Neo-Orientalism and the new barbarism thesis: Aspects of symbolic violence in the Middle East conflict(s)

Dag Tuastad

Neo-Orientalism and the new barbarism thesis: aspects of symbolic violence in the Middle East conflict(s)

DAG TUASTAD

ABSTRACT *Imaginaries of 'terrorism' and 'Arab mind' backwardness can be seen as closely connected: the latter explains the former as irrational—violence thus becomes the product of backward cultures. I regard this way of representing the violence of peripheralised peoples as a specific expression of symbolic violence: new barbarism. The 'new barbarism' thesis implies explanations of political violence that omit political and economic interests and contexts when describing violence, and presents violence as a result of traits embedded in local cultures. New barbarism and neo-Orientalist imaginaries may serve as hegemonic strategies when the production of enemy imaginaries contributes to legitimise continuous colonial economic or political projects, as can be witnessed in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.*

Symbolic power is power to construct a hegemonic version of reality.[1] The means of production in this sense is also the means to produce distorted images of dominated people. Hence, resistance also involves resistance to the imaginaries produced by the hegemonic power. Palestinians are victims of symbolic violence in two ways. The first is the 'terrorist' stigma, with which the occupying power has labelled Palestinian resistance organisations, if not the whole Palestinian population. The second way is that described by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, the imaginary of the 'Arab mind' by the Israeli writer Raphael Patai, or by Sainia Hamady's imaginary of the temperament and character of Arabs that Said quotes:

> The Arabs ... have demonstrated an incapacity for disciplined and abiding unity. … They show lack of coordination and harmony in organization and function, nor have they revealed an ability for cooperation. Any collective action for common benefit or mutual profit is alien to them … The Arab has little chance to develop his potentialities and define his position in society, holds little belief in progress and change, and finds salvation only in the hereafter.[2]

The production of such imaginaries dominated the writings of the early Israeli social science establishment, as has been documented by Elia Zureik.[3] The focus was on the Palestinian as an individual actor, on his/her psychology, culture,

Dag Tuastad is in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, Norway. Email: d.h.tuastad@sai.uio.no.

value system, temperament and so forth. Attachments to extended kinship systems, labelled 'familism', were interpreted as if Arabs were resistant to Western-style industrialisation and development, and by implication, to democratisation. Raphael Patai in *The Arab Mind* is a telling example of this approach.[4] Patai leans on psychological cultural explanations when he describes the stagnation and backwardness of Arabs, claiming that 'the problem' is rooted in mental configurations, as the title of his book suggests.[5] Arabs have a 'sense of marginality which never allows an Arab to detach himself from his traditional culture', Patai writes—the Arab has a 'proclivity to blaming others for his own shortcomings and failure. Since the West is the most readily available scapegoat, it must take most of the blame, with that goes inevitably most of the hate.'[6]

Alroy, building on Patai, claims that Palestinian resistance against Israel is based on 'basic personality traits peculiar to Arab peoples', which refers to the notion that 'the Arabs are a fiercely vengeful people'.[7]

This imaginary of Arabs has significant political implications. For example, Waschitz asserts that 'various social and communal groups' (the terms used when referring to Palestinians) lack the 'psychological readiness', the cultural qualities that are needed to be members of a democratic society.[8] This is the underlying message of these interpretations of Arab social organisation: Arabs or Palestinians do not have the 'civic' ethos necessary for political communities. The political implication is what Said has called the project of 'Orientalism': 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented'. This is the quotation from Marx that is stated on the opening page of *Orientalism*.[9]

A measure of the powerfulness of states is their ability to thwart attempts to unmask that power.[10] 'Terrorism' and 'familism' or 'Arab mind' labels equally serve as powerful inventions that legitimise continuous colonial economic or political projects. The imaginaries of 'terrorism' and 'Arab mind' backwardness are closely connected. The latter explains the former as irrational—violence thus becomes the product of a backward culture. I will argue that this way of explaining the violence of peripheralised people in conflict is a form of symbolic violence, a form that has been characterised as the 'new barbarism thesis'.[11]

