "mosaic" society, modernization theory, and theories of 'Oriental Despotism.' This is relevant to a study of Gellner, since even though he never worked explicitly within this framework, the importance of 'modernity' in fundamentally changing societies is clearly the key issue when Gellner considers nationalism and Islam. In 1964 Gellner considered that:

> *An ideal fate of a 'backward' territory might well be the following: a colonial occupation which provides some schools and the 'infrastructure', and undermines the power of the traditional and backward-looking ruling class; followed by a struggle for independence which generates a united and determined leadership with a good mass organisation; followed by independence in which these tools can be used for growth.*[47]

This is typical of the modernization theorists that Gellner had initially followed who argued that democracy would follow development, implying unsubtly that authoritarian rule (from which democracy could "secrete out in a context of economic growth") was often preferable in third world developmental states. Such theory has since been shown to be lacking its formerly presumed universal applicability through positivist as well as interpretive critiques. In particular, modernization theory has been shown to lack applicability in the Middle Eastern states due to a range of factors ranging from geopolitics, resource rents, authoritarian 'balancing' and the unresolved Palestinian question.[48]At best, the Lipsetian modernization thesis should be taken as a:

[47] Gellner, *Thought and Change,* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson), 1964, pp176-177
[48] Ibrahim El-Badawi and Samir Makdisi, 'Understanding the Democratic Transitions in the Arab World', Economic Research Forum Working Paper Series, 2013, pp3-5

"framework for analyzing long-term cross-country differences in the standards of democracy, rather than a theory of political transition."[49] Gellner was slow to recognize this, generally neglecting the impact of continued economic dependency in ex-colonies even as he became increasingly troubled by stagnant Third World development in the 1970s

Bryan Turner's *Marx and the End of Orientalism* was written almost simultaneously to, and independently from, *Orientalism;* the only connection being that both scholars received advice from Roger Owen.[50] Turner describes Orientalism as a discipline in very similar terms to Said, noting the penetration of the thinking of canonical sociologists such as Marx and Weber by Orientalist categories and assumptions such as blanket notions of stagnation, decline, ossification and a lack of history.[51] Turner however placed more emphasis upon criticizing modernization theory, at a time when the weakness of a "view of Westernization without any reference to the special problem of capitalist development at the periphery of global capitalism" was becoming painfully clear.[52] Turner, part of the 'Hull school' and said to be "devoted to the rather dizzying task of combating Orientalism while furthering the concepts of Althusserian Marxism",[53] rails against assumptions that large sections of Marxist theory are not applicable to Middle East social formations, even whilst critiquing the 'Asiatic Mode of Production'.[54] For Turner, such a perspective can acknowledge differences between occident and orient – notably the prevalence of feudalism in the former versus the oriental prebendalism identified by Max Weber – whilst breaking "with the classical

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[49] Ibid, p5
[50] Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism* (London: Heinemann), 1984 and Said, *Orientalism* (Acknowledgements)
[51] Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism,* p8. In fact, neither Said nor Turner were the first to make these points. Turner acknowledges observations were made by Laroui (1973), Hodgson (1974) and Coury 1975).
[52] Ibid, p14
[53] Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p298
[54] Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism,* Ibid, p49

assumptions of Orientalism", since his analysis obviated the necessity of bringing in a Weber-esque "static comparison of religious essences".[55] Moreover, for Turner, notions such as the idea of the 'missing middle class' in Islam as an explanation of the lack of economic growth, rationalization and civil push back against the state, is one that misunderstands the significance of bourgeois entrepreneurship in European capitalism.[56]

Gellner's key criticism in his review of Turner was of Turner's implication that Middle Eastern societies' failure to match the growing power of Europe was due to imposed dependence on European centres of global capitalism as opposed to internal factors (he saw 'stagnation' as historically normal).[57] It was also interesting in that it marked him out as a modern scholar who accepted the Orientalist nature of the discipline but nevertheless argued that there were solid grounds for some of the orientalist's conclusions to be true.[58] He has a point in his criticism of Turner in that much of Turner's work on Orientalism is spent highlighting those, such as Perry Anderson, who are "explicitly aware of the dangers of the Orientalist tradition but continue to flirt with that perspective", without acknowledging that internal factors may well be useful even if they are only valid when considered alongside the international context of a the development of a global economy emanating from Western Europe.[59] Gellner often benefits from being more comfortable discussing these internal factors; yet at times this comfort is his downfall. As will be seen in later chapters, a Turner

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[55] Turner, *Capitalism and Class in the Middle East,* p83
[56] Ibid, p77: "There is comparative evidence to support the view that, once capitalism was the dominant mode of production in Britain, all subsequent capitalist development outside Britain required massive support from the state. Thus the importance of the state, bureaucracy and the new middle class in Middle East development in the modern period does not appear historically or structurally peculiar in the context of global capital development."
[57] Hall *Ernest Gellner, p*298
[58] Gellner, 'In Defence of Orientalism', pp295-300
[59] Turner, *Capitalism and Class in the Middle East,* p73

influenced dissection of modernization theory also provides a useful critical perspective when assessing Gellner's writing on Islam and Civil Society in addition to that of Said.

Gellner's Intellectual Journey – 'The Gellner Project'

In order to contextualize the characteristics of Gellner's thinking outlined above, it is worth briefly outlining his intellectual development, since different scholars' impressions of him seem to vary quite considerably. For one thing, Gellner is often considered as being further to the 'right' than is the case. Criticism of Marxism was a long-standing theme in Gellner's work, although this was usually done through asides rather than in direct pieces on the subject. Here Gellner's uneasy experience as a soldier in a heavily Communist Czech brigade in the Second World War was no doubt formative.[60] Less debatable as a Gellnerian position is his commitment to reason – as

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[60] There is much discussion of the interaction between the personal and the scholarly in Hall's *Ernest Gellner*. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the significance of interaction between Gellner's experiences and his work can perhaps be better appreciated by a brief, facetious, comparison with Michel Foucault. Although Gellner was scathing of Foucault, describing him as merely a "countercultural clown", this juxtaposition serves to illustrate both the impact holding such a consistently stark perspective – be it Gellner's self styled "Enlightenment Rationalism Fundamentalism" or the Foucauldian project in the opposite direction – has in offering a new perspective; a starting point for productive inquiry even if the explicit claims made rarely hold up to in-depth scrutiny.

Both Gellner and Foucault saw themselves as rebelling against complacencies and orthodoxies of their time, and both self-consciously developed a style that at times wedded dinner party discussion topics with these outlooks. Gellner, with his lucid and witty style, kaleidoscopic rotation of his themes, and infuriating insistence on untranslated Germanisms and football analogies (even for the writer who is a Germanopohne soccer fan) lived out his dream of the 'good life' in his Sussex house outside of cosmopolitan London, with four kids and regular climbing holidays. Foucault, a privileged prodigy bullied at school for being 'different', who described his text as "a labyrinth", lived out his dream with his Jaguar, velour suits, active participation in student protests throughout 1968 as a lecturer, and attempts to performatively deconstruct binaries of pleasure and pain. Perhaps the most relevant Islington/Left Bank topic of the 1970s to receive both the Gellner and the Foucault treatments was the Iranian revolution. Both scholars heralded Khomeini, either as an exemplar of Islam's particular utility as an agent of modernization without the need to ape Western liberalism, or as an example of "spiritual politics" and the possibility of breaking decisively from the Western political and cultural order (Ernest Gellner *Conditions of Liberty,* London: Penguin, 1996 (1994) and Afary & Anderson *Michel Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2005)). Gellner also joined Foucault in seeing Khomenism as more than empty ideology and the Iman himself as "no Shiite Machiavelli, but rather a practitioner of politics of genuine and deep conviction…he orders killings…not from facile caprice" (*The New Republic,* 25/08/86). Of course, neither were fully correct, but both provided useful starting points for those hoping to assess either the causes, meanings or implications of such momentous events.

The sense in post-structuralism of the need to see past our stultifying current order so as to imagine an alterative life-mode is matched in Gellner by the urgency of the need to keep up our firm grasp on the nature of the current order lest it slip between our fingers and return us to the trap of 'Agraria'. Gellner's childhood in a cosmopolitan Prague, still bitter at the Counter-Reformation, saw him assimilate a strong sense of the precariousness of modernity and the relative freedom from coercion and kinship obligation (compared at least to the pre-modern world) that his new English home provided for him. Indeed, Gellner himself identified this as a reason why many American academics, from a nation "born modern" ('Reply to Critics*', NLR*) in his view took for granted the historically peculiar social

opposed to relativism – and a Kantian universalism that sees 'modernity' as a

phenomenon "whose only normative foundation lies in the extent of its *de facto*

acceptance."[61] From a focused critique of the Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy that

pervaded his undergraduate experience of PPE at Oxford in the 1940s, it grew to an

evaluation of the entire "structure of human history".[62]

Having come to understand how modernization theory and 'transitology'

neglected the origins of the states and societies that they sought to improve, Gellner

sought to suggest how this might have happened – even if he saw no alternative to the

uneven, "ghastly tidal wave"[63] of industrialization and modernization and the "years of

agony"[64] first experienced in the dark satanic mills of Manchester by the English

working class (endured "with the help of Methodism and gin").[65] This is because in

Gellner's vision we live in a world:

> *in which one style of knowledge, though born of one culture, is being adapted by all of them, with enormous speed and eagerness, and is disrupting many of them, and is totally transforming the milieu in which men live.*[66]

Influenced by Karl Popper's 'Open Society' thesis, Gellner sees the model of

the 'liberal' world today as the only one containing the, continually vulnerable,

possibility of freedom as it is generally conceived. A crucial cognitive change took

place in this society in the 18th Century: concepts now taken for granted, for instance the

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order in which they lived in. "General prosperity is within reach; but liberty is precarious; and the connection between the two is not at all clear. This is the crucial fact for political thought." (Hall, *Ernest Gellner*, p70). 1968 was all too early to risk throwing it all away for Gellner, whereas Foucault claimed to feel just as stifled in De Gaulle's France as he had been in Communist Poland (See James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault,* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). At this point, future antagonist Said had only just been politically awakened by Israel's actions in the Six-Day War. Tragically, Said never lived to see the end of occupation, whereas Gellner was able to return to Prague in the 1990s, only to be disappointed at the "desperately dull" Washington consensus Czechia that had emerged, a far cry from the tri-cultural experience of his younger years – nationalism could be a powerful force for justice but it was also rather vulgar and unsatisfying.

[61] Perry Anderson, 'Science, Politics, Enchantment' in Hall and Jarvie (eds.), *Transition to Modernity: Essays on Power, Wealth and Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p202
[62] Gellner, *Words and Things,* (Oxford: Routledge), 2005 (1959) and *Plough, Sword, and Book*
[63] Gellner, *Thought and Change,* p166
[64] Ibid
[65] Gellner, 'Reply to Critics', *New Left Review,* Issue 221, (Jan-Feb 1997), p105
[66] Quoted in Dannreuther & Kennedy, p340

notion that any two facts make 'sense' in relation to each other,[67] helped lead to the

decline of European absolutism; acquiring wealth without first having power became at

least *conceivable*.[68] Such a situation was considered unusual and precious by Gellner,

who was always critical of social theory that "simply starts out with the assumption of

an unconstrained and secular individual, unhampered by social or theological bonds,

freely choosing his aims, and reaching some kind of agreement concerning social order

with his fellows."[69] If 'we' are the "WEIRD-est people on earth", than those who

Gellner considered as still enjoying a degree of "stifling communalism"[70] – for better or

for worse (usually both) – need to be studied. In this perspective, the 'lands of Islam'

fitted easily into Gellner's intellectual itinerary.

Dannreuther and Kennedy (2007) provide an excellent in-depth summary of

Gellner's grand vision of modernization, highly relevant in informing Gellner's view of

such processes in the Middle East. The following is worth quoting at length:

> *Gellner clearly finds much explanatory consolation in [the] first emergence of*
> *nonkinship based civil society and the reassurance that the increasing affluence*
> *of modern society could also be reconciled with a liberal and tolerant political*
> *order. But, Gellner was also convinced that this was a contingent conjunction.*
> *Toleration might, admittedly, have been necessary to permit that first break-*
> *through across the ''ditch'' from agrarian to industrial society but there is no*
> *such necessary linkage for latter shifts in other societies. It is here that Gellner*
> *introduces the critical concept of rattrapage, meaning the determination of*
> *those societies seeking to ''catch up'' and emulate the economic successes, and*
> *the political power that this brings, of the early modernizers… The essential*
> *problem for Gellner is that later emulative modernization is necessarily pursued*
> *in conditions where individualistic liberty is either absent or a potential obstacle*
> *to reform. Gellner's concern was that compared to early industrialization,*
> *''later industrialization is altogether different: its infrastructural requirements*
> *become enormous, conspicuous, and contentious. Emulative industrialization is*

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[67] Gellner, *Plough, Sword, and Book*, p63
[68] Ibid, p250
[69] Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and It's Rivals*, London: Hamish Hamilton (1994), p13
[70] Ibid, p12

often imposed in conditions that are not favorable to [capitalist] economic activity, which themselves need to be imposed.''[71]

Gellner considered that followers of Islam were able to pursue *rattrapage* more effectively and with less cultural compromise than others, yet, due to both their religion's teachings as well as historical and geographic circumstance, were less likely to fully develop a nonkinship based civil society.

This characterization of Gellner is as reminiscent of the dilemmas of contemporary democracy theorists and 'neo-institutionalists' as it is the more old fashioned modernization theorists. Such scholars often comment that countries such as Britain benefitted from having had "liberalism before democracy", an option seemingly not open to a country such as Libya, with the result that Libya now suffers from weak institutions and a lack of checks and balances against authoritarian, patronage, or kin-oriented behavior. This reflects Gellner's acknowledgement that the inevitable spread of a 'Western' model of modernity to differently structured societies, where the political and the spiritual are not so clearly delineated, is likely to be problematic. This need not however lead Gellner to reject the modern scientific mode of explanation as Eurocentric and damaging, but instead to understand how the painful (if inevitable) injustices it precipitated in the Muslim world engendered different strategies or solutions – including that of 're-enchantment' – in the ways they did.[72] This is similar to the

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[71] Dannreuther & Kennedy, 'The International Relations of the "Transition": Ernest Gellner's Social Philosophy and Political Sociology', *International Political Sociology, No.1,* (2007) pp346-347. The quotation from Gellner in the passage is from *Plough Sword and Book* (1988), p346. Gellner developed this attitude towards development early on, with the quip in 1964 that: "Industrialisation, like sex but more genuinely so, is rather special the first time." Gellner, *Thought and Change*, p133.

[72] Nietzsche and Weber strongly inform Gellner's conception of 're-enchantment', alongside Marxian 'alienation'. Gellner saw rational society's key flaw as a lack of cultural reassurance, or validation, leading to disenchantment. This belief in humanity's need for a "re-enchantment industry, a cognitive Disneyland" that co-exists with rational society is an important inspiration for Gellner's theories of nationalism and Islam. As Perry Anderson notes, the issue of enchantment, which led to Weber cheerleading World War One "whatever the result" is one area where he is very distant from the pessimistic Gellner, although in general is perhaps second only to Michael Mann in carrying to

approach taken by many contemporary students of post 1970s "political Islam".[73] It is

worth remembering that Gellner's concept of modernity is not starry eyed; chopping off

the hands of a thief in Saudi Arabia, in the context of the horrors of the 20th century, is

hardly 'un-modern' – so long as it is carried out by a centralizing state whose brand of

Islam abhors the hierarchical and superstitious versions of Islam that undermine its role

as sole arbiter of disputes and possessor of a monopoly of organized violence within its

borders.

With regards to his interest in Islam, and especially its relative compatibility

with civil society, for many the question of Gellner's Jewish, cosmopolitan background

hangs over his work.[74] However, the available evidence seems to be balanced against

considering Gellner's work as 'pro-Zionist'. Gellner spent a brief stint researching at

Tel Aviv University in 1980 (and had been invited before his death to spend two

months in the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in 1996), and in an interview suggested

rather cryptically that his interest in Islam stemmed in part from the fact that "the

'situation' in Middle East [is] extremely complex morally".[75] Moreover, whilst clearly

acknowledging that Israel in no way lived up his liberal standards, Gellner did seem

particularly irked by the idea that Israel had a "monopoly of evil" and thus many part-

time Palestine activists were thus lumped in with Gellner's "trendy" relativist

intellectual adversaries.[76] Nevertheless, in a 1995 interview Gellner stated that: "despite

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Weberian torch. See also John Hall and Ian Jarvie, 'Introduction', p3-4 and Perry Anderson, 'Science, Politics, Enchantment', in Hall and Jarvie, (eds.), pp198-202

[73] Andrew March, 'Political Islam: Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science,* Vol. 18 (2015), p17

[74] The fact that Bernard Lewis, a British Jew and scholar of the Orient, is an avowed pro-Zionist (later also becoming a supporter of US neoconservative interventions in the region), which aroused much suspicion as to the motives of his later works which focused upon supposed failures of Islamic societies to adapt to the challenge of Europe in addition other politically charged issues such as Arab anti-Semitism and 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', inevitably meant that such charges have also been leveled at Gellner.

