Demonizing the Other: Travels, Texts, Orientalism and the Pre-colonial South Asia, and Moving Beyond: Towards a New Turn in Sociology

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Abstract: One of the central questions that animated many of the early sociologists and historians of South Asia was why pre-colonial South Asia had lagged behind, remained stagnant and failed to develop capitalism (Karim, 1956 for a summary of the debate). They were all influenced by the seminal works of two of the central figures classical social theory -- Marx and Weber and later by that of Karl Wittfogel. Although Karl Marx's theory of Asiatic Mode of Production became a major focus of controversy rejected by some and accepted with modification by others, yet the debate has continued to haunt both history and social sciences. Since 1978, Edward Said's paradigm of Orientalism has completely transformed this debate. The objective of this paper is threefold. It revisits Said's concept of Orientalism and deploys it to examine three of the core theoretical perspectives on the Oriental society—Marx’s notion of Asiatic Society, Weber's analysis of Indian culture and social structure and Karl Wittfogel’s theory of Oriental despotism. The paper examines these theories against the currently available historical data to disprove these theories. The paper suggests that evolutionary paradigm of social change which has informed the study of social change since the Enlightenment or the concept of European exceptionalism that Weber advocated are too narrow to study the dynamics of social change which includes both rise and fall of civilizations within an increasingly global context. The looming crisis in sociology that Gouldner predicted has become true and sociology has merely lapsed into the study of here and now. Said fails to account for what led to the formation of Orientalist discourses. The world-system theory of Wallerstein has provided narratives of European transition to capitalism. It does not provide causes of transition. Recent scholarship in history on divergence only changes the time—scale of divergence. It falls into the same trap of European exceptionalism. This paper argues that the emerging sub-discipline of societal collapse provide us with an opportunity to move beyond the prevailing crisis in sociology. The paper argues for a new perspective in sociology that combines Orientalism with cyclical theory of social change advocated by Khaldûn and Paul Kennedy, world-system theory and recent studies on societal collapse to account for the divergence. The paper outlines a four-phase model of the rise and fall of polities and sets it in the context of the collapse of the Mughal Empire and rise of the West.

Keywords: Orientalism, World-system Theory, South Asia, Mughal Empire, divergence, societal collapse, cyclical theory, social change, crisis

* An earlier and shorter version of this paper was presented at the East-West University, Dhaka. I am thankful to Professor Fakrul Alam, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the university, Professor Mokerrom Hossain of Virginia State University and Professor Jahir Ahmed of Jahangirnagar University for their comments.

I am deeply indebted to my long-time friend and colleague Professor Nazrul Islam for meticulous review of the paper and insightful comments for revising the paper. This paper forms the first part of a series four essays.

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“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

- Walter Benjamin, The Threepenny Opera.

Introduction

Since the colonial period, historians and social scientists have debated over the question why South Asia in spite of its fabled wealth and vast network of international trade failed to develop capitalism on its own before being colonized. Over the last two centuries, three of the most eminent social scientists have provided theoretical perspectives to account for why capitalism failed to blossom in the inhospitable terrain of pre-colonial South Asia. The most dazzling and provocative answer was provided by Karl Marx through his views on the Asiatic Society and Asiatic Mode of Production. Max Weber fleshed out a broader and opposite theoretical analysis that gave primacy to culture and embedded social institutions agreeing with Marx on many areas. Karl Wittfogel developed the idea of hydraulic society and Oriental despotism as an expression of total power to account for the failure of the indigenous merchant class to grow and transform into a capitalist class. In spite of long running criticism of these theories, they represent a vast and enduring archive of knowledge that underlies most of the views on the Orient in humanities and social sciences. This is particularly true for sociology.

Said’s seminal work entitled Orientalism (1985) has provided a powerful critical tool to examine these core theories of Oriental society. Although Said himself has referred to Marx more often and to Weber only a couple of times and a large critical literature has emerged against each of these theories, there has been hardly any comparative analysis of these three theories from the prism of Orientalism. Orientalism, however, provides a metacritical perspective. It maps out the growth of a particular form of ideology in the West that justified colonialism and imperialism, it does not explain why the Orient failed to develop capitalism on its own or test it against empirical evidence. This paper aims at revisiting Orientalism on the occasion of 40th anniversary of the publication of Said’s book and moving beyond it to provide a sociologically grounded analysis of why capitalism failed to develop in this region taking the fall of the Mughal Empire as an example. It shows how Marx, Weber and Wittfogel in their different ways produced the most powerful expression of Orientalism that continues to dominate sociology and anthropology in South Asia. The paper argues that although Orientalism provides a powerful analytical tool, it is time to leave Said behind to construct a more adequate theory of uneven pattern of the dynamics of social change in the context of South Asia. The study of social stagnation and social change demands a more complex theory that combines theory with empirical evidence and not mere textual analysis. Thus the key objective of the paper is to refute the views of Marx, Weber and Wittfogel through most of the available evidence and relate it to the emerging field of societal collapse to account for the failure of pre-colonial South Asia to develop capitalism.

Orientalism
What is now a modern classic, Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* (1978; 1985), first published in 1978 now celebrates 40th year of publication. Although his book has spawned a bitter controversy and vast literature over the last four decades, he is now almost forgotten. Yet he is more relevant today in this post-humanist age and in the context of global reconfiguration of power and ideology.

**Meaning of Orientalism