The new barbarism thesis

What is meant by 'new barbarism'? Paul Richards has used the term to criticise presentations of political violence that omit political and economic interests and contexts when describing that violence, and present the violence as resulting from traits embedded in local cultures.[12] With the US President George Bush's description of a 'war on terrorism' following the September 11 attacks as a 'crusade', and the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's statement on 26 September 2001 that 'We should be conscious of the superiority of our civilization', the dubious success of this world view is indicated.[13]

How is the new barbarism thesis produced? Zygmunt Bauman has argued that in modern societies racist imaginaries need professional organisation, leadership—and experts.[14] These are provided by the moral authority that state apparatuses need to rest their claims on: science. Thus, opinions that have a scientific validity, but at the same time a language that allows them to reach

broader audiences, as well as a language understandable to politicians, are very applicable. Who are the 'scientific' alibis for new barbarism? Richards has pointed out the US writer Robert Kaplan as a main proponent.[15] I will deal in some length with a recent work by Kaplan, and then try to indicate how his thoughts resonate with neo-Orientalist sentiments in American academe.

'The coming of anarchy'

Robert Kaplan's books have had a high degree of political influence on leaders of the US state apparatus. Kaplan is a lecturer for the US military and has been a consultant to the US Army's Special Forces Regiment. His book *Balkan Ghosts* was a bestseller[16] and the idea of the 'ancient hatred' of the Balkans had as a consequence that the US President Bill Clinton had 'a change of heart' after reading it in 1993.[17]

Kaplan's latest work, *The Coming of Anarchy*, had a deep impact on the US administration.[18] When the article the book is based on first appeared, top officials of the United Nations called a confidential meeting to discuss its implications, and the Under-Secretary of the US Department of Global Affairs faxed it to every US embassy in the world.[19] In the book, the threats of new barbarism are explicitly outlined.

'For too long we have been prisoners of social–social theory' Kaplan writes, criticising the idea that social and political changes have social causes.[20] In *The Coming of Anarchy* conflicts are presented as the struggle between primitivism and civilisations, between the educated few and the uneducated but newly empowered millions whose borders are not those of national states, but 'those of culture and tribe'.[21] The masses of the forests are the barbarians invading the urban areas with tribal violence, a violence that only modernity and 'civil', cultural evolution could have prevented:

> In places where the Western Enlightenment has not penetrated and where there has always been mass poverty, people find liberation in violence … Physical aggression is part of being human. Only when people attain a certain economic, educational, and cultural standard is this trait tranquillized.[22]

In the Pentagon, Kaplan writes, he is advised to read the Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld's *The Transformation of War*. Van Creveld foresees a dis-integration of the nation-state in the Third World and a resurgence of 'tribalistic identity'.[23] In such a state, war becomes a permanent fashion as 'fighting in many ways is not a means but an end' for these newly resurgent tribes.[24] Hence, the distinction between war and crime will break down, as the war will be 'more in common with the struggles of primitive tribes than with large-scale conventional war.'[25]

The quotation indicates the kinship between Kaplan and Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis.[26] Huntington has been an important figure in US foreign policy since the Vietnam War, and has been a member of the National Security Council. The main adversary in the tribal global wars in Huntington's narrative—'civilizations are the ultimate human tribes, and the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on a global scale'—was the Muslim civilisation.[27] The USA had

classified seven countries as 'terrorist states', five of which were Muslim (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sudan).[28] Further:

> During the fifteen years between 1980 and 1995, according to the US Defence Department, the United States engaged in seventeen military operations in the Middle East, all of them directed against Muslims. No comparable pattern of US military operations occurred against the people of any other civilization.[29]

This led Huntington to ask why it was that *Muslims* were involved in far more inter-group violence than people of other civilisations, and how one could explain 'the demonstrated contemporary Muslim propensity to group violence'. In classic Orientalist fashion Huntington found his answers in features innately embedded in the Muslim religion, including the proposition that Islam is a religion of the sword and a religion that glorifies military virtues, and in what Huntington calls 'The indigestibility of Muslims'.[30]

These ideas resonate very well with the neo-Orientalist trend in American academe.