[76] Gellner to Chomsky, Chomsky to Gellner, October 1986, Gellner Archive, LSE Archive. A series of fascinating letters exchanged in the high-Reaganite atmosphere of the late 1980s terminated the long-standing mutual admiration that Gellner and Noam Chomsky had previously held for each other. The crux of the dispute was Gellner's position that the academic has no obligation to be an activist and that it was iniquitous to consider the sins of the US in South

my Jewish background…you could say that there were times when the Palestinians could say, unless they resorted to violence, no one, including their fellow Arabs in other countries, would do anything to help them."[77] From being "prepared to fight" for the new state in 1948, Gellner came to the conclusion that "in solving a European problem the Israelis have created a European one": "I owe my allegiance to Auschwitz, not to Jerusalem."[78] Gellner's penchant for the glib was not only reserved for Muslims. He had already gained notoriety for his statement that the Holocaust "was best seen as an unnecessary mistake of industrial society."[79]

Whilst they provide an insightful entry into the topic, the factual minutiae of the grand debates between Gellner and his intellectual opponents, namely Said, are often moot when considering Gellner's work on Islam and society. They boil down to "what it takes to make a model", as Hall argues,[80] as well as to what an academic hopes to achieve with their work. Establishing what Gellner didn't, and did, hope to achieve with his work is important in this regard.

America, South East Asia and elsewhere as equal to those of the Soviet Union and China. Chomsky was exasperated and passionately stated that as an American he had the responsibility through his position as an American intellectual to help change American policy and grassroots attitudes for the better. Gellner was moved yet unpersuaded. Thus, Gellner's more understandable position, that, with regard to 'modernity' and European Imperialism, Pandora's box had already been opened and therefore we should try and best understand its effects rather than fight it or apportion blame, was occasionally tarnished by an apparent disdain towards the causes of the likes of Said or Chomsky. Gellner liked to point out that neoliberalism's insouciance in the face of its adversaries had led to the commodification of similar brands of activism (although he was a certainly no fan of the 'end of history' thesis and was appalled by the West's management of the transition to capitalism in the former Soviet Union).

[77] 'Ruthless Liberalism', *Fortnight,* No. 338, Apr, 1995, p28
[78] Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* pp91-92
[79] John Gray, 'The Free Floater', *The New Republic,* 27/01/2011
[80] Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p304

CHAPTER 2

GELLNER'S ANTHROPOLOGY

A critic claimed that: "Gellner described his life and called it sociology"; the implication being that he mistook the specific for the general.[81] Indeed, Gellner's anthropological work in North Africa over the 1950s and 60s, and his more general life experience over this period, can be seen as a basis for both Gellner's later understanding of Islam and his penchant for 'models'. The insights derived from, and drawbacks of, this work will be discussed in this chapter. It will be argued that Gellner's anthropological models are limited, but that they can still be insightful and remain an influence for many contemporary scholars. The simplistic 'if not this… then what?!' defence of Gellner's model of segmentary cohesion remains surprisingly prescient. In general, Gellner-type Structural Functionalist anthropology (and sociology) has the advantage of bringing in the entire population of an area being studied, as opposed to only elites, but suffers from the tendency to refer everything back to the social 'base', regarding other factors as mere decorative flourishes.

On his own account, Gellner arrived in Morocco to conduct fieldwork largely ignorant of the functional anthropologists who would later inspire him, claiming that he first went in order "to find out about Muslim culture and/or society", unaware of any particular dynamic, and not seeking to impose one for convenience.[82] Gellner visited

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[81] Michael Lessnoff, *Ernest Gellner and Modernity*, 2002, *www.the-rathouse.com/2011/gellner.html*. Accessed 14/10/14.

[82] Gellner to Hall, 08/08/95, Gellner Papers, LSE Archive. In an interview with John Davis, Gellner also admits that his passion for mountain climbing was a factor in his choice of Morocco, as well as the fact the he had foreseen the fact that "solution of the Jewish national predicament by the establishment of the state of Israel would lead to a dramatic, tragic, perhaps insoluble confrontation with the Muslim world. The least one could do was try to understand that world. " John Davis, "An Interview with Ernest Gellner", *Current Anthropology*, Vol 32, No. 1, Feb. 1991 p63

Morocco on seven extended trips between 1953 and 1961, mostly living amongst Berber speaking peoples of the Atlas mountains. The final result, via many articles and unpublished sets of notes, was *Saints of the Atlas,* published in 1967. In terms of theory, Gellner discovered, and was inspired by, the work of the French administrators-cum-anthropologists, Jacques Berque, Robert Montagne and Emile Masqueray.[83] However, as Hall explains, Gellner's experience did not agree with the interpretations of these men that conflict between tribes was regulated by a chequerboard pattern of territorial control (which fitted neatly with the French myth of North Africa being a pre-colonial Hobbesian free-for-all). Instead Gellner saw a more comprehensive order in the absence of central authority or other social entities, and chose to draw upon the work of E.E Evans Pritchard on the Nuer and Sanusi (in the Upper Nile and Cyrenacia respectively).[84] Evans Pritchard's segmentary theory, still in Gellner's era highly influential in British anthropology, was applied to the Berbers of the Atlas. According to this model, different tribes, defined by lineage, were in roughly balanced opposition with one another, and further sub-divided into further sub-groups, who would unite against each other in the appropriate combinations should conflict arise between any of them, efficiently maintaining order in the absence of central authority.[85] The tribesmen in this system are not merely enslaved to this custom by ritual however, but bound by

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[83] Gellner's notes and early work show that Gellner wrestled with the problems, later identified by the likes of Laroui and Said, of relying upon colonial anthropology, but Gellner came to the conclusion that "French rule in Morocco in the 19th century had a scholarly and sociological tendency that was stronger than I imagine is the case with most colonial anthropology", even if it was largely down to "aestheticism" and "political utility". For this reason Gellner praised Jacques Berque for his "untopical" thirst for knowledge and lamented the loss of his ilk's knowledge upon Morocco's independence. (Gellner, 'The Far West of Islam: A Review of Jacques Berque *Structures sociales de Haut-Atlas* (1955) and a discussion o some other literature in French concerning the social structure of the Moroccan Berbers', Gellner Archives, LSE
[84] Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p64
[85] Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1969), pp41-43

"shared interests":[86] "the driving force behind the cohesion of the groups is fear, fear of aggression, fear of aggression by others in an anarchic environment."[87]

This system is reliant upon lineages of Saints (*igurramen*), "endowed with special status and the capacity to mediate between humanity and the Deity, a status they owe, ideally, to their birth".[88] These figures also perform the role of Evans-Pritchard's 'Leopard-Skin Chiefs' in that they are trusted to mediate between feuding segments; such is the shared acceptance of what constitutes an *igurramen* and what endows them with divine blessing (*baraka*).[89] *Saints of the Atlas* provides a comprehensive study of a region's *igurramen* in their various lodges (*zawaya*), and the mechanisms through which they maintain order in a heavily armed, often mobile (if not entirely nomadic), society. The latter included trial by collective oath, presiding over elections of tribal chiefs (*imgharen*), mediation, and other functions that fulfilled both the quotidian and spiritual needs of tribesmen. Holy guarantors were necessary to arbitrate the large-scale annual migrations that resulted from transhumance over a variety of ecological zones whose fortunes fluctuated.[90] However, this was a system that could not be preserved when integrated into the modern world. As the power of the postcolonial Moroccan state spread to encompass the entire territory and a rationalising, Weberian Capitalist ethic became increasingly necessary for economic development, a system in which

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[86] Ibid, p63. Gellner stresses that, in addition to the weight of tradition, "inheritance expectations at home and the disadvantages of immigrant status in the new community, are sufficient to discourage any easy and frequent mobility between geographically distinct groups." Despite his anthropology emphasizing the flexibility of tradition to certain circumstances, as Hall points out (*Ernest Gellner*, p68) "the manipulative realism of human beings did not automatically allow a transition to a different social order. Humans could be discontented, but they were normally trapped within social structures from which they could not escape." For Gellner this was the worldwide norm pre-Industrial Revolution. In all cases, it was social structure rather than culture that was the key constraint.

[87] Ibid, p53. Moreover, "If the balancing system really worked perfectly, producing a kind of perpetual peaceful balance of power at all levels, the society would cease to be anarchic, and fear would cease to be a powerful spring of action."

[88] Ibid, p70

[89] Ibid, pp74-80

[90] Ibid, pp160-61. Gellner also claimed to have observed different segments hedging ecologically by having members placed in different ecological zones, fluctuations in which could be mitigated by tribesmen migrating to join one's kin in a more favourable location, which also further ensured the tribe's cohesion (Radim Tobolka, Social Evolution & History Vol.2, No.2 (Jul 2003), pp 88-117, 2003.

"truth is not sought at the expense of social efficacy"[91] was destined to come to an end in its current form.

Another important but consistently overlooked thesis in *Saints of the Atlas* was the fact that it was also a study of state *avoidance*. Gellner made the distinction between 'marginal' and 'primitive' tribalism; his subjects were marginal, only semi-nomadic tribesman (the default mode of rural life in much of the Middle East for centuries according to Albert Hourani),[92] who had knowledge of both the settled agriculture of the plains and the politics of the cities.[93] The segmentary system was not merely a device for order maintenance, but for avoiding the state, since "such tribesman know the possibility… of being incorporated in a more centralised state…Indeed, they may have rejected and violently resisted the alternative," something Gellner took to mean "divide that ye not be ruled".[94] This was an important observation, but unfortunately one that did not provoke Gellner to consider the constraints such an ecology placed upon the modernising state, which in North Africa was more likely to be 'fierce' than truly 'strong'.[95]

The reception to *Saint of the Atlas* within anthropology and scholars of North Africa was varied.[96] American anthropologists influenced by Clifford Geertz were critical, and by the late 1970s their views had taken textbook form. Dale Eickelmann considered the segmentary idea as an "ideological superstructure"[97] and criticised Gellner accordingly, although we already have Gellner's view on those who he considered as having 'abandoned objectivity', by studying "culture conceived as a

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[91] Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p70. See also Gellner, 'Berbers Revisited', (1956), Unpublished Paper, Gellner Archives
[92] Albert Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples*
[93] Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas,* pp1-3
[94] Ibid. This observation was made by James C. Scott.
[95] In the terminology of Nazih Ayubi. *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East,* (London: I.B Tauris) 1999, p447
[96] Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* pp296-7; 300-3
[97] Ibid, p296

system of meanings."[98] Henry Munson, Jr. and Gellner also engaged in public critique and counter-critique,[99] but with Munson objecting to the reality of segmentation on solely empirical grounds, via a reassessment of the data provided by other ethnographers (primarily David Hart) of the Ait 'Atta. Munson discerned a far less extensive system of segmentation, with significant disparities between segments underpinned by institutions such as local courts. Meanwhile, co-operation among segments was deemphasised, with evidence of "a Mafia-like protection racket whereby transhumant tribesmen extorted regular payments from the residents of sedentary communities" instead highlighted.[100] In response, Gellner made something of a concession, emphasising that his focus was upon the Saints, not the lay tribes who made up the vast majority of the Atlas, but still insisted that the Ait 'Atta "constitute a masterpiece of segmentary organisation", stating that "if Munson manages to find an alternative explanation of relatively effective order-maintenance in complex stateless societies, ensuring sufficient internal peace and external defiance to facilitate a certain affluence, I shall be exceedingly interested."[101]

More recently, scholar of North Africa Hugh Roberts also sought to make a similar critique of Gellner, on grounds that the influence of segmentarity was still "almost monopolistic" amongst Algerian anthropologists, even when it was largely

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[98] Radim Tobolka, "Gellner and Geertz in Morocco: a Segmentary Debate", Social Evolution & History. Volume 2, Number 2 / September 2003,

[99] Although unlike the Said dispute, the two remained friends and collaborators during this time. (Gellner to Munson, Munson to Gellner, Undated, Gellner papers). Abdullah Hammoudi also undertook a similar critique (Segmentarité, stratification sociale, pouvoir politique et sainteté, réflexionssur les thèses de Gellner, *Hesperis Tamunda*, 1974

[100] Henry Munson, Jr., 'Rethinking Gellner's Segmentary Analysis of Morocco's Ait tta', *Man*, N.S, Vol. 28, No.2 (June 1993), pp272-274

[101] Gellner and Munson, Jr., 'Segmentation: Reality or Myth?' *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol.1, No.4 (December 1995), pp821-822; 827. Munson did not propose an alternate theory but marshaled further strong evidence to erode the foundations of Gellner's earlier observations ("if he a calculator that consistently gave wrong results, would he keep using it simply because he did not have a better one?"), whilst still restating his loyalty to the grander Gellnerian vision of the world (pp829-831).

ignored by contemporary scholars of Morocco.[102] After taking a more thorough approach to historical context and the idiosyncratic 'political traditions' of Algeria, Roberts asserts that: "even if we admit that segmentarity is a prominent feature of the social structures of the Algerian countryside…we are [still] dealing with political institutions, that is, the very things which Gellner's thesis absolutely refuses to entertain, because the radical absence of political institutions is one of the fundamental premises of his model."[103] This is a worthwhile point, emphasising as it does the important impact of politics that Gellner does not sufficiently take into account (pre, during and post-colonial era) below the level of the "radically absent" central authority. To this end, Roberts goes on to praise the analysis of Gellner in a 1962 essay, 'Patterns of Rural Rebellion in Morocco' (reprinted as part of *Muslim Society*), claiming that: "The irony lies in the fact that it is only when Gellner abandons his anthropological hat and reverts to the persona of the sociologist in order to look at contemporary Morocco that he frees himself from the reductionist tendencies of structuralist sociology and allows himself to describe what is happening in the political field in its own terms."[104]

As has been shown, Gellner's anthropological work, and the segmentary conception of rural Morocco in *Saints of the Atlas* is problematic. Whilst it is mere truism to state that the 'ideal type' of segmentation does not exist, scholars have raised substantial objections to such a model both in the case of Gellner's work and that of others across the Middle East, in Libya, Yemen and Iran. Gellner's Moroccan subjects were in fact somewhat distinct from other tribal populations in the Middle East due to factors particular to Morocco, such as an Arab/Berber dichotomy, in which Berber

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[102] Hugh Roberts, 'From Segmentarity to Opacity: On Gellner and Bourdieu, or why Algerian Politics have Eluded Theoretical Analysis and Vice Versa', *Crisis States Program,* LSE, Working Paper no.19 (December 2002) p3.
[103] Ibid, p11. For Roberts other anthropologists of North Africa, such as El Akiba, Bourdieu and Yacine 'claim to be segmentary but are not', given that they take into account institutions such as the *jema'a, sfuf,* and hierarchical village politics.
[104] Ibid, p16

speaking transhumant tribes are separated by language from the urban/settled zones; the fact that elsewhere supposedly segmented tribes existed without Saints, and the apparent ability of some 'tribal' societies to develop sophisticated political cultures more often associated with urban civilisation.[105] The a-historical nature of the model, in addition to the reductionist tendencies of a purely functional approach, also meant that important political contexts were sidelined.

Nevertheless, in most critiques of *Saints of the Atlas,* and of segmentation more generally among contemporary scholars, there is consensus on the widespread existence of segmentation as a discourse (or superstructure) of tribal or formerly tribal peoples (possibly first articulated by Emrys Peters in 1967).[106] Many also continue to accept such patterns of social action as a "social resource in reserve."[107] Given this, it is difficult to dismiss segmentation wholly and settle for Geertz's assertion that "There are only ad hoc constellations of miniature systems of power which compete, ally, gather strength, and, very soon overextended, fragment again."[108] As his late exchange with Munson demonstrates, Gellner may well have amended his ardently functionalist ideas on segmentation to a more pragmatic approach such as those adopted by Salzman or Roberts, had he not been so preoccupied with the 'hermeneutic' turn that the main anthropological debate surrounding segmentary systems had taken by the 1970s.

Much of the above criticism and counter criticism, much like the Gellner-Said debate, again seems to depend upon to what extent a model can be imposed without the resulting analysis being clearer than the truth. For all its drawbacks, the attempt to go beyond a purely descriptive account is surely worthwhile. Gellner and, say, Geertz's

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[105] See for example Shelagh Weir, *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen,* Texas: University of Texas Press (2007)

[106] The view of Peters is crucially different from Gellner's however, with Peter's segmentation being mere legitimation of action as opposed to the *cause* of action (Tobolka, 2003 makes this point).

[107] Salzman, quoted in Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p302

[108] Clifford Geertz, 'In Search of North Africa'. *New York Review of Books*, 22 April, p20 (1971)

work on Morocco are, of course, on a sliding scale – not mutually exclusive (The Morocco depicted in Geertz's *Islam Observed* perhaps lying somewhere in the middle of the continuum between *Saints of the Atlas* and the later work that became more associated with Geertz's teaching).

Both approaches can also be integrated into a political economy approach. In the case of Gellner's usage of segmentation, his idea can be 'salvaged' in the face of empirical and hermeneutic critics by focussing on the property relations it implies. Indeed, Gellner, in a later lecture aimed at describing the economic and ecological basis of his theory, stressed his belief that almost all "tribal ecologies" in the arid zone were *dependent* upon smaller settled populations of artisans and trandesmen, which were not themselves dependent upon their hinterlands, differing from a feudal Europe where towns were dependent upon a rural surplus.[109] This is said to be important since it necessitated capability in both self-defence and aggression. Gellner also claims that the spread of pastoral nomadism across North Africa from 1000AD onwards is evidence that these strategies were increasingly emulated by populations that had at one time been more widely settled.[110] Segmentation for Gellner was a survival optimising strategy and thus the Saints were necessary in order to provide the Durkheimian "social punctuation" that allowed tribesmen to make sense of these strategies of communal ownership of resources and hedging against potential threats.[111] Might it be possible to effectively take into account the legacy of order maintenance (in physical and economic terms) in the absence of central authority, retaining the spirit of Gellner's attitude

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[109] Gellner, 'State and Revolution in Islam', *Millenium – Journal of International Studies,* no. 8 (December 1979), p191
[110] Ibid, pp190-191
[111] Ibid, p192

towards models, whilst avoiding the need to debate whether specific historical groups were organized on a purely segmentary basis? [112]

The general debate that stems from *Saints of the Atlas* as outlined in this chapter also had the effect of obscuring Gellner's other observations, which, as will be explored below, were perhaps greater influences on his later theories on Muslim society. These include the strong influence of the specific ecological component, 'in the final analysis', that determines the political and economic setting of rural actors in much of the Muslim world,[113] and the widespread role of "folk Islam", in fulfilling social functions in a pre-modern or pre-capitalist setting.[114] These factors suggest that *Saints of the Atlas* is not only important to understanding the intellectual development of Gellner's wider thinking on Islam from an intellectual history point of view, but also that the work has some value outside of the 'segmentation debate', which is what those who have taken issue with *Saints of the Atlas* have generally focussed upon. Although Munson and Roberts dispute the totality of the *igurramen's* role in what was often highly complex local politics, this factor was not pursued by other critics of Gellner with the same vigour.

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[112] An approach along these lines has been adopted by Tell when discussing the mutual aid among the old tribal order and the *musha'a* system on 'the frontiers of the state' in a changing Ottoman Trans-Jordan: "no doubt this nexus of common-property regimes and common pool resources, and the norms of reciprocity and mutual aid that they supported, helped buttress the cohesion of corporate villages and reinforced the *'asabiyyah* of tribal groups. However, this "group feeling" was commutarain rather than (primitive) communistic, and the moral economy that it underpinned in Ottoman Trans-Jordan was neither an egalitarian nor an isolated rural idyll." (Tariq Tell, *The Social and Economic Origins of Monarchy in Jordan,* (New York: Palgrave), 2013, p36) The idea of 'moral economy' here is derived from James Scott's usage, in which social actors "possessed of such an ethic pursue optimizing (rather than maximizing) "survival algorithms" aimed at coping with the pervasive uncertainty of their environment (Ibid, p34). For Tell, functional anthropology is too "synchronic" – the model needs to be modified to escape implications of a stagnant, mosaic society towards the idea of a "local order", retaining the idea of "survival strategies" and Scott's "moral economy" (Ibid, p132).

[113] See Gellner and Munson, 1995, p822

[114] Patricia Crone, 'Tribes without Saints', 1992, unpublished, quoted in Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p301, "Gellner is surely right that all the holy men of the Middle East should be classified as manifestations of a single syndrome and that this syndrome arises from the dispersal of power characteristic of segmentary organisation". Crone made a usefully analogy with medical biology; exact causes of diseases, given the sheer multitude of external factors that cannot be controlled, can never be discerned, but this does not stop much accurate diagnosis and treatment.

CHAPTER 3

MUSLIM SOCIETY

Saints of the Atlas was also significant in that its first section deviated from many contemporary ethnographies (certainly those written from PhD research) by attempting to immediately tackle 'big questions' about political life in postcolonial Morocco and how it fitted in with the fieldwork's findings. Observations made by Gellner during his fieldwork, particularly regarding the changing role of Islam and the use of Arabic in the Berber communities he visited, were to tempt him to expand his remit further still.[115] *Muslim Society* was the eventual result. The book sought to both explain the alleged specificity of the political and cultural in the 'Arid Zone' of the Muslim World and outline how its unique interaction with modernity led to a continuation of this exceptionalism. The latter focus would be elaborated on in greater detail in Gellner's later work and is examined in the following chapters. Here the key thesis of *Muslim Society* and its novel application of Ibn Khaldun will be discussed. Whilst the thesis of *Muslim Society* and its implications have been discussed by numerous scholars, Gellner's deployment of Ibn Khaldun has not been as substantially engaged with.

Gellner had become strongly influenced by the great 14th century writer Ibn Khladun whom he later described as "the greatest sociologist of all time".[116] Interest in Ibn Khaldun's writings, especially on the rise and fall of dynasties, had been revived by Ottoman scholars in the 17th and 18th centuries. This was picked up by European

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[115] The many drafts of articles from this time in the Gellner papers at LSE confirm that Gellner was devoting considerable time to issues of nationalism, modernization/westernization and Arabization in Morocco from the mid-1950s onwards.
[116] Note in Gellner Archive, LSE

Orientalists in the 19th century, who tended to interpret Ibn Khaldun as further evidence of inherent barriers to progress and historical development in the Middle East. As we have seen, by the time Gellner had become established as a scholar of Islam, the excessive reduction of modern Arab/Muslim societies by many such writers to 'the world of Ibn Khaldun' had come under increasing criticism. Nevertheless, to this day some academics continue to revive *The Muqaddimah,* and even expand its remit, often in precisely the same spirit of anti-canon, anti-Eurocentricism as the earlier critics of Ibn Khaldun's usage.[117] However, despite the preceding centuries of intermittent "Ibn Khalduniana",[118] Gellner's application of him in *Muslim Society* has been described as "probably the only serious attempt to look at Ibn Khaldun's theory as a theory of Muslim reform."[119] This theory, as detailed in the long central chapter of *Muslim Society* 'Flux and reflux in the state of men' (and expressed in more summary form in other writings), and Gellner's usage of Ibn Khaldun will be discussed, alongside comparisons with similar projects by Alatas and Lacoste that take more of a political economy approach.

Muslim Society drew on Gellner's anthropological experience and his reading of Ibn Khaldun and considered them in light of the 'Gellner project' – the impact of the inexorable, uneven spread of modernity, that is to say, the: "emergence of a rationalized society in which impersonal, universalistic, context free communication can spread across and down large social spaces."[120] Gellner's work had begun to question whether it might be possible to offer an explanation linking a modern context which saw high and apparently increasing religious observance, not to mention a seemingly theocratic

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[117] Most important in the former and latter category respectively are Aziz al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldun: A Study in Orientalism,* (London: Third World Centre for Research and Publishing), 1981 and Syed Faird Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khladun: The Recovery of a lost tradition in sociology,* (London: Routledge), 2014

[118] Azmeh, *Ibn Khladun, An Essay in Reinterpretation,* (London: Frank Cass), 1982, p*xi*

[119] Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun,* p79

[120] Michael Mann, 'The Emergence of Modern European Nationalism', in Hall and Jarvie (eds.), p162

revolution in Iran, to the role of Islam played in the traditional order. The answer, in the affirmative, was *Muslim Society,* in which there was said to be a "pendulum-swing"[121] process of transition from 'folk' to 'high' Islam. When these old social structures reliant upon religious mediators broke down "the pendulum unhinged", resulting in the triumph of an orthodox, scriptural Islam.[122]

Gellner begins with Hume's idea, which was drawn from comparison of Catholicism and Protestantism, that religious practice based on scripture – as a result of "competitive sycophancy" – inevitably fostered increasing idolatry before reaching a tipping point wherein puritan reformers would emerge. This theory is praised by Gellner but said to be "rather neglecting [the needs of the] society within which such changes occur."[123] In order to improve on this, Gellner's application of Hume to Islam rests upon the idea that traditional Muslim civilisation "combines pastoralism and (often vicarious) scripturalism", with this dynamic pushed further than in other traditional ecologies.[124] What Gellner deemed to be the scriptural infallibility at the core of Islam could not for most of its history be conveyed beyond urban centres to a dispersed, often mobile and largely illiterate rural populace that was organized along the segmentary lines detailed above. This means that both "practicalities" as well as "needs", lead to a dichotomy in the "religious ecology" between urban and rural. Oral tradition, given its ability "to change greatly over time and simultaneously think of itself as remaining faithful to the tradition",[125] was for Gellner an ideal form for rural religious practice when practiced in combination with the unorthodox, ecstatic, hierarchical forms of 'catholic' worship required (to regulate group feeling in an anarchic environment such

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[121] Gellner, *Muslim Society,* p10
[122] Ibid, p56
[123] Gellner, *Muslim Society,* p11. This was restated in Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion,* pp6-9
[124] Ibid, p21
[125] Scott, *Seeing Like a State,* p332

as the one explored in *Saints of the Atlas*). After all, "Ibn Khaldun knew full well that the state of nature is not individualistic, but tribal."[126] Given the impossibility of central power over the periphery, such a society would always be unstable. Here Ibn Khaldun's axiom that *'asabiyyah* – essential for the founding of a ruling house – was impossible in an urban setting meant that a charismatic rural leader would be able to use a puritanical religion to unite tribes in order to form a new ruling *'asabiyyah*. Gellner, following from Ibn Khaldun's concept of religious change or reform (*taghyiir al-munkar),[127]* brought in the idea of 'oscillation' from Hume: only the appeal to a purer, more authentic religion could provide the necessary social glue.

This process was than fed into Gellner's 'functional' idea of modern state formation, first explored in his book *Thought and Change.* As states modernized, the "importance of a common idiom",[128] long necessary in the towns, was now ever increasingly important as local economies became more thoroughly integrated. As older social structures are eroded and ties of kinship begin to loose much, if by no means all, of their previous currency, 'folk' Islam loses both its allure and social function. Furthermore, where the society in question had been colonized, traditional practitioners of "folk Islam" had often been co-opted by the colonial powers, generating further resentment against the status quo. In the North African context, this meant that the:

> *ultimate lesson for us is that saints could be voices of reason, accommodating and genuine in their practice, but stood little chance of serving as a basis for national feeling, too segmented and particularistic, and too open to charges of collaboration/obscurantism from Salafists, nationalists…*[129]

However, Gellner is adamant that changing social function was the key contributor to the Saints', loss of *baraka* relative to the forces of orthodoxy, not colonial complicity.

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[126] Gellner, *Muslim Society,* p24
[127] Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun,* p79
[128] Gellner, *Muslim Society,* p29
[129] Ibid, p148

For Gellner this explains the successes enjoyed by the Wahhab-Saud alliance in Arabia and Osman dan Fodio in Northern Nigeria.[130]

Perhaps the most convincing section of Gellner's argument is when he discusses the "embarrassment"[131] that the Ottoman Empire poses for his theory. In discussing the problems the secure, stable, and enduring Ottoman Empire poses for his Khaldunian model, Gellner is in fact skillfully demonstrating the importance of *'asabiyyah* and the lengths that the Ottoman system went to nullify its effect. These included the institutionalization of 'gelded' elites with the development of *devshirme* that saw slaves plucked from communal contexts fighting as Janissaries and administering the Empire (a practice first adopted by the Mamluks). The Ottoman political philosophy of the 'Circle of Equity', wherein the strong state, necessary to ensure prosperity, was necessarily funded by the prosperous, a system that worked especially well in the more settled ('un-Khaldunian') heartlands of Anatolia and the Nile flood plain, existed in opposition to Khaldunian principles. However, for Gellner there was more of a Khaldunian world under the surface of Ottoman stability than met the eye, and this was incorporated into the "real balance of power".[132] Security as well as prosperity was part of the bargain in the Circle of Equity, and that meant security from those who would seek to gain power through strength of kinship. There is something in this; there was certainly a difference in the Empire between the densely populated cities and heartlands and: "rural and tribal areas away from [the] cities [that] were treated, for the most part,

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[130] Gellner wrote many book reviews of specialist histories of different Muslim societies and usually used these as an attempt to apply his theory to different case studies, ranging from Sufi orders in Senegal to the rise to prominence of the Agha Khan in British India.
[131] Gellner, *Muslim Society*, p73,
[132] Ibid, p75

as though they did not exist…[the] neglected area consisted of the greater part of Syria, Iraq and Arabia."[133]

The idea that 'leadership only exists through superiority, and superiority through group feeling' is "perhaps the single most importance sentence in Ibn Khaldun's sociology", and for Gellner brings Ibn Khaldun into dialogue with sociologists such as Emile Durkheim.[134] This focus differs from the many modern scholars who have engaged substantially with Ibn Khaldun's work in relation to state formation, who have tended to focus upon bringing in modern economic concepts such as modes of production into Ibn Khaldun's famous study of "the pattern and rhythm of history."[135] Yves Lacoste, for example, attempted to integrate Ibn Khaldun with contemporary trends in dependency theory, situating the *Muqadimmah* in a larger economic world system.[136] Lacoste sees Ibn Khaldun's work as "a sociology and political economy of North Africa" that can help modern scholars understand the 'peripheral' economic role experienced by the newly independent 'Third World' nations since it explains how a bourgeoisie or class struggle failed to materialize in the Maghreb.[137] Ibn Khadlun's *'umran badawi* (as distinct from the *'umram hadhari)* were, Lacoste argues, far more than complex than a simple nomad-sedentary binary, with the rural population in fact both settled and nomadic.[138] This affects Lacoste's view of *'asabiyyah,* which becomes

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[133] Kamal S. Salibi, 'Middle Eastern Parallels: Syria-Iraq-Arabia in Ottoman Times', *Middle Eastern Studies,* Vol. 16, No.1 (Jan 1979), p70
[134] Ibid, pp28-29
[135] Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun,* p147
[136] Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World,* (London: Verso), 1984, p2 "Exploring the thought of Ibn Khaldun does not mean straying into medieval orientalism, plunging into the distant past of an exotic country…it does not mean turning our backs on the modern world. It is, rather, a means of furthering an analysis of the of the underlying causes of the most serious of contemporary problems…[Ibn Khaldun] describes very complex political and social structures…those structures led to colonial domination in the nineteenth century and colonialism in its turn led to the present situation of underdevelopment."
[137] Aziz al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation,* p170
[138] Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun,* p94

"eminently dialectical" and "a socio-political structure which marks the transition from a classless to a class society", losing its religious/ideological component.[139]

Lacoste, who emphasizes that "North Africa was very different from the rest of the medieval Muslim world",[140] stresses the importance of medieval North Africa's position along lucrative trade routes (especially gold routes) stretching across the Sahara. The Asiatic Mode of Production exits for Lacoste, but the paradigm of 'hydraulic societies', wherein a despot's military-bureaucracy has total control over the means of production, is not applicable in North Africa. Instead, the Asiatic Mode is reduced to the existence of 1) autarkic or semi-autarkic villages/tribes that constitute the majority of the population and 2) "the presence of a privileged minority whose members accumulated large profits but had no right to the private ownership of the means of production."[141] The ruling tribe slowly becomes a 'ruling class', but the resultant destruction of egalitarianism as kinship becomes less useful (due to the ruler's control of trade routes, ability to levy tribute etc) and of the tribe leads to its downfall. The fact that the ruling group could not truly control productive land in the manner of oriental despots meant that, via this "artificial mode of production", "the structures of 'military democracy' could not emerge[142] and the cyclical nature of state formation continued. As in Gellner's reading, *internal* factors are important in Lacoste's interpretation of Ibn Khaldun,[143] but an effect of these factors on religion and modern religious reform is not entertained.