Neo-Orientalism and new barbarism

Daniel Pipes, a chief proponent of what has been labelled neo-Orientalism, mirrors Huntington in an informative way: 'Muslim countries have the most terrorists and the fewest democracies in the world'.[31]

Since it is taken as axiomatic that Middle Eastern societies are resistant to democratisation, they can, according to the standard tenet of Orientalism, be explained by idiosyncratic cultural factors. Two incompatible ethoses are seen as colliding in the Middle East: the incompatibility between an anarchistic ethos of a segmentary kinship-based social organisation, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the universalism and duty of submission of Islam. The legitimacy of the politics of the nation-state is hence understood as too particularistic for loyalty to the divine, and, alternatively, seen as undermined by the particularism of kinship-based ideological localism. The Arabs are thus on the one side too particularistic, and on the other side not particularistic enough. This represents a continuity from Orientalist to neo-Orientalist thought, whereby Middle Eastern society is seen as either too weak or … too strong.

Classical Orientalism argued that Orthodox Islam and weak societies promoted political quietism. Islamic 'submission' favoured fatalism, a lack of critique, despotism.[32] Hence Islamic communities did not develop the civil society that was seen as the foundation of a sound political evolution and modernisation. This proposition could not account for a 'weak' society conquering state power through the Iranian revolution in 1979. After the revolution, renewed and reformed Orientalists soon reversed the model. An influential thesis was delivered by Patrica Crone, who has been described as the most persuasive and rigorous of the neo-Orientalists.[33] According to Crone, Islamic civilisation was unique in the way that it refused to legitimise political authority. Islamic law, *sharia*, was codified under the great Arab Islamic Abbasid empire in the eighth century, but the *ulama* (the Islamic jurists) were men of tribal origin, and the law they drafted reflected their 'profound hostility to settled states'.[34] 'The *ulama*

defined God's law as *haqq al-'arab*, the law of the Arabs, just as they identified his language as the *lisan al-'arab*, the normative language of the Bedouins, the consensus being that where God had not explicitly modified tribal law, he had endorsed it.'[35] This resulted in a 'tribal vision of sacred politics' where kings were rejected and 'God's community was envisaged as an egalitarian one unencumbered by profane or religious structures of power below the caliph, who was himself assigned the duty of minimal government'.[36] These ideas have been translated into the contemporary political landscape by other neo-Orientalists like Daniel Pipes and John Hall, the former with close ties to the Republican Party in USA, and a consultant to the US State Department.[37] Their argument implies that the political norms of the *sharia* law codes are impossible for any regime to live up to, and that this ensures that any form of government will sooner or later be seen as illegitimate by Muslims. That society withholds its support from political authority not only makes the state unstable but also obstructs the development of a true civil society, as no 'organic state' has been able to emerge in the Arab world.[38] A contract between state and society can never be reached in such a political environment, and the lack of such co-operation is seen as implying a lack of the foundations for development.[39]

A critical reading of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist sources would question the way the influences of colonialism and imperialism are ignored, as well as the reductionism and essentialism of having identified an anti-modern core in the eighth century that doomed any further political development of the world's fastest growing religion. The neo-Orientalist way of explaining polity and political organisation culturally resonates very well within current trends in US universities, and these kinds of questions are rarely asked. Rather, the basic tenets of neo-Orientalism are universalised, as in the anthology of leading US social scientists with the telling name *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. In the book indigenous cultural factors are treated as independent variables that explain levels of political alignments and antagonisms, modernisation, political democratisation, military strategy and the behaviour of ethnic groups.[40] In an article in the anthology, with the telling title 'Does Africa need a cultural adjustment program?', the former World Bank advisor Daniel Etounga-Manguelle—accused of being a 'disgruntled insider' delivering indigenous testimony by the anthropologist Richard Shweder—asks:

> Was African totalitarianism born with independence? Of course not! It was already there, inscribed in the foundations of our tribal cultures. Authoritarianism permeates our families, our villages, our schools, our churches. It is for us a way of life. Thus, faced with such a powerful, immovable culture, what can we do to change Africa's destiny? We are condemned either to change or to perish.[41]

Well, if faced with an immovable culture the prospects for change are not high. Although the articles address the cultural backwardness rather than violence in the Third World, the basic ideological assumptions of the anthology, and of neo-Orientalism, are consistent with the tenets of new barbarism, where violence is seen as deeply rooted in local culture, which means that political and economic situations and structures are irrelevant. It is not in these that the causes of the violence, the threat against civilisation are located. Be it colonialism, ethnic

595

cleansing or occupation—political phenomena and structures are subordinated as explanations by Kaplan and Huntington, just as they are by neo-Orientalists. New barbarism theorists understand economic crisis as a natural Malthusian catastrophe, and political violence as a resurgence of tribalism, as cultural backwardness among peripheral, non-civilised groups.[42] The violence is irrational and cannot be stopped by means of diplomacy or conciliation.[43]

This again has another significant political implication: it makes the business of 'blaming the victims' a relevant policy for state apparatuses involved in colonial economic or political projects. In the same way that Orientalism once served the policies of colonial powers, the new barbarism thus serves the political interests of people who are aware of the need to produce images of a conflict as one between civilisation and barbarism.

A conflict such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is hence also a symbolic war. In *The Coming of Anarchy*, Kaplan writes that the 'violent youth culture of the Gaza shantytowns may be indicative of the coming era'.[44] Israel, in Kaplan's words, represents a 'fortress amid a vast and volatile realm of Islam'.[45] 'Pessimism can be a more efficient line of defense against genocide than any human rights policy—as many Israelis, for example, intuitively grasp', Kaplan maintains.[46] If nothing else, the political relevance of new barbarism can be observed in the dynamics of symbolic violence involved in this conflict.

'A fortress amid a vast and volatile Islam'

More than 350 foreign news agencies are permanently accredited to Israel. During the first *intifada*, an additional 700 journalists came to the country, which meant that for every 6000 Israelis there was a foreign reporter, a proportion which would have been similar to 36 000 reporters arriving in the USA.[47] Why does the Israel–Palestinian conflict get so much more media coverage than other violent conflicts? I think one of the underlying causes of the attention Israel receives is embedded in the quotations from Kaplan above: Israel constitutes a 'line of defense', 'a fortress in the middle of Islam'.

Since the state was founded, Israel has insisted on representing Judeo-Christian morality, ie, on symbolising Western civilisation. The former Israeli Foreign Minster, Abba Eban, has stated: 'We knew we had to appeal to the Christian world that knew and loved the Biblical history, and we used it for what it was worth, plus a little extra'.[48] The little extra involves the distribution of around 100 freelance articles about various aspects of Israeli life, technology and medicine by the Israeli Foreign Ministry every year. The articles are sent to some 2000 publications in the USA. In addition the Ministry produces radio programmes for the Israeli broadcasting company that are regularly sent to 550 radio stations in the USA, and to 300 stations in Latin America and Europe. A similar production is distributed through local TV stations in the USA, frequently transmitted as news on the stations without the source being named, according to Thomas Friedman.[49] In addition Israel pays between 400 and 500 influential people to lobby for it: journalists, priests, union leaders, mayors, local politicians and academics, who are invited to come to Israel all expenses paid and who return home and write about their experiences. In the USA, Friedman writes, Israel's

embassy and nine consulates supervise what is written in newspapers or published on TV and, if anything 'inimical' occurs, the officials schedule a meeting with the editors of the news agencies and encourage local activists to write letters or denials.[50] During the Israeli incursions into Jenin in 2002, 1000 people suspended their subscription to the *Los Angeles Times*, claiming that its coverage was biased towards the Palestinians.[51]