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[139] Ibid, p116
[140] Ibid, p16, p194
[141] Ibid, p26
[142] Ibid, p32
[143] Ibid, pp90-1 "the vicissitudes of the gold trade did have major repercussions for the history of medieval North Africa; but only because of the specificities of the internal structures of its states and their relative fragility."

Alatas, writing after Gellner, argues that Gellner's theory, despite its claims not to, repeats Hume's crime of "being too psychologistic" and praises Lacoste's approach. Criticized however is Lacoste's attempts to keep North Africa within an altered Asiatic mode of production framework when there was "in reality a complex interaction of several coexisting modes of production."[144] Alatas is on board with Gellner's greater ambitions for Ibn Khaldun and the idea of a Khaldunian theory of religious reform, but offers a more systematic approach (his analysis reads somewhat less edifyingly as a result). The world described in *The Muqaddima* is one in which control over means of production can accumulate but without clear territory – the polity was instead based upon urban centres based around trade routes. Gellner had observed in *Saints of the Atlas* that pre-colonial Morocco was neither a feudal society nor an oriental hydraulic despotism a la the Asiatic Mode of Production, but rather than pursue this, it merely led to mirth at the resultant knots that Althusserian Marxists had tied themselves in and a decision to focus on 'ecology' over economy.[145] Alatas criticises Gellner for being insufficiently sociological, teasing out an interpretation of Ibn Khaldun's own *taghyir al munkar,* less inclined to see the rise and fall of dynasties as just derivative of its social base, more likely instead to be part of a larger societal change that involves war and conflict between overlapping modes of production and shifting political loyalties.[146] Indeed, " '*asabiyyah* itself erodes in a specific political context that can be understood in terms of mode of production."[147]

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[144] Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun*, pp85-86 Turner and Ayubi also take this position.
[145] Alatas, p85
[146] Ibid, p79
[147] Ibid, p90 Alatas is also more keen than Gellner to extract economic reasons why a ruling group's social control declines out of Ibn Khaldun – a good example being the his interpretation of a *Muqaddimah* passage wherein need for a state that experienced a declining economy to pay military tribes in *iqta'* rights, which could easily become entitlements or even permanent holdings – facilitating further disloyalty to the state (p89).

The point of this comparison of Lacoste and Alatas with Gellner is that they highlight the importance of economy, or "ecology", to Gellner's theory. Whilst Gellner, along with Alatas and Lacoste, believes that class cannot be brought convincingly into a discussion of Islam and the lands where it predominates before the transformations of the modern era, he also claims that there is important "overlap between the worlds of Ibn Khaldun and Marx."[148] Indeed, whilst Gellner was always critical of Marxism in the round, perhaps similarities can be drawn between his work and that of Marxist structuralists for whom the concept of mode of production encompasses ideology, politics and economics, with the latter not always dominant (yet always determinant "in the last instance") in pre-capitalist formations.[149] More firm parallels can be drawn between with Turner's *Capitalism and Class in the Middle East,* as discussed in chapter 1. Nevertheless, the problem Gellner gets into later on in this regard is the extrapolation of this beyond the 'heartland' or the "Arid Zone" of Islam to areas where the ecology was often radically different to that of Ibn Khaldun, such as the Indian subcontinent, South East Asia and West Africa. The result is that the peculiarities of Islamic societies discussed in later works of Gellner's such as *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* appear to be all down to Islam itself, which has somehow supplanted nationalism's role, and not its context or social basis. In doing this, Gellner heads too far towards doing what he excoriates Postmodernism for doing, "[abandoning] any serious attempt to give a reasonably precise, documented and testable account of anything."[150] This will be explored further in subsequent chapters. This notwithstanding, many postcolonial scholars, or those under the spell of the Saidian critique, also have a problem with the

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[148] Gellner, *Muslim Society,* p56

[149] This idea comes from Talal Asad's discussion of the 'French Marxist structuralists', such as J. Copas and D. Seddon, highly influential in the era Gellner was actively writing on social structure and Islam, in his review of Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History*, 'Are There Histories of People without Europe? A Review Article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* Vol. 29, No.3 (Jul 1987), p597

[150] Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion,* p29

idea of a sociological continuity between even the heartlands of the former Ottoman Empire and the peripheries of North Africa.

Nevertheless, so long as one sticks to the narrower remit he originally gave himself, Gellner's linking of religious change with political and economic change is convincing and insightful, even if the broad brushstrokes approach of *Muslim Society* lacks empirical rigor at times. This approach can of course still be challenged on empirical and epistemological grounds, as will be seen in later chapters, but for now it will be argued that the basis of Gellner's theory is a sound one. This basis can be distilled to the physical limitations of the power of an Islamic state (or indeed any agrarian one) within the so-called arid-zone, and the ability of religion to act as a 'social glue' that promotes order and cohesion, both expanding the 'imagined community' of a social group. At this stage we are dealing with a separate issue to the question of whether or not 'Islam' is 'exceptional'. We are instead talking again about the utility of 'the Gellner project' of describing a particular non- European case of what it means for society to undergo a transition to 'modernity.'

There are certainly elements of oversimplification that can still be addressed whilst still retaining Gellner's broad approach. For instance, there is often the sense in *Muslim Society* that political and economic changes were happening within a static society, a cardinal sin of Orientalists as identified by Said and Turner. References to external influences in terms of foreign domination (physical and economic) are brief, even though it is admitted that "the more benign the colonial experience, the closer, generally speaking, the country remains to the world of Ibn Khaldun."[151] Indeed, Gellner's attempts to explain differences between, for instance, Kemalist Turkey and

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[151] Ibid, pp75-76

French Algeria in *Muslim Society* largely ignore the different experiences of state building – dependent and independent – in these countries. Even when such factors are touched upon, in this later analysis it appears that the character of Islam is being shaped reactively by its relation to the relevant centre of power, rather than by 'Islam' itself: "old-style puritanism prevails where a traditional elite survives…new-style puritanism…prevails where colonialism had destroyed old elites and where a new one had come up from below…the one Muslim state which was a colonial power [Turkey] in its own right…opted for political secularization."[152]

The appeal of Gellner's theory is that it creates common ground between the 'two traditions' of explaining divergence between Europe and the Islamic world identified by Simon Bromley: "the culturalist position…which when explicitly theorized is usually underpinned by a more or less functionalist model of social order and social change" and the "tradition of materialist analysis, originating in Ibn Khladun, passing through Karl Marx and Max Weber".[153] Like Max Weber, Gellner's works have 'major keys' and 'minor keys',[154] which simultaneously explain events in materialist and culturalist terms. The problem is that the dominant mode is always inconsistent and difficult to pin down in Gellner's writing. Moreover, whilst it provides an excellent insight into Islam's "fusion of pastoralism and scripturalism", as well as the later fusion of this Islam with the remnants of the tribal 'moral economy' as peasants moved en masse to cities in the 20th century, it is less effective at pinning down Islam's

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[152] Ibid, p69

[153] Simon Bromley *Rethinking Middle East Politics*, Austin: University of Texas Press, (1994), p19 Bromley does than proceed to separate the Marxian and Weberian variants of this approach, coming down in favour of a more solidly historical materialist approach.

[154] The metaphor comes from *Ibid*, p24 Bromley appears to be the only scholar who has explored the tension between the cultural and material in *Muslim Society*. His analysis on this matter is extremely insightful and proved welcome validation of some of my own reflections on the text.

relationships with politics in the abstract, nor its relationship to changing politics beyond a basic *resentissement.*

This insistence that Islam, whilst likely to generate different outcomes in different political context, "tends to be a stable moral order, with well oiled mechanisms or institutions for determining the socially effective content of the faith",[155] is particularly noticeable in Gellner's writing on civil society as discussed in the following chapter. A more historical approach that compared variations in material factors in more depth would ruin the elegance of the *Muslim Society* thesis (compare the purity of vision in Lacoste and Gellner against the necessarily more repetitive Alatas), but would also rescue it from the post-Saidian dustbin, at least in the 'Arid Zone', to the continued benefit of area studies of the Middle East as a discipline. It may not be the whole story, and other critiques will be discussed in the fifth evaluative chapter of this thesis, but *Muslim Society* and its engagement with Ibn Khaldun works as an effective articulation of the argument that "it is in a sociological sense that a normative Islam does exist and has enormous political consequences."[156]

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[155] Gellner, 'The Moslem Reformation: Review of Edward Mortimer 'Faith and Power in Islam', *The New Republic*, 22/11/82, p34

[156] Ibid, p30: "Islam is a civilization, or a style of thought and feeling, that possesses *within itself* a method for deciding this very question: what is Islam, and what are its social commandments? And there is now a fair amount of consensus among Moslems as to what that method is." (p29)

CHAPTER 4

ISLAMIC EXCEPTIONALISM AND CIVIL SOCIETY

It is likely that Gellner would have broadly agreed with many of the comments on *Muslim Society* made by Bromley, Alatas, and others regarding the danger of an over reliance on "culturalist" explanations and sentences that begin with the words "Islam is..." Yet Gellner was not interested in pursuing such issues further. Instead, Gellner's writing increasingly began to explore the 'Islamic' component further, undeterred by the pitfalls of "ahistorical use" of "culturally specific concepts."[157] Understanding this direction is important because it goes a long way to explaining the relative success and popularity of Gellner's work on nationalism and civil society compared to that of Gellner's work on Islam. For Gellner, no national creed was superior to another (when it came to comparing German, Russian, or Japansese nationalism, Gellner really was a 'cultural relativist'), as any national creed was endlessly adaptable to suit its function. This contrasted with Gellner's insistence, matched by scholars such as Patricia Crone and Daniel Pipes, that Islam has an 'essential' core "immune to change by historical influences."[158] When it came to Islam, "the history of this movement and modern Arab (and other) nationalisms can hardly be separated from each other."[159] The result of Gellner's placing of Islam in such a monolithic position in his analyses of Muslim societies is that other factors, such as the impact of imperialism, are too heavily sidelined. This view, together with Gellner's model of arid-zone societies in which a

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[157] Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics,* p40
[158] Yahya Sadowski, 'The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate', Middle East Report, No. 183, Political Islam. (Jul. - Aug., 1993), p19. 'The New Orientalism' for Sadowski was the tendency for contemporary analysts and policy makers to describe Arab and other Muslim societies as particuarly unsuited to democracy and as places where modern institutions are powerless in the face of strong 'traditional' social formations. This of course echoed the 19th and early 20th century Orientalism analyzed by Said.
[159] Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism,* p40

strong centre was historically surrounded by a largely autonomous but fragmented periphery, meant that Gellner could not envisage effective nationalism and civil society 'crossing the Mediterranean'.

Gellner's analysis was conducted in the context of the 'Gellner project' – explaining the remaking of changing social relations in an industrialising (capitalist) world – and Gellner's more widely lauded work on Nationalism and 'Civil Society'. Whilst "we don't have the option" of returning to a Khaldunian society, it is the *overlap* between the two forms of solidarity that exist in the "Durkheimian" ('organic solidarity') and "Khaldunian" (*'asabiyyah)* worlds, as "the ditch" is crossed, that is dangerous for a society's prospects of being "open." This is the basis for Gellner's insistence that divided loyalties exist between '*ummah*' and nation in the Muslim world. Nationalism is said to be unable to eclipse these older forms in Islamic societies with the same success as in Europe. As the previous chapter suggests, however, it is important to remember that Gellner could not have arrived at this conclusion without his idea that Islam, whilst originally shaped by the social structure it emerged in, is a religion that now "informs social structure."[160] In this chapter this approach will be analyzed and compared with that of Albert Hourani, who also employed a rather sweeping use of Khaldunian concepts – notably the centre/periphery dichotomy – in a modern, nation state context in order to shed light on the great social upheavals that took place in the Arab world in the 20th century (and 21st in the case of Malise

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[160] Tristan Mabry, 'Modernization, Nationalism and Islam: an examination of Ernest Gellner's writings on Muslim society with reference to Indonesia and Malaysia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* Vol 21, No.1 (January 1998), p68

Ruthven's most recent afterword to Hourani's famous *A History of Arab Peoples*)
whilst almost wholly avoiding Saidian ire.[161]

Gellner on Nationalism and Civil Society

Gellner's famous theory of nationalism requires briefly restating in order to
properly contextualise his views on civil society. Gellner's nationalism thesis was one
that strictly avoided the "dark Gods" type explanation of his LSE contemporary Elie
Kedourie. Nationalism for Gellner was not an avoidable, pernicious doctrine "invented
in the nineteenth century", nor the "the emotive manifestation of social concerns" but a
"necessary" (if often lamentable) product of the radical social change effected by
industrialisation, urbanisation and the attendant mass literacy it resulted in.[162] The crux
of the theory was that, driven my ever more complex division of labour as
industrialisation occurs, necessitating "context free communication",[163] earlier "low", or
"folk" cultures are either eroded by the spread of literate "high cultures" (as seen in the
rapid decline of French provincial languages and customs), or forced to become "high
cultures" in order to survive (as in the case of Czech in Gellner's original homeland).
These same forces that for Gellner lead to nationalism are used to explain the decline of
Khaldunian-type social cohesion in societies where such forms had been prevalent, as
"the pendulum unhinged". Indeed, early notes made by Gellner in Morocco seem to
suggest that his theory of nationalism, especially the "high" and "low" culture

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[161] Hourani is excepted from criticism in the work of Said, with Hourani's concerns about Said's analysis in his original review of *Orientalism* considered by Said in his afterword to the 1995 edition (Said, *Orientalism,* pp341-342).
[162] Gellner, *Nationalism,* pp10-11. Michael Mann, when assessing Gellner's nationalism theory pointed out that the role of modern militaries (as well as modern education) was just as critical, if not more so, in European nationalism. This factor is surely applicable to the nations of the Middle East, a large number of whom were to be ruled by leaders from military backgrounds (often men from rural, lower status backgrounds who were trained in Ottoman and European military academics), and reliant upon massive militaries post-independence. See for example Provence and Van Dam on the importance of this factor in 19th/20th century Syria.
[163] Ibid, p34

component, was inspired by Gellner's conception of "high" and "folk" Islam and the early effects of mass education in 1950s Morocco.[164] However, the secularisation attendant to this process that Gellner observes in his European case studies of nationalism is said to be "uniquely missing in the Muslim world" due to the fact that "high" Islam provided a ready-made, easily accessible high literate culture to the new urban masses uprooted from social formations previously sustained by "folk culture" and "folk religion". Moreover, this culture possessed within it the capacity to be compatible with modernity.

This analysis led to 'Islam' being included as something of a counterpoint to the 'West' in *Conditions of Liberty,* a book written in the context of a renaissance of studies on 'civil society' after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The central argument of the book took the form of an attempt to compare the development of a 'Civil Society' familiar to an inhabitant of "Atlantic Society" in the late 20th century with two other Weberian 'ideal types': "stifling communalism" and "centralised authoritarianism."[165] Gellner's definition of civil society is a more demanding one than that commonly deployed in studies of democratization. Civil society consists of "plural institutions protected by the state but strong enough to check it", producing a pattern of association capable of "breaking the circle between faith, power and society."[166] "The simplest formula for Civil Society…is political-coercive centralisation with accountability, rotation and fairly low rewards for those manning the political apparatus, and economic pluralism."[167] Whilst the collapse of the Warsaw Pact states was led by a clamouring for

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[164] Germs of Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* can certainly be seen in Gellner's 1950s notes from Morocco in the Gellner papers. For example, Gellner dedicates quite some time to analysing a phenomenon he observes of young Berber men who migrate from the countryside to the city in search of work returning to their families and declaring themselves 'Arab'. ('Beauty and the Berber', unpublished essay, Gellner Archive, LSE).
[165] Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, p12.
[166] Ibid, p141
[167] Ibid, p93

institutions capable of pushing back against the state, or at least acting economically

beyond the state's control, Gellner diagnosed the failure of what other political

scientists called 'third wave democratisation' in 'The Muslim World' to be a result of a

combination of factors specific to Islam and social continuity from the world of Ibn

Khaldun:

> the possibility of Civil Society, of associations within the city strong enough to
> resist the state (or even to turn it into its servant) does not seem to have
> occurred to [Ibn Khaldun] ...Modular man, capable of loyalty, cohesion, and
> hence political effectiveness, without for all that being locked into an over-
> cohesive tribal community composed of real or putative kin, is a possibility he
> simply does not contemplate. Notwithstanding the 'Protestant' traits of Islam,
> this development does not seem to have occurred in the Muslim world and to
> this day is not very much in evidence.[168]

Such a statement appears redolent of the 'new orientalism' of the triumphalist phase of

the post-Cold War era. However, when Gellner's explanation for this conclusion,

summarised at the start of this chapter, it is broken it is actually is actually very close to

the argument of Albert Hourani in classic works such as the essay 'Ottoman Reform

and the Politics of Notables' and *A History of Arab Peoples.*

Parallels with Hourani?