Friedman implies that a consequence of this Israeli information policy is a lack of knowledge of the basic facts of the conflict. During Israel's siege of Beirut in 1982 the foreign editor of the *Dallas Times Herald* sent a telex to the paper's correspondent: 'Why can't the Palestinians go back to Palestine? Is there a problem with their papers or something?' The correspondent told Friedman that he assumed that the ignorance of the foreign editor—note *foreign* editor—'simply mirrored that of the American people'.[52]

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, the 'Arab mind' narrative of the Palestinians has eventually been replaced by another imaginary, the 'terrorist' stigma, with which the Palestinian resistance organisations, if not the whole Palestinian population, has been labelled. It is this imaginary, of Arafat as Bin Laden (according to the Israeli Prime Minister after September 11) that is currently being produced. And it is an imaginary which frequently takes an explicitly racist form, as when the former Israeli Minister of Health, Nissim Dahan, called Muslim worshippers in the Aqsa Mosque 'foxes who evolved gradually to become snakes and scorpions'.[53]

As long as a focus is maintained on the 'barbarism' of their adversary the Israeli state representatives can diverge from questions concerning refugee return or giving up conquered territories. Hence racist imagery and 'terrorist' or 'Arab mind' labels serve as powerful images of a non-civilised Other. The new barbarism imaginary thus legitimises a continuous colonial economic and political project.

Conclusion

John Gledhill has argued that American national ideology embeds deeply contradictory elements: on one side an extremely individualistic ethic, on the other side racist explanations of the causes of social inequality.[54] The contradiction is kept alive through the separation of centre and periphery while the crisis of the centre is projected onto the periphery. Thus violent conflicts are 'cognized through homologous metaphors of order versus disorder and civilization versus barbarism which becomes fatefully ingrained into the consciousness of ordinary Anglo-Americans'.[55]

The 'new barbarism thesis' should be understood within this framework. To see 'pathologies' among peripheral people can be a consequences of hegemonic strategies. As Gledhill contends, in the post-Communist enemy era it has been essential that a distinct separation is maintained in political discourse from the *non-systemic* problems of an irrational periphery, separated from the rational centre.[56]

This point has not lost relevance after 11 September 2001. Just as the 'clash of civilizations' perspective has been strengthened, so a focus on the modern Western state versus peripheralised peoples has been made to appear relevant.

Notes

The article is based on a paper presented at the conference 'Explorations of the state', University of Oslo, October 25–26 2002.