In Hourani's famous article, reprinted the same year *Conditions of Liberty* was

being written, as part of *The Modern Middle East* (edited by Hourani, Philip Khoury

and Mary Wilson), it is argued that the "urban politics of the Ottoman provinces (at

least of the Muslim provinces) cannot be understood unless we see them in terms of a

'politics of notables', or, to use Max Weber's phrase, a 'patriciate'".[169] Hourani's

notables were urban but drew their power from their control over the countryside. They

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[168] Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty*, p131
[169] Quoted in James L. Gelvin, 'The "Politics of Notables" Forty Years After', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin,* Vol 4., No.1, June 2006, p19

were not merely the '*ulama* and Ottoman officials, but also bureaucrats, soldiers, wealthy merchants, heads of guilds, tribal sheikhs, and even Sufi orders. The Ottomans were able to exert their authority by the notables acting as intermediaries to varying degrees – less so in the centralised core of the empire, more so in the towns of Greater Syria (and almost feudal in their position in Mount Lebanon by the 19th century) – speaking for local areas with their own local knowledge whilst also cultivating ties of personal dependence with unempowered members of a society. It was in this schema that Hourani suggested that the social movements of 19th and 20th centuries in the Middle East "may have been feuds rather than revolutions"[170] since these movements could be argued as always being reliant upon "active forces in society" such as craft guilds, religious leaders, and mobs. Such manoeuvring persisted into the age of mass politics.

Hourani's Notables sought to neutralise rivals who might emerge from ungoverned space and gain influence in government, which is somewhat similar to Gellner's Khaldun-based Moroccan tripartite of 'sheepdogs', 'sheep', and 'wolves' in its view of the centre-periphery dynamic: the 'sheepdogs', cohesive groups who work for the royal authority to subdue the submissive 'sheep' population whilst the 'wolves' – groups who have maintained their cohesion and evade royal/urban authority – (and are indeed prime candidates to establish a rival dynasty themselves) – lie beyond.[171]

This 'notables' idea was originally used by Hourani as a way of understanding the politics of collaborating elites, the struggle between 'Ottomanists' and 'Arabists' in late-Ottoman Damascus, and the politics of opposition and collaboration in the French mandate. Hourani was also comfortable using an Ibn Khaldun-informed big-picture

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[170] Hourani in PJ Vatikiotis (ed.), *Revolution in the Middle East and other case studies,* (New York: Allen and Unwin), 1972, p63
[171] Restated more succinctly from *Saints of the Atlas* in *Muslim Society,* p30

analysis of the 'Arab Peoples' in order to account for the remarkable stability of Arab elites in spite of the massive social, economic and political upheaval that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. Drawing on the idea of *'asabiyyah,* the stability of ruling elites – bound by an *'asabiyyah* not restricted to kinship ties but also other factors such as educational cohort (notably military institutions), neighbourliness and mutual dependence - was said to depend on the their ability to align themselves with the dominant interests in society, but also on the ability of a 'big idea' to legitimate the status quo.[172] In Hourani's analysis, looking only at Arab states, more specific factors than 'Islam' can come into play as the irreversible political and economic effects of 'modernity' took hold. For Hourani, "the idea that a group of people should form a nation, and that the nation should be independent, is a simple one, too simple to be able by itself to provide guidance for the way in which social life should be organised".[173] As such, Gellner's aforementioned focus on Ben Badis, a similar reformist, as the crucial figure in understanding modern Algeria is matched by Hourani: "by putting forward a version of Islam based on the Qur'an and Hadith and tending to break down the barriers between sects and schools of law…[Islam] had become more fully involved in political life, and identified with the nationalist demand that Muslims should have equal rights within the French system."[174] Later, such discourse could be matched in efficacy by the more secular Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism of figures such as Houari Boumedienne and Franz Fanon, facilitated by organisations such as the FLN.

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[172] Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples,* p448: "To borrow and adapt an idea from Ibn Khaldun, it could be suggested that the stability of a political regime depended on a combination of three facts. It was stable when a cohesive ruling group was able to link its interests with those of powerful elements in society, and when that alliance of interests was expressed in a political idea which made the power of the rulers legitimate in the eyes of society, or at least a significant part of it."

[173] Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples: Updated Edition* (London: Faber & Faber)*, 2013, p343*

[174] Ibid, p347. Moreover, such reformist teachings were, "by implication, to attack the position which the leaders of Sufi orders had held in Moroccan society; and to call for a society and state based upon a reformed *shari'a* was to oppose the rule of the foreign occupiers of the country."

Here Hourani's ideas, based on a more specific set of political and historical circumstances than Gellner given his narrower (if still broad!) focus, is more satisfying than Gellner. Gellner assumes that loyalty to an *ummah* automatically trumps loyalty to a nation; Hourani shows that this need not be the case, even within a Khaldun-inspired framework. Indeed, modern Islamist political groups (aside from the obvious extremist exceptions) are notable for their dedication to working *within* the existing nation state paradigm.

The second area where Gellner's ideas can be brought into dialogue is in the intersection of language with identity. Gellner's theories of nationalism and Islam hinge, after all, on a functionalist explanation of the changing role of culture in modernising societies. Gellner's starting assumption (set out in the greatest detail in his *Plough, Sword, and Book*) is that culture's main function in agrarian societies was to "reinforce, underwrite, and render visible and authoritative, the hierarchical status system of that social order."[175] Such a society has no need for Gellnerian nationalism - "the view that the legitimate political unit is made up of anonymous members of the same culture".[176] A 'modernising' society, however, with an increasingly complex economy where most work is semantic, necessitates far greater movement of and interaction between individuals in addition to an interaction with an impersonal bureaucracy, does appear to require a language and culture that permits "context free communication." The nature of this "high culture" of Gellner's is, however, difficult to pin down. In his analyses of Europe it seems to boil down to a printed language, backed by the apparatus of Andersonian "print capitalism", that must be substantial enough to fill an educational curriculum. In the end we are left with the evocative yet unsatisfying

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[175] Gellner, *Nationalism,* p20
[176] Ibid, p21

metaphor quoted in the introduction in which cultural nuances become "raindrops in a storm" aggregating into larger "puddles". Indeed, in much of the analysis of *Nations and Nationalism,* language and culture are more or less interchangeable. It is curious therefore that Gellner's analysis of Islam, which we have already seen is capable of performing culture's main function in both agrarian and modern societies in its "folk" and "high" variants, chooses to focus largely upon the scripture itself as opposed to the language it is written in – Arabic – as a high culture. Indeed, Tristram Mabry makes the point, informed by Gellner's concept of nationalism, that many key figures in the *nahda* and later Arab political movements such as the Ba'ath party were non-Muslim Arabs, self-identified as 'Arab',[177] an identity sustained by the di-glossia of Arabic language (i.e. the formal, state sanctioned *fusha,* and unofficial but de facto colloquial Arabic dialects used in everyday interaction) in the public sphere. With the partial exception of Lebanon, Arab states' post-colonial language usage and education policies were unarguably along strict Gellnerian lines. Hourani also makes much of the linguistic component of the Arab intellectual renaissance through print-capitalism, although he is careful to remind readers that in the early stages of the state formation process, and certainly until the widespread penetration of radio, this was restricted to a reasonably narrow elite, who also consumed much written material in French and English.[178]

So what does such a comparison tell us about Gellner's idea of Muslim exceptionalism? Once again, it appears to be one based upon a particular, 'arid zone' socio-economic formation in the context of a universal historical process. Moreover, for Gellner, his concept of Muslim exceptionalism – that it is more effective than

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[177] Tristam Mabry, 'Arab Di-Glossia', The Levantine Review, Vol.2, No.1 (Spring 2013), p30 The persistence, argues Mabry, of semi-codified vernacular Arabic dialects that are often not mutually intelligible, forments 'di-nationalism'. This phenomenon is discussed at monograph length in Mabry's forthcoming *Nationalism, Language and Muslim Exceptionalism*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 2015
[178] Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples,* p338

nationalism in facilitating modernisation in the Muslim world - acts as a proof for his argument that nationalism is not an inevitable manifestation of atavistic social behaviour, but merely a necessary handmaiden of modernity (so long as another high culture that can do the job does not already exist). This brings Gellner into rare agreement with many of his more 'hermeneutic' counterparts, given his strong disavowal of any notion of nationalism being the apex of an Hegelian teleology. Gellner must therefore surely agree with Aziz al-Azmeh that nationalism and pan-Islamism share the same "vitalist" characteristics, and are connected at the level of "semiotic function".[179] We should consider Gellnerian Muslim Society as exceptional in so far as it supposedly negates the need for a strong nationalism as traditional social units are broken up whilst legitimating the continuation of a neo-Khaldunian 'politics of the notables' in what are often arbitrary, colonially created states.

This exceptionalism, however, is one that fails to separate 'Islam' and 'Islamism' satisfactorily, which is largely why Gellnerian Islam has appeared to embrace the bogus notion of being an 'oriental essence' – Muslims who may on some level consider themselves as part of an imagined community that encompasses all of their co-religionists are usually not the same as those who see the "permanent victory" (as the "pendulum unhinges" following previous fluctuations between "revivalism" and "folk Islam") of "High Islam" as providing the "legal blueprint of a social order."[180] As such, Gellner's theory can only be seen as one that seeks to explain a perceived lack of state legitimacy and political pluralism in terms of Islam's particular scriptural

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[179] Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernties,* p62: "This semiotic connection can be seen to have been borne out by, among other things, such morsels of empirical evidence as are available on the composition of political crowds in Arab countires which show, in the case of Syria for instance, that the Islamic and the Nasserist crowds of the 1960s were virtually indistinguishable. Similarly, the same social groups in Cairo, with slight differences concerning rural affilations, account for the cadres of left-wing as well the most radical of Islamic groups such as the famous *Takfir* and *Tahrir;* and the same urban petty trading elements in Syria gave Nasser much of his public strength as today nourishes the Muslim Brothers."

[180] Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty,* p79; p17

rigorousness, not one that argues that theocracy is inevitable in Muslim societies.

Gellner, along with many notable 20th century Islamist thinkers from Abdul 'Ala al-

Mawdoodi to Sayid Qutb, presumes the ability of Islam to transcend the (almost always

colonially imposed) nation state, and the potential offensiveness of the concept of the

sovereignty of the nation to literalist Islamic scripture. He is, however, far too quick to

ignore the complex relationship between Islam and nationalism (even his own theory of

it, as seen above!), particularly in the context of dependent state formation. Hugh

Roberts rightly points out that the thought of Ben Badis, Gellner's go-to example for

"high Islam", "is also the story of the complex relationship of Islamism and

nationalism, and of the divisions that developed within the Islamic reform movement

itself."[181] Gellner's theory is also fundamentally limited in that it is one that does not

seek to define "political Islam" separately from mere "Islam", since, in the purest sense,

the two are traditionally one and the same, despite a large degree of separation, de facto

if not officially between *siyasa* and *fiqh*, throughout the history of the religion.

Gellner was also clear that Islam had a particular 'immunity' to secularization in

the modernization theory sense of the word. Given the importance Gellner places on the

puritan Protestantism in producing a powerful capitalist class not interested in capturing

or contesting the state, Gellner was initially excited at the possibility that puritan Islam

could propel non-oil rent based economic growth in the Arab world.[182] In a 1990

appearance on the BBC's *The Late Show*, where *The Satanic Verses* was inevitably

being discussed, Gellner defended sociologist Akbar Ahmed as Michael Ignatieff and

Ian McEwan pressed him to accept the human origin of his religion: "Well, he can't.

Islam has yet to be secularized. This is the great mystery about it. All the other world

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[181] Hugh Roberts, 'North African Islamism in the Blinding Light of 9/11', *LSE Crisis States Programme*, Working Paper No.34, October 2003
[182] Sadowski, 'The New Orientalism', p19

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religions have softened, have been permitted the ambiguity of meanings." Ahmed

enthusiastically agreed,[183] and, to be sure, this is an opinion that has been restated by

many Islamic scholars.[184] However, such a viewpoint does not seem to sit well with

Gellner's philosophy of history, which so clearly informs much of his thought. Whilst

Gellner would seemingly agree that "culture and nature are so closely intertwined that it

would be misleading to speak of an essential, unchanging human nature, given the

dynamics of change",[185] he does strongly argue that modernity has brought about an

irreversible change from which there is no certain refuge. Societies can choose to return

a more 'traditional' form, but they are marked by the fact that they have "eaten from the

tree of knowledge"; Gellner quotes al-Ghazzali to emphasize this point: "the true

traditionalists do not know they are traditionalists."[186] As a result of mankind having

reached a level where there exists a standard of objective, verifiable knowledge, all

efforts at "re-enchantment" will be inevitably referential. This both explains the power

of Gellner's "International Consumerist Unbeliever" states and ultimately undermines

Gellner's predictions regarding the durability of Islam in the longer term. Islamic

revivalism may be a current trend, and "the blueprint of a social order", but is surely

reliant on certain sociological and political conditions, such as the "tributary

appropriation of the state class and the locally based notability which allowed the

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[183] Akbar Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*, London: , 1992, p42.

[184] Robert Fisk, 'Pluralism was once the hallmark of the Arab World, so the exodus of Christians from the Middle East is painful to one Islamic scholar', *The Independent,* 23/02/2014 Tarif Khalidi is quoted as saying: "there has not yet been a higher criticism of the Koran. It may happen, but it hasn't. Christians indulged in this higher criticism of the Bible at the end of the 19th century. We need, for example, very seriously to re-examine things between men and women. The implication of these things have not been fully explored. Veiling, for instance. You need to re-think basic human rights issues. And what does 'revelation' really mean?"
http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/robert-fisk-pluralism-was-once-the-hallmark-of-the-arab-world-so-the-exodus-of-christians-from-the-middle-east-is-painful-to-one-islamic-scholar-9147720.html

[185] John H. Bodley, *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System* (Plymouth: AltaMira Press), 1994 , p11

[186] Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Hapsburg Dilemma,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1998, p21

consolidation of the religious classes,"[187] that enabled ruling groups to "link [their] interests with those of powerful elements in society."[188] Here Gellner might point out that the old 'religious class' he examined in 1950s-60s Algeria and Morocco has surely disappeared, but that this has not prevented re-enchantment under the new 'mafia like' ruling groups in the arid zone.

Indeed, if the set of factors Gellner works with are looked at in regard to the political and geographic contexts of certain zones in particular, (i.e. the Arab states) *specificity,* rather than *exceptionalism* appears to be the more apt designation (this will be explored in in the next chapter), suggesting that a 'non-orientalist' account of 'Muslim Society' can be extracted from Gellner. Nevertheless, the point, most eloquently made by al-Azmeh, that all scripture is merely "idle chiliasm" until political power fills the inevitable gap between scripture and physical reality,[189] is a truism for Gellner; the fact the remains that the scripture exists. Gellner's writings on civil society and Islam go further than Hourani sees fit to. These writings still have their base in Gellner's political economy based theory of "pendulum swing" of his theory of religious change, but they clearly and problematically move beyond it by asserting that the nature of Islam will always take precedence over other factors. Gellner describes (ultimately) weak states and fragmented societies in the Muslim World, with the result that 'civil society' is supine and unlikely to be able to develop as it managed to in Europe (even though his Weberian account of the importance of the Protestant Ethic in creating the conditions for a modern, non-abosolutist, state means that he remained hopeful 'high' Islam could create a capitalist class able to produce wealth without

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[187] Burke and Lapidus (eds.), *Islam, Politics and Social Movements,* (Oakland: University of California Press), 1992 , p40. It is claimed that It was this factor, "rather than any intrinsic factors of Islam as such" that account for Islam being "deeply entrenched" in Middle Eastern societies.
[188] Ruthven in Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples*, p488
[189] Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities,* p117

dependence upon state patronage).[190] However, despite acknowledging that *ratrappage* is inevitably different from the initial experience of the initial 'crossing of the ditch' into the modern world, Gellner does not entertain the many alternative explanations for why 'civil society' has failed flourish in the Middle East.