1.   Pierre Bourdieu, *Symbolsk makt*, Oslo: Pax forlag, 1996, pp 40–42.
2.   Quoted in Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1977, pp 309–310.
3.   Elia Zureik, *The Palestinians in Israel*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
4.   Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, New York: Scribner, 1973.
5.   Zureik, *The Palestinians in Israel*, p 84.
6.   *Ibid*, pp 84–85.
7.   Alroy, quoted in *ibid*, p 87.
8.   *Ibid*, p 92.
9.   Said, *Orientalism*, p xiii.
10. Carole Nagengast, 'Violence, terror, and the crisis of the state', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, 1994, pp 109–136.
11. John Gledhill, *Power and its Disguises. Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*, London: Pluto Press, 2000, p 167.
12. Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*, Oxford: James Currey, 1996.
13. *Guardian Unlimited*, 27 September 2001.
14. Zygmunt Bauman, *Moderniteten og Holocaust*, Oslo: Vidarforlaget A/S, 1997.
15. Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*.
16. Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1993.
17. In 1993 the USA considered invading Bosnia. It could no longer be denied that the cause of the war in Bosnia was the aggressive, warring Serb separatism, where Serb militias were systematically carrying out attacks on the Bosnian Muslim population. But then Bill Clinton got Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* for Christmas, according to Richard Holbrooke in his memoirs on the peace negotiations after the civil war. *Balkan Ghosts* is an archetype of a primordial explanation of ethnic violence. The reader gets the impression of unchangeable, eternal ethnic violence between ethnic groups of the region. In the Balkans, Kaplan writes, 'men have been isolated by poverty and ethnic rivalry, dooming them to hate'. After reading Kaplan's book Clinton concluded that it was not possible to do anything in the area. The spiral of violence was ineluctable, once in you would never get out. For that reason the plans on intervention were put on hold. Two years later splint grenades exploded in the marketplace of Tuzla and in a besieged Sarajevo, killing dozens of innocent civilians. With the TV spotlights on, US opinion now demanded action. NATO planes then bombed Serb held positions and, despite all warnings, the Serb positions fell like a house of cards and the Bosnian Serbs capitulated. Soon peace negotiations were held, and although until recently Bosnia has looked more like an international protectorate than an independent democratic state, the people have lived in peace. The arguments against intervention had been proven wrong. The same could have been achieved if the intervention had come in 1993. Since Clinton received Kaplan's book, 200 000 people had been killed, and half the Bosnian population had become refugees or internally displaced persons.
18. Robert Kaplan, *The Coming of Anarchy*, New York: Random House, 2000.
19. Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*, p xiv.
20. Kaplan, *The Coming of Anarchy*, p 24.
21. *Ibid*, p 26.
22. *Ibid*, p 45.
23. *Ibid*, p 47.
24. *Ibid*, p 44.
25. *Ibid*, p 48.
26. Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
27. *Ibid*, p 207.
28. *Ibid*, p 216.
29. *Ibid*, p 217.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Quoted in Yahia Sadowski, 'The new Orientalism and the democracy debate', *Middle East Report*, 183, 1993, p 14.
32. *Ibid*, p 16.
33. *Ibid*, p 17.
34. Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
35. Crone, quoted in Sadowski, 'The new Orientalism and the democracy debate', p 17.

36 Crone, quoted in *ibid*.
37 Sadowski, 'The new Orientalism and the democracy debate', p 18.
38 *Ibid*, p 18.
39 *Ibid*, p 19.
40 Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p xiv.
41 *Ibid*, p 75.
42 Gledhill, *Power and its Disguises*, p 167.
43 *Ibid*.
44 Kaplan, *The Coming of Anarchy*, p 43.
45 *Ibid*, p 42.
46 *Ibid*, pp 103–104.
47 Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1993, p 429.
48 *Ibid*, p 441.
49 *Ibid*, p 444.
50 *Ibid*.
51 *Ha'aretz*, 15 April 2002.
52 Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, p 446.
53 *Jerusalem Post*, 27 September 2002.
54 Gledhill, *Power and its Disguises*, p 170.
55 *Ibid*.
56 *Ibid*, p 167.

New Political Science

New Political Science is the journal of the Caucus for a New Political Science (CNPS), an Organized Section of the American Political Science Association, and serves as an organ for its goals and interests. The CNPS was formed in order to help make the study of politics relevant to the struggle for a better world.

The focus of the journal is to develop analyses which reflect a commitment to progressive social change and which treat topics that are within exploratory phases of development in political science. It insists on the broadest possible definition of 'politics', and holds that political and cultural development cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Each quarterly issue contains a combination of peer-reviewed scholarly articles and book reviews. Both thematic and non-thematic issues are published.

This journal is also available online.
Please connect to www.tandf.co.uk/online.html for further information.

To request a sample copy please visit: **www.tandf.co.uk/journals**

ORDER FORM   cnps

PLEASE COMPLETE IN BLOCK CAPITALS AND RETURN TO THE ADDRESS BELOW

Please invoice me at the ❑ **institutional rate** ❑ **personal rate**

Name _____

Address _____

  _____

  _____

E-mail _____