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[190] See Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, Religion,* p22 and Sadowski, p19

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION

Critiques of Gellner tend to fall into three categories – those that question the very epistemological ground that he walks upon, those of the "historians anxious to stress the indispensability of their craft",[191] and those who criticised Gellner from within what might be called his own 'Weberian' tradition. This chapter will examine the two most cogent critiques of Gellner's theory of Muslim society and, in light of the arguments made in previous chapters, assess whether Gellner's theory can accommodate them and still be of relevance to our understanding of politics in the 'Middle East'. It will be shown that Gellner's concept of a generalised 'Islam' as an explanatory factor is difficult to justify either epistemologically or in comparison with the historical record. However, once considered alongside the political economy/political ecology of the 'arid zone' it was originally intended for, Gellner's concept of the 'unhinging of the pendulum' has analytical value. When considered in alongside the 'Gellner project', Gellner's analysis of the material aspects of the 'arid zone' provides a useful starting point for comparative historical sociology of 'east' and 'west' – into which state formation and the effect of *ratrappage* under the aegis of European capitalism can be brought in – that need not just be about finding 'essences' that define these two, admittedly arbitrary, categories.

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[191] Muslim society, p83

An Anthropologist's Critique: Talal Asad

Talal Asad's criticisms of Gellner in 'Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter', and, especially, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam', are written with a concern for the intersection of power/knowledge, discussed in chapter one in relation to the work of Edward Said. Whilst Asad is rigorously critical of functionalist anthropology and its categories, such as 'tribes', his ultimate goal in his criticism of Gellner is to question 'Islam' (in addition to secular power and secular moral categories) as a subject of anthropological and genealogical enquiry. Asad was also instrumental in inspiring the turn towards reflexivity within anthropology, a questioning that went beyond problematising the role of the ethnographer in an imperial context to moving away from functionalist attempts to explain behaviour, towards an alternative that sought instead to analyze the relation of practices to particular "discursive traditions."[192] Such an intervention has severe implications not only for Gellner's anthropology, as discussed in chapter 2, but also for the wider proposals made by Gellner regarding religion in modernity. Can 'Islam', as a "distinctive historical totality" ever be a legitimate object of study? Whilst Asad claims to believe that, in principle, studying Islam in this way is far more appealing than using Islam as "an anthropologist's label for a heterogeneous collection of items, each of which has been designated Islamic by informants", the former is "unacceptable."[193]

Gellner's lengthy 'Reply to Critics' essay, first published as part of a collection of essays inspired by Gellner's work that included Asad's 'The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam',[194] only contains a brief comment on Asad's criticism, returning

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[192] Talal Asad, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam', *Qui Parle,* Vol. 17, No.2 (Spring/Summer 2009), p1
[193] Ibid, p2. The idea that Islam is simply whatever Muslims everywhere say it is "will not do, if only because there are everywhere Muslims who say that what *other* people take to be Islam is not really Islam at all.
[194] Hall and Jarvie (eds.), *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*

again to the theme of looking for general patterns versus seeking to undermine them. What seems to be at issue is largely a matter of research strategy:

> *my aspiration is to find general models (rightly or wrongly, I believe there is one to be found for traditional Islam), whereas Talal thinks the diversity is more important; and partly, he favours something like a 'discursive tradition' as a key concept whilst I remain loyal to the simple notion of structure. I see no harm in mutual tolerance.*[195]

Asad does appear to see harm in Gellner, however, claiming: "the most urgent theoretical need for an anthropology of Islam is a matter not so much of finding the right scale but formulating the right concepts. A discursive tradition is such a concept."[196] Asad agrees with Gellner that viewing Islam purely as an umbrella term for endless variation is of little use, but sees little hope in Gellner's project, which he manages to convincingly portray as hopelessly over-ambitious.

Asad makes his point via an examination of Gellner's *Muslim Society,* using it "to extract the theoretical problems" that result from "the assumptions it draws on and the concepts it deploys."[197] Some of Asad's disagreements are normative and empirical, such as his doubting that Christianity is historically any less "intimately concerned with the use of political power for religious purposes" than Islam, but mostly the problem lies with "the terms employed".[198] Among the most pressing of these are the ideas of a "high" and "low" form of Islam in the writing of Gellner (in addition to that of Clifford Geertz) and their linkage to the social structure of cities and countryside. Asad than makes 5 "interconnected points" worth quoting in full:

> 1)   *Narratives about culturally distinctive actors must try to translate and represent the historically situated discourses of such actors as*

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[195] Ernest Gellner, 'Reply to Critics', *New Left Review* Issue 221, Jan-Feb 1997, p95
[196] Asad, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam', p20
[197] Ibid, p3
[198] Ibid, p7

> *responses to the discourse of others, instead of schematizing and de-historicizing their actions*
>
> *2)   Anthropological analyses of the social structure should focus not on typical actors but on the changing patterns of institutional relations and conditions (especially those we call political economies)*
>
> *3)   The analyses of Middle Eastern political economies and the representation of Islamic "dramas" are essentially different kinds of discursive exercise that cannot be substituted for each other, although they can be significantly embedded in the same narrative, precisely because they are discourses*
>
> *4)   It is wrong to represent types of Islam as being correlated with types of social structure, on the implicit analogy with (ideological) superstructure and (social) base*
>
> *5)   Islam as the object of anthropological understanding should be approached as a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formations of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it) and the production of appropriate knowledges)[199]*

These items relate to some points of fundamental disagreement with Gellner, but also to some directions (i.e. 2) into which Gellner could perhaps be taken (although, if we are to fully agree with Asad, the interrelatedness of these points would surely forbid this). On the first point, 1) is clearly an example of the 'relativism' Gellner abhorred, maintaining a "belief in the existence and availability of objective facts, and above all in the possibility of explaining said facts by an objective and testable theory, not itself essentially linked to any one culture" over "'heteroglossic' styles of presentation, which [avoid] presenting unique facts".[200] The problem with settling this argument however is that neither Gellner nor Asad can objectively test their analysis of dynamics in Muslim societies – Asad is convinced of the pointlessness of such an exercise, and Gellner is inevitably hampered by the impossibility of conducting fieldwork on such an immense scale – so the point is ultimately moot. Another critique along these lines is when Asad criticises Gellner and Geertz for assigning 'dramatic' roles to the 'dramatis personae' of

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[199] Ibid, Here I would also note that Asad's idea of 'anthropology' is rather open-ended, and inter-disciplinary, in a similar vein to Gellner's. Asad's criticisms are intended to be equally applicable to depictions of 'Islam' in political science, sociology, or any other supposedly differentiated academic disciplines.

[200] Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion,* p25, p28

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their work – for talking about what rural tribesmen, peasants, sheikhs etc *are* rather than what they *do,* insisting upon turning behaviour into 'readable gestures' without recourse to local discourse."[201] Gellner is surely guilty of assuming that modern, literate Muslims will interpret their sacred texts in the manner of a Calvinist puritan, even if his analysis of what Moroccan marabouts *are* is the result of extensive observation about what they *do.* However, is this critique, however persuasive, not just another way of once again criticising Gellner yet again for functionalism?

Related to points 4) and 5) is Asad's argument that "if the anthropologist seeks to understand religion by placing it conceptually in its social context, then the way in which that social context is described must affect the understanding of religion." Indeed, if overlap always exists between arbitrary social categories than it will be found, but Gellner, who took as axiomatic that in-between his categories: "Everything was continuous, the transitions were gradual, the boundaries ambiguous and shadowy",[202] agrees with this. To be sure, Gellner's accounts of political economy's interaction with religious reform are too vague and general, but surely an extension of this interaction, probing for correlation between religious and economic practice, is possible. Asad is right that pre-capitalist societies "cannot be understood by isolating one a priori principal"[203] and became dismissive of the "reproduction of production relations"[204] in pre-capitalist society, yet, surely this leaves the door open for historical sociology to do just this by "trying to identify that combination of elements

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[201] Ibid, p13

[202] Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty,* p19. Gellner, the die-hard functionalist, does however have the gall to claim that: "obfuscation of contrasts was itself very useful" in that allowed for the rural worshipper to recognize the latent authority of the high ideal of Islam even if it was not aspired to in practice (p20). In addressing Asad's point about the importance of the *way* social categories are described, I have not defended Gellner once again from the charge of using inappropriate terms of reference.

[203] Asad, 'Are There Histories of Peoples Without Europe?', p602

[204] Asad, 'Primitive States and the Reproduction of Production Relations: Some Problems in Marxist Anthropology', *Critique of Anthropology,* 5:21 (1985), pp21-31

(environmental, demographic, social, cultural, etc) in the past of a given population that can explain a particular outcome."[205]

The idea of a "discursive tradition" in 5) is most useful as a counter to Gellner's assertions about "high" Islam as an (socially driven) ideology based upon a specific set of doctrines, freely accessible and analogous to nationalism, when, for Asad, the Qu'ran, Sunna, Hadith etc. should be seen as *"tradition"*. Thus, what is Islamic for Asad becomes less homogenous (and shorn of its "totalism… [which] precludes institutionalised politics"),[206] instead, "a practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims."[207] If orthodoxies exist wherever Muslim institutions can endorse or criticise practices as (un)orthodox, then we have less reason to assume that they carry a timeless function. Nevertheless, Gellner was perhaps as comfortable as he was with Asad's criticism due to the esteemed anthropologist's opinion that: "widespread homogeneity [of religious orthodoxy] is a function, not of a tradition, but of the development and control of communication techniques that are part of modern industrial societies".[208] This quotation could have been a passage from *Nations and Nationalism*! It seems the real point of difference between Asad and Gellner is not the construction of Gellner's theory of 'Muslim Society', but rather, the question of how 'Islam' is conceived, which is "important because one's conception of religion determines the kinds of questions one thinks are askable and worth asking."[209]

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[205] Asad, 'Are There Histories of Peoples Without Europe?', p603
[206] Gellner, 'Muslim Society', p48
[207] Asad, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam', p23
[208] Ibid
[209] Ibid

Nevertheless, a comparison of Gellner and Asad is thus limited by the inevitability of it becoming a zero-sum game. Both scholars present cases for whether or not Gellner's questions are worth asking; Asad's case, whilst compelling, is ultimately driven by a different sense of the moral responsibility of the scholar (such a sense sustained Said and Noam Chomsky during their disagreements with Gellner detailed in chapter 1), as evidenced his assertion that:

> *To write about a tradition is to be in a certain narrative relation to it, a relation that will vary according to whether one supports or opposes the tradition, or regards it as morally neutral. The coherence that each party finds, or fails to find, in that tradition will depend on their particular historical position. In other words, there clearly is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a universally acceptable account of a living tradition. Any representation of tradition is contestable. What shape that contestation takes, if it occurs, will be determined not only by the powers and knowledges each side deploys, but by the collective life to which they aspire – or to whose survival they are quite indifferent. Declarations of moral neutrality, here as always, are no guarantee of political innocence.[210]*

This approach is admirable, and is a sure fire defence against academic complicity with imperialism, but its zero-sum nature is surely evidenced by the robustness of Aziz al-Azmeh's – not a scholar one would consider a target of this kind of criticism – opinion that Asad's approach to religion and 'the secular' is merely "boundless relativism" doomed to become "another effortlessly repeatable ethical statement" that can be all to easily enlisted in the service of "nativism and relativism".[211]

It is ultimately more advantageous to seek the death of Gellner's 'Muslim Society' through a thousand smaller cuts. In this spirit, Asad's epistemological approach did not prevent him from identifying certain inconsistencies in Gellner's free movement between depicting a Durkheimian marabout, for whom ritual is enactment of

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[210] Ibid, p24 Compare this manifesto to Gellner's declaration at the beginning of *Plough, Sword and Book*, in which he argues for the importance of a "philosophic history" so that we may attempt to know "know the range of alternatives from which our reality is drawn to better evaluate it" (Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book*, p12).
[211] Aziz al-Azmeh, 'Is Islamism the Arab Destiny', Paper presented at SOAS, University of London, 20/02/13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAfLgTGWrgA (accessed 01/05/14).

the sacred, a symbolic representation of social structures, whereas Gellner's "high

Islam" becomes a hodgepodge of Weberian bourgeois asceticism and Marxian opiate.

More fundamentally, Asad also questions the idea that something so ethereal as

scripture could ever compete with the power of the modern state, which (presumably in

terms of Foucauldian disciplinary power) is said to have been far more potent in its

regulation of social behaviour than Islam ever has been or could be.[212]

A Sociologist's Critique: Sami Zubaida

Sami Zubaida's engagement with Gellner, most fully expressed in a chapter

entitled 'Is there Such a Thing as a 'Muslim Society',[213] largely attacks Gellner's

attempts to form a grand narrative by recourse to empirical deficiencies, even if the

overall result is to establish another grand narrative claiming that religion, without

exception, is always subordinate to political and economic factors when assessing

sociological causation. There is, therefore, no such thing as a Muslim Society for

Zubaida.

Gellner shys away from its usage, but when he discusses the spread of

"modernity", the word "capitalism" could almost always be substituted in. Zubaida is

more explicit that the (uneven) spread of "capitalism" and "modernity" was concurrent.

Taking issue with Gellner's claims regarding Islam's particular (if not guaranteed)

resistance to secularisation, Zubaida gives an account of what amounts to "spray on

Islam", claiming that this does not merit exceptionalist study of societies where Islam is

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[212] Asad, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam', p20

[213] Sami Zubaida, *Beyond Islam: a new understanding of the Middle East,* (London: IB Tauris), 2011. Methods may vary, but, similarly to his former 'Hull school' colleagues Talal Asad and Roger Owen, Zubaida states that: "My intention here is not so much to show that [writers including Gellner] are wrong about Islam, but challenge 'Islam' as a coherent sociological or political entity." (p34).

the primary religion.[214] Instead, Islam is said to be "superimposed upon normal modern activity, with pretence of an historically and religiously based difference of identity."[215] Thus, one should look instead beyond Islam in order to examine the 'normal modern activity' itself, whilst avoiding the selection bias inevitable in the works of scholars such as Huntingdon who assume a fundamental uniqueness in the development of the West and are therefore compelled to look for absences in other societies. Zubaida's case is compelling, and he is meticulous in taking issue with Gellner for abandoning his universalism, as Hugh Roberts did in chapter 3.

Crucial problems raised by Zubaida include the fact that there are few genuine examples of orthodox urban preachers leading tribes, even in the medieval Maghreb, whilst a more contemporary example of a 'pendulum swing', the establishment of the Saudi-Wahhabi dynasty, is explained as more of an attack upon nomadic tribes by the settled rather than the other way around.[216] Zubaida also draws upon Hourani's idea of urban notables, which explains the power of notable families within the Ottoman Empire in terms of both their material and religious position, emphasising however that their 'religious position' owed much to "the inherited charisma of a family and its claim to a sacred ancestry"[217]. Zubaida also highlights the diversity in Hourani's formulation, notably the Nile area of Egypt and Anatolia, where densely populated and permanently settled agricultural areas led to far more centralised patterns of political control, with power centring around control of land tax.[218] In doing this, Zubaida is focussing on the local political constraints that Hourani allows to enter his model (more so than in Gellner). This results in a dynamic where even the most seemingly 'Gellnerian' of

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[214] Zubaida, pp5-7
[215] Ibid, p17
[216] Ibid, pp61-63 The small oasis villages and towns of the Najd were hardly the 'city' of Ibn Khaldun's analysis, but the point remains that the impetus did not come from nomadic tribes on the margins.
[217] Ibid, p45
[218] Ibid, p46

orthodox *'ulama* are reliant upon favourable patronage and socio-economic conditions in order to accrue wider support for their definitions of "social norms." This is the case even in a prosperous mercantile urban milieu, whereas for Gellner these norms are available in final and definite form to anyone who can read.[219] For Zubaida, the situation was in fact "a far cry from the unitary class of non-organised *'ulama* enjoying undisputed authority guaranteed by the divine law."[220] It would seem that the political field that surrounded even written doctrine made it less accessible than Gellner had imagined.

Gellner's view of urban life and urban cohesion (or lack thereof) is also taken to task by Zubaida. Whilst Gellner's acceptance of a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, existing between 'high' and 'folk' Islam has already been discussed, Gellner certainly does not allow for close involvement of urban *'ulama* with Sufism and the urban organisation associated with it in many different times and spaces. Indeed, it is only the Wahabbi and Salafi traditions that are recognisably 'puritan' (in a Gellnerian sense) to Zubaida. However, these are "strictly modern phenomena"[221] that Gellner is assumed to have projected backwards. To demonstrate this Zubaida places medieval scholar Ibn Tamiyyah in his social context, reliant upon courtly patronage for the spread of his ideas rather than puritan tribes.[222] Here we can again argue that the Gellnerian modernity paradigm is useful in explaining changes in religious practice and identity but only when this practice is discussed in relation to the local political economy.

When this connection is broken, the result is an overly functionalist view, reliant upon a 'sociology of ideas', of modern currents in Islam(ism), which can be contrasted

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[219] Gellner, Muslim Society, p2 Indeed, the Qur'an status as the final and ultimate intervention of God into worldly affairs sits uneasily with the tradition of earthly mediators and interpreters.
[220] Zubaida, *Beyond Islam*, p48
[221] Ibid, p52
[222] Although these courts were dominated by Mamluks with tribal antecedents

with Zubaida's idea of a 'National Political Field'. The latter is derived from the notion

of a political field, defined by Pierre Bourdieu as a space in which "political products"

are produced through competition between differing political actors in order to be

'consumed'; meaning that "the distribution of opinions in a given population depends

on the state of the instruments of perception and expression available and on the access

that different groups have to these instruments."[223] It is the limits placed upon this

political field in the 'Islamic World', that for Zubaida have led to his conclusion that:

"The Arab world is diverse, but religion seems to be hegemonic in the culture and

politics of most countries".[224] Such a theory assumes that modern 'political Islam' is in

fact only able to exist in light of modern, secular ideological innovations. The

"function" of "orthodox" religion is then reduced to giving such ideas associated with

political organisation in a nation state sway in the 'political field', where reactionary

conservatives may use it to "maintain patriarchal and institutional privileges" and

compete with "more modern populist organisation, typically that of the Muslim

Brotherhood", to instrumentalise religion for political ends.[225]

The opposite conclusions that Gellner (who states that modern secular politics in

the Islamic world is a veneer) and Zubaida (that Islamist politics are a veneer for

modern secular politics) arrive at, scholars who generally agree on much,[226] cannot be

attributed to a fundamental epistemological rift. Indeed, it should be noted that Zubaida,

through his engagement with Hourani, has similar attitudes to Gellner when it comes to

the politics of patrimonialism in the Middle East, where "political powers and

movements, within and without ruling groups and institutions, have often revolved

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[223] Pierre Bourdieu, 'Political Representation: Elements for a Theory of the Political Field', *Language and Symbolic Power,* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1991, pp171-172
[224] Zubaida, *Beyond Islam,* p196
[225] Zubaida, 'The Arab Spring in Historical Perspective', *Open Democracy*, 21/10/11
[226] David Stayn, 'Introduction: Sami Zubaida, modernity, politics and a social Middle East', *Economy and Society,* Vol. 41, No. 4 (2012), p490

around solidarities and factions of kinship, patronage, locality and community."[227]

Instead, it should be argued that it is Zubaida's willingness to countenance a greater amount of political and historical nuance whilst not losing sight of his own 'grand narrative', that is the key difference. Zubauda benefits from Hourani's more sophisticated, if still rooted in Ibn Khaldun, account of state formation, not to mention his upbringing in Iraq as a native Arabic speaker! If one takes these lessons from Zubaida's criticisms of Gellner and proceeds to consider the criticism from those intellectually close to Gellner, the problems with Gellner's Islamic exceptionalism become clearer still.

Michael Mann, a fellow 'Weberian', is also useful in helping us question the work of Gellner. From an admittedly Eurocentric point of view, Mann adjusts Gellner's Nationalism thesis, accepting the link between the two but questioning whether industrialisation really *requires* nationalism. For Mann, the spread of nationalism in Europe did require 'modernity' in a technological sense, but was "more dependent on specific inter-relations between a diversity of power relations, not merely economic ones."[228] In the European context this means that Great Power wars cannot be discounted as a driver of the development of Andersonian 'imagined communities' before the advent of mass literacy, as geopolitics began to have more of an impact upon the lives of common people (through both conscription and taxation).[229] After all, mass literacy has generally only existed in MENA nations in the past few decades, and has not yet been achieved in places such as Yemen, and rural South Asia. So what are the consequences of this in Muslim nations, where state building took place in a context of

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[227] Zubaida, 'The Arab Spring in Historical Perspective'
[228] Michael Mann, 'The Emergence of Modern European Nationalism', in Hall and Jarvie (eds.), *Transition to Modernity,* p138
[229] Ibid, p157. Mann's discussion of the emergence of Hapsburg nationalism could perhaps be applied to the Ottoman Empire, due to certain similarities in the composition of the two empires, particularly in the post-Tanzimat.

economic dependency as well as increasing state penetration of everyday life, not to mention mass conscription and military conflict? This is a question Gellner did not consider, perhaps because (apart from his analysis of the thought of Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionary redefinition of the Iranian state) the modern Islamists he focused upon ignore it themselves. As Andrew March put it: "the state as such thus represents an asteroid that crashed into the ecology of premodern Muslim society, for all that it remains un-theorized and un-criticized by most modern Islamist movements."[230] This is the key reason that Gellner is so reliant upon his - clearly flawed, if instructive – idea that the spread of literacy led to the diffusion of a high Islam, and that a puritanical fundamentalism that substituted for nationalism and obviated the need to develop a strong civil society. In doing so he came, whilst ignoring the diversity of the political reasons for why orthodox religion is encouraged, to the same conclusion as Zubaida that: "religion appears hegemonic" in the cultures and politics of many Muslim countries. British patronage of Mohammed Ali Jinnah or Anwar Sadat's patronage of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1970s Egypt can hardly be seen as inevitable; the accessible high culture of orthodox Islam may have helped facilitate the rise of these movements but it did not prevent their rival secular groups from achieving much in less favourable circumstances.

Zubaida's research, limited largely to the Arab world, Turkey and Iran, leads him to restrict his conclusion about "Islamic hegemony" to the Arab states. Moreover, returning to the argument made in chapter 3, it is insightful that a letter Gellner wrote to Zubaida regarding the 'Is there Such a Thing as a Muslim Society' essay takes as its main line of defence the fact that:

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[230] March, 'Political Islam: Theory', p25

the argument [in *Muslim Society*] *assumed a so to speak input and implications of the arid environment: at least to pastoralism, which in turn leads to rural populations which are difficult to govern. So the overall argument was not applicable to Muslim societies in tropical environments.*[231]

'Zones of Islam'?

Might it therefore be useful at this stage to posit a theory based upon 'zones of Islam', analogous to Gellner's later addition of "zones" to his model of Nationalism,[232] whilst also taking into account geopolitics and state formation in a dependent, post colonial context largely missing from *Muslim Society* and *Conditions of Liberty*. If we take Gellner's 'arid zone', described in Muslim Society as the region "stretching roughly from the Hindu Kush to the Atlantic and the Niger bend",[233] we can see that the Gellnerian Ibn Khaldun-inspired model has been applied by many with some success (and not without considerable opposition at times) by anthropologists such as Barth, Lindholm and Ahmed, from the Swat Valley to rural Libya:[234] all areas where the power of the state has been historically limited and a division between rural areas and the state is apparent.

By way of contrast, an examination of Malaysia and Indonesia from a Gellnerian perspective becomes highly problematic.[235] These countries are surely examples of states where clear, ethnically centred 'national culture', separate from an Islam originally introduced by trade rather than by conquest, and thus fitting around

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[231] Gellner to Zubaida, 14/07/95, Gellner Archives, LSE. The rest of the note read as follows: "The fact that the same tension between puritans and saint worshippers occurs in the tropics in a way weakens the argument, even if it extends the applicability of the model, in as far as the argument invoked factors which were absent in the tropics. Also, I do not entirely accept that the Ottoman Empire is an exception. On the surface, it does look like an exception. But under the surface, large areas were not effectively governed and the model did seem to apply. The Arabian peninsular, most of North Africa, Eastern Anatolia, even parts of what is now Iraq. Obviously, the model does not apply to the Balkans, Western Anatolia, the big river valleys and Tunisia."

[232] See Gellner, *Nationalism*.

[233] *Muslim Society,* p36

[234] See Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p303,

[235] Tristan Mabry, 'Modernization, nationalism and Islam: an examination of Ernest Gellner's writings on Muslim society with reference to Indonesia and Malaysia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* Vol. 21, No.1 (January 1998)

existing folk traditions and adapting to them, can be observed.[236] 'Islam' was of course powerless in the face of ethnic nationalism and Cold War realpolitik in the separation of West and East Pakistan. This is despite the fact that the Indian subcontinent contains by far the largest number of Muslims in the world, which is a striking fact when one considers how many studies of 'Islam' exclusively focus on its traditional 'heartland' in MENA. Another 'zone' of Islam could perhaps be the former Soviet states of Central Asia, where since the 1990s – despite the identification of Khaldunian-type social structures by Gellner's friend Anatoly Khazanov, the Soviet anthropologist – states have actively attempted to draw upon their particular Sufi traditions (often mixed with other, often Zoroastrian) practices in order to solidify a fragile 'national character'. These 'national religions' are often explicitly compared with the more orthodox strains of Islam, which many dissidents are attracted to.[237] Here Gellner's 'pendulum' may have not yet stopped swinging. However, given that the focus of this thesis on Gellner, Orientalism, and 'Middle Eastern studies', these other zones cannot be significantly expanded upon in this thesis.

If we are to consider the 'arid zone' in the 20th century, dominated in the main by 'fierce states', characterised by strong disciplinary power but lacking in Gramscian 'hegemonic power', instead reliant upon certain groups in the society,[238] Gellner's concept of "weak states...which both permit and oblige rural units to be strong" remains useful.[239] After 'modernity', the 'rural' *asabiyyahs* need not be so simply delineated in an era of instant communication and mass urbanisation, where networks of patronage

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[236] Ibid, pp78-85

[237] These ideas come from a talk given by Emily O'Dell at the American University of Beirut in February 2014, and subsequent communication between herself and I. See also O'Dell, 'The Teaching, Practice, and Political Role of Sufism in Dushanbe', *National Council for Eurasian and Eastern European Research (NCEEER) Working Papers Series,* 09/11/11, which describes the government of Tajikistan's active attempts to promote a locally flavoured form of Sufism as a counter 'extremism' measures.

[238] In the typology of Nazih Ayubi in *Overstating the Arab State*

[239] Gellner, *Muslim Society,* p25

and cross-class feelings of group loyalty are able to operate more amorphously. In these are areas, where hegemonic classes are scarce due to fragmented communal structures and where various articulated modes of production have failed to produce strong class consciousness,[240] the result is that individuals in the 20th century tended to be "removed from [their] primary social group but not [be] fully 'nuclearised'" by a state that has less of a "contractual" relationship with the citizen. In these circumstances there is significant room for either appeals to an imagined 'cultural nationalism', such as the pan-Arab Ba'athism which drew from the German romantic tradition,[241] or for a return to an imagined religious golden age.

However, an important distinction made with regard to this argument by Nazih Ayubi should be emphasised: these conditions are *specific,* rather than *exceptional.*[242] Gellner attributed Islam's apparent outlasting of Marxism in the Arab world in the 1990s to the fact that Islam has the advantage of generally leaving the economic sector well alone,[243] thus not disturbing the "sociological icebox" that traditional institutions had been placed in during indirect colonial domination and incomplete state formation processes.[244] However, the history of the 20th century shows that on many occasions Gellner got this the wrong way around. For instance, it was Islamic institutions' superior capacity to distribute economic welfare in Egypt that allowed organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood to benefit from the neglect shown by the quasi-socialist *state* towards the local economy and the everyday lives of the majority of Egyptian citizens, largely urbanised, but still in many senses Tawney's peasant, who is

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[240] (in the Althusserian 'Hull School' sense, also taken on by Ayubi with a more Khaldunian inflection)
[241] Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities,* p5, p53. Gellner also considered nationalism to be an "ideology of *Gesellschaft* speaking the language of *Gemeinschaft* (*Nationalism,* p74).
[242] Ayubi, p*xii*
[243] Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty,* p40
[244] Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas,* p19

economically: "up to his neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him."[245]

Nevertheless, even within the 'arid zone', are we here still talking about 'Islam's' importance in society as a 'high culture' in the same manner as, say, 'German' or 'Italian' high culture, or as something more, capable of both regulating behaviour predictably and transcending the states that these two European 'high cultures' eventually became tied to? It is this second step, arguably an epistemological break from the rest of Gellner's "universe", which has been most successfully debunked by the critiques of Asad and Zubaida. If we further condense the 'arid zone', to the Arab countries, Gellner's case appears stronger. However, this is surely less because of the contents of an essentialised Islam but more to do with the simple fact that the Arabic language and classical 'Islamic' culture are far more traditionally interlinked (a national 'high culture' based around a language being of course key to Gellner's theory of nationalism). This enables discourse to take the form of the following proclamation by Sufi Abu Talib, speaker of Sadat's 'People's Assembly' in 1982, which follows Gellner's logic: "Elevating Islamic law to the level of application and laying down its rules represents the return not only of the Egyptian people but the entire Arab and Islamic nation to its nature."[246] The proclamation, accompanying draft laws in its spirit several thousand articles long,[247]followed a wider pattern in the Arab world during the 1970-1990s of either secular governments or monarchies of nations such as Jordan and Iraq, 'Islamising' legal codes that must surely be seen as an attempt to outmaneuver public opinion against them rather than the pursuit of fundamentalist gains. This

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[245] Quoted famously in James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia,* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1976, p1
[246] Quoted in Shadi Hamid, *The Temptations of Power: Islamists and Illiberal Democracy in the Middle East (*London: Oxford University Press*),* 2014, p65
[247] Ibid, p66

'playing the Islamist card' demonstrates the viability of Islam as a 'high culture' unifying 'big idea' in the region, but seems to vindicate *Nations and Nationalism* rather than *Conditions of Liberty*.

Such governmental moves are first and foremost political. The employment of such rhetoric by Saddam Hussein, for example, only led to the rise of what Charles Tripp describes as "sectarian entrepreneurs" who exploit such discourse for further rounds of divide-and-rule politics. As Hamid points out, it is remarkable quite how much modern 'Islamist' political actors remain firmly within the boundaries of the nation state paradigm.[248] As chapter 4 argued, the blurred lines between his theories of nationalism and Islam were not considered sufficiently by Gellner in relation to Arab states either. When Gellner's Khaldunian ecology is considered alongside the histories of colonial state building in the region (best seen as a "de-coupling" of "state" and "nation" building)[249] are considered, the Arab states demonstrate how 'high Islam' was in fact something that originally complemented, rather than undermined, the foredoomed attempts of (pan-)Arab nationalists to turn states into cohesive nations. The era of industrialisation did not only see a mass, usually permanent, transition of Islamic practice from its 'folk' to 'high' forms, but also one in which Islamic institutions became *political* actors and Islamic discourse became a *political* ideology. In this context, the fact that "the modern Arab state was much more powerful than its Ottoman predecessor, but in crucial respects it lacked either modern democratic legitimacy or the moral authority of its historical antecedents"[250] is as crucial as the ideology itself in the practice of "fundamentalism", however. This explains why Zubaida himself still

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[248] Shadi Hamid, *The Roots of the Islamic State's Appeal*, 'The Atlantic', 31/10/14
[249] This idea comes from Jonathan Wrytzen, 'Colonial State-Building and the Negotiation of Arab and Berber Identity in Protectorate Morocco', *IJMES,* No. 43 (2011), pp227-249
[250] Malise Ruthven, 'Afterword', in Hourani *A History of Arab Peoples*, p638

described late 1980s Egypt as "swept by a wave of narrow religious moralism and chauvinistic paranoia"[251] despite his aversion to mixing religion with sociology.

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[251] Zubaida, *Beyond Islam,* p187

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

GELLNER THE ORIENTALIST?

This thesis began by examining the strong accusations of 'Orientalism' directed at Gellner by Edward Said. We have seen how many of Said's criticisms hit their mark, but does the over-arching charge stick? Few topics in any field of academic study have become as loaded as that of 'Orientalism' in "Middle Eastern Studies". When the very name of an academic department carries with it connotations of colonial epistemic violence, a scholar can hardly hope to get away without having a well thought answer to the question "what do you think of the work of Edward Said?" Yet we should not forget Orientalism, as part of the 'postcolonial school', goes beyond critiquing European depictions of West Asia and seems at times to question the very possibility of knowledge production of the cultural 'other'. Is the whole concept of area studies invalidated as a result? Given the established protocols of reflexivity within modern academia, surely the answer, if we want to avoid what Fred Halliday feared might be a situation in which "solidarity" can mean that "people don't want to know what's actually going on in Third World countries",[252] can be yes. An assessment of the works of Ernest Gellner can in fact be used as a defense of the whole project of 'area studies', which – though problematic in many ways – is clearly superior to philology or text-based orientalism. In attempting to do this, I will also conclude by making the claim that Gellner is not 'Orientalist' for three reasons: his work is often mis-characterised;

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[252] 'An Interview with Fred Halliday', *Open Democracy,* 29/04/2010

his work is never directly negative about Islam; and, at its best, Gellner's writing on Islam is consistent with his holistic view of the world.

Gellner's post-1990 discussion of Islam is as close as he comes to being a true 'orientalist'. He writes about an Islam divorced from more than a cursory account of political and economic context. This had led to Gellner being characterized as "a Weberian to the core, [for whom] the system of faith and ideas in Islam is...the key to Muslim social and political behavior."[253] This may be true of the Islam in Gellner's *Conditions of Liberty*, but Gellner's original analysis in *Muslim Society* – more closely derived from his fieldwork for *Saint of the Atlas* – appears to analyze Islam's "blueprint of a social order" more strongly in terms of how it relates to the situation around it; for instance through the observation that traditional Islam, with its visible and hierarchical institutions, inevitably becomes associated with colonial collaboration once a land has been colonized. 'Essences', such as the "finality" of Islamic revelation and the record of its rapid early expansion are said to "enormously strengthen the hand of those who have access to the delimited truth through literacy and who use it as a charter of legitimacy",[254] but it is never explicitly stated that these factors are enough on their own. Instead, the major problems of Gellner's theory become those more general problems with structural functionalism and the simplification of the socio-economic situation in Muslim countries by a scholar who admits himself that "my attention to historical work was less systematic."[255]

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[253] Mabry, 'Modernization, nationalism and Islam', p68. Mabry overstates his case somewhat here. In *Muslim Society* (p216), Gellner is clear on the importance of the modern state to explaining the "unhinging of the pendulum", himself criticising Eickelman for "A tendency to underestimate the impact of the modern (colonial and post-colonial) state in diffusing patronage relations at the expense of the previous segmentary tribal ones, of Ibn Khaldun's *asabiyya* if you wish."

[254] Gellner, *Muslim Society*, p2

[255] Ibid, pp23-24

Said's criticisms of Gellner as a specifically 'anti-Islam' scholar also seem to fall wide of the mark, although many of his methodological criticisms of him are important. Gellner's riff imagining an "Ibn Weber", writing in a world in which the Arabs had won at Poitiers, arguing that the European miracle could never have taken place without the "Kharejite ethic",[256] seems to suggest that he harbored no innate sense of European superiority, although the modern Muslim is said to be exceptional in terms of how his belief affects his actions. However, this "exceptionality" is due to the fact that Islam is able to conform to the rules of Gellner's universe, rather than due to it being an anachronism in defiance of it. This has led to Gellner's receiving approval from scholars who identify as Muslim. Take for instance this summary of Gellner, in the words of Manzoor Ul-Haq Siddiqi, a key player in Jinnah's *Tahrik-i-Pakistan,* which perhaps makes it unsurprising that he was a believer in the logic of Gellner's theories of nationalism and Islam:

> *Islam has its merits. It is acceptable to the modern world because of its Unitarian, puritanical denial of magic. At the same time it regulates life. It does provide for a zone, which makes it a workable modern religion. It combines firm guidance in an idiom compatible with modern backgrounds, with a respect for the type of social division that is essential for a viable society.*[257]

Indeed, Zubaida notes that a large part of the appeal of Gellner's thesis is that "it says good things about modern Muslims while at the same time keeping them apart and alien" from "social forms conducive to modernity and progress".[258] This is something that would appeal to Samuel Huntingdon as much as it would to Rashid al-Ghannouchi. Moreover, Gellner, revealing sympathy for the modernisation theory attacked by Turner in chapter 1, also expressed surprise at the failure of more Muslim majority states to

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[256] Ibid, p7
[257] 'Islam and Marxism: Failure and Success, a discussion of the work of Ernest Gellner, 1925-1995', Manzoor-ul-Haque Siddiqi,http://www.tolueislam.org/Bazm/Manzoor/LT_004.htm (Accessed 05/01/15)
[258] Zubaida, Beyond Islam, p76

develop rapidly, given supposed legalistic, 'rational' nature of Islam – undiminished by "widespread unearned oil wealth."[259] It could also be argued that Gellner is too generous to modern Islamists when it comes to his assumption that their ideas are all drawn from a long standing and essentially unchanging, puritan tradition. The intellectual interchange that figures such as al-Afghani and Rida experienced with European philosophers and institutions (such as the masonic lodge), are overlooked.[260] This is not to say that all Orientalists were negative about the Middle East and Muslims, something which is obviously not the case.[261] Gellner's attitude towards Islam should in fact not be seen as positive or negative, nor part of any specific political agenda (Talal Asad's misgivings about the viability of this notwithstanding). Gellner stated that the romanticization of the nomadic lifestyle should be left to Europeans that way inclined;[262] the Khaldunian world should instead be considered dispassionately, as purely serving a function. As Hall remarks to close his biography, Gellner's outlook on the world in general was austere, "but therein lies the attraction...Not much real comfort for our woes is on offer; the consolations peddled in the market are indeed worthless. What Gellner offered was something more mature and demanding: cold intellectual honesty."[263]

As the above suggests, the main reason why it is unfair to dismiss Gellner as an orientalist is that his views are an attempt to abstract a self-evidently complex

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[259] Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion,* p22
[260] See Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities,* pp43-46 and, more generally, Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1993
[261] See Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge,* or Albert Hourani's review of *Orientalism.*
[262] See Gellner, 'Trust, Cohesion, and the Social Order', in Gambetta, Diego (eds.) *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, (Oxford: University of Oxford Press), 2000, pp142-157
[263] Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p400. John Gray, in an otherwise critical review, thoroughly agreed with Hall's conclusion from his own memories of working with Gellner. For Gray, Gellner's only problematic moralising was his assumption "like many liberals" of modernization as "progress." Nevertheless, Hall finds Gellner's worldview ultimately hollow and teleological; he cuttingly sums up by saying: "in a paradox that this connoisseur of irony seems not to have noticed, Ernest Gellner's liberalism was a triumph of the will." (John Gray, 'The Free Floater', *The New Republic,* 27/01/2011).

phenomenon – the uneven spread of modernity in a non-European sociological context – so as to create a model with explanatory power. In doing so Gellner's work is often explicitly anti-Marxist in its analysis and conclusions, but it is hardly anti-historical materialist. Nor is his original idea of Islam separate from his universalist world-view, even if it is a challenge to it. As Mabry puts it, "as an avowed structural-functionalist, Gellner's model...is secondary to his understanding of modern or modernizing societies in general."[264] His attempts to fit Islam into his lifelong consideration of broader questions regarding the relationships between nation, state, culture, and language can be seen as "asking the right questions", even if mistakes are clearly made. Factors, acknowledged in Gellner's work on nations and nationalism, that underpin Islam's basis as a "high culture" that can "fuse with nationalism,"[265] such as the Arabic language, are disregarded. Ultimately, it comes down to a question of how far a scholar can apply a general model before its explanatory power becomes more of a hindrance than help. To be sure, as Wolfgang Kraus argued, too uncritical an acceptance of a model could become dangerous: "on the level of generality the [segmentary society] model had arrived at in [Gellner's] thinking, it has become immune to empirical refutation, despite his professed respect for empirical reality."[266]

But is it of any use? Bromley provides a prescient summary of the pitfalls of Gellner's work in the context of Max Weber:

> *the work of both Weber and Gellner appears to offer the basis for a materialist account of 'Islam' and 'modernity', but then fails to break with the ahistorical use of culturally specific concepts. To be sure, knowledge in the social sciences must proceed by way of the search for comparisons, what Runciman has called*

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[264] Mabry, 'Modernization, nationalism and Islam', p67
[265] Gellner, *Muslim Society,* p5
[266] Quoted in Hall, *Ernest Gellner,* p302

'suggestive contrast'. But if we are to avoid building into our explanations that which needs to be explained, or to move beyond historical description, such contrast should act as empirical controls on our generalizations, and not be employed as putatively explanatory concepts.[267]

Nevertheless, as has been seen in previous chapters, such models can still help our understanding of reality, particularly when they are more strictly focussed upon areas such as 'the arid zone'. It is no coincidence that scholars as diverse as Asad, Geertz, O'Leary, Mann, and Zubaida chose Gellner as a starting point for major works of theirs - his model serves them well in all cases as an 'ideal type' from which explanatory comparison could be drawn to the benefit of the reader. This alone was seemingly enough for Gellner, who stated that "as a good Popperian, I ask no more of theories."[268] However, it cannot be denied that a greater emphasis on his earlier restriction of his scope to 'the arid zone', or even 'the Middle East', would have still benefitted the theory significantly.[269] For Gellner was rarely 'wrong' in many of the specific claims he made in *Muslim Society,* but he extrapolated and generalised too far, most notably in *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion,* mistaking the result of a specific set of historical circumstances and idiosyncrasies as a general rule.

I would, however, argue that analysis within 'area studies', studies of 'Islam', so long as they are situated within a political context, can be worthwhile. After the damage done by politically motivated scholars such as Daniel Pipes, contemporary scholars seem once again willing to countenance a level of 'specificity' in their depictions of phenomena such as 'Political Islam' whilst avoiding descent into Orientalist tropes. An example is Shadi Hamid, who argues that 'political Islam' should be understood for

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[267] Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics,* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1994, p30
[268] Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', p43
[269] This was also the main gripe of Perry Anderson, who was largely sympathetic to Gellner's thesis as a broad model but complained about its over reliance on the Maghreb, that Anderson saw as having long been "the backward, Wild West of the Islamic world" (Hall and Jarvie (eds.), p203)

what it is – the meeting of public demand for greater application of 'high Islamic values' in a context in which Islam and Islamic law had only faded from public life only briefly during the relatively short heyday of Arab nationalism. Hamid is able to claim that: "the ascendance of Islamism seems less like an accident of particular economic and political circumstances and more a reflection of a widespread tendency towards religious observance and practice", something that was amplified by the sudden, unexpected advent of competitive democratic politics following the Arab revolutions in 2010.[270] Hamid's conclusions are more optimistic than Gellner's regarding the nature of civil society where Islam is the dominant religion (so long as the citizens of Arab elites and Western powers have the nerve to back "illiberal democracy" that does not immediately provide the results they desire), and are too rooted in political nuance to be read as a strong endorsement of Gellner's functionalism.

As March argues, well researched conclusions of this nature should be considered politically acceptable, so long as they do "not lead to a simplistic conclusion about the forms that political Islam might take in modernity or about the potential strengths of its ideological competitors."[271]After all, if we try to insist that Gellner's *Muslim Society* is wrong through a case study of, say, Saudi Arabia, by instead looking at the impact of oil rents, American backing, and specific political aims that have underpinned that state's encouragement of puritan Islam as a tool of social control domestically and geopolitical influence internationally, we cannot than deny that this Wahabbist ideals are more than mere "idle chiliasm", without any inbuilt appeal for those already practicing another more 'folk' form of Islam, given the 'success' of Saudi

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[270] Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of power: Islamists and illiberal democracy in a new Middle East.* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2014. See also Michael Cook, *Ancient religions, modern politics: The Islamic case in comparative perspective,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 2014 and the aforementioned 'region-specific' theory of Nazih Ayubi in *Overstating the Arab State.*
[271] March, *Political Islam,* p8

policy. Indeed, the importance of religion in general deserves to be more widely considered in social sciences. Gellner may have had a point when wrote that: "modernist Christian theology, with its elusive content, approaching zero, constitutes by far the best evidence for the secularising thesis, far more so than any overt 'rationalism'",[272] yet this trend of "secularization" has not prevented strong Christian revivalism in the United States – who can forget the symbolism of George Bush and Tony Blair praying together on the eve of the Iraq War – nor Hindu chauvinism in India, nor its Buddhist equivalent in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Said was correct to argue that Gellner appears simultaneously too quick to accept the 'secularisation thesis' in the case of Europe, and too quick to see an exception to it when he looks at Islam in the Middle East.

In summary, Gellner's was a vision that acknowledged the many variegated Muslim societies, yet willingly essentialized Islam based on a belief that enough of the key variables were the same, particularly with regard to social structure, in order to produce a coherent model in which "the same limited deck of cards has been dealt...the hands vary but the pack stays the same."[273] A major problem, however, is that Gellner ignores the ongoing political developments within the societies he discusses. Whilst he should be credited with predicting that religious feeling and widespread conservatism amongst the populations of Arab states would not be something that would fade away quickly as secular elites hoped in the 1950s glory days of Arab Nationalism, Gellner and his theories – which are clearly rooted in the theories that guided his 1950s fieldwork in North Africa – did not take into account the evolution of political Islam in this part of the world, nor what could be high levels of variance in the economic

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[272] Gellner, *Muslim Society*, p4
[273] Ibid, p99

situation. Gellner tends to omit analysis of economic relations that cannot always be satisfyingly described in terms of being 'feudal', 'tributary', or 'segmentary'.[274] Likewise, "fundamentalism" was a constant theme, but the myriad differences between the 'fundamentalism' of Sayid Qutb and that of Ben Badis – was not. Moreover, the continued importance of the actions of the political elites in the countries he studied (key to Hourani's 'notables' concept) were less systematically considered by Gellner who, by the 1990s, had his gaze focused upon the rapidly unfolding events in the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact nations. Gellner's final academic position was in his childhood home, Prague, at the newly established University of Central Europe. The institution, funded by George Soros and subject to nationalistic grandstanding between its Hungarian and Czech halves, was far from immune to the shock-therapy era nationalist revival in Central and Eastern Europe. Gellner's two posthumous books, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (1998) and *Nationalism* (1997), an attempt to restate his theory more elegantly and in light of the slaughter in former Yugoslavia, reflect this. Gellner died before he was able or willing to reassess his thoughts on Islam in the same manner. It is likely that Gellner, particularly interested in the work of Gilles Kepel before his death and planning a conference on Central and Eastern European Orientalism (which Said was planning to attend),[275] would have returned to his studies of Islam had he had the chance.

It has been argued that the 'exceptionalism' attributed to Islam by Gellner is somewhat more due to political factors than due to the 'essence' of the religion than

[274] Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830-1932*, (New York: State University of New York Press), 1995, p6
[275] Gellner to Patricia Thomas, 09/11/95, Gellner Archives, LSE

Gellner believed,[276] and that the later application of Gellner's *Muslim Society* to the entire 'Muslim world' prevented a satisfying reconciliation of the theory with Gellner's language and ethnicity based nationalism thesis, despite the many similarities between the two theories. In both cases Gellner, a philosopher first and foremost, given to arguing from first principles, remained "explicitly, brazenly, and unashamedly functionalist."[277] This is of course problematic given the near-impossibility of describing modern, knowledge-rich societies in purely functionalist terminology. A case could certainly be made for extending the 'Lucas Critique' of economics onto Gellner's theories: political and social actors are without doubt aware of their motivations (and perhaps even of Gellner's theory!) O'Leary is correct to state that Gellner's high-functionalist tendency is "forgivable in a social anthropologist, but it is less easily accepted by philosophers, political scientists, and other social scientists committed to causal explanations or methodological individualism."[278] Moreover, a general scepticism of Marxist approaches leads Gellner to over-focus upon the effects of exclusionary control of cultural capital rather than the effects of exclusionary control of propertied capital,[279] despite the openings in this direction in what was fundamentally a materialist theory, something later attempted by Ayubi in a specifically Arab context.

Gellner is right in that if we want to learn more about 'Muslim Society' we should not be afraid to try and study it, or, with caution, generalise about it. Gellner's attempts at doing this are highly suggestive and deserve to continue to be widely read, even if ultimately they are unable to adequately explain such complex phenomena as

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[276] As in Gellner's typical *Verwendung* of 'culture', where it is analyzed in "sociologistic, or psychosociologistic" terms. See *Jenseits des Nationalismus,* iKUS Lectures. Nr. 3+4, (Wien: Institut fur Kulturstudien) 1992, p31
[277] O'Leary, 'On the Nature of Nationalism: An Appraisial of Ernest Gellner's Writings on Nationalism', in Hall and Jarvie (eds.), p85
[278] Ibid
[279] Ibid, p83

'Islamic fundamentalism' and the lack of political pluralism in many Muslim societies without further elaboration.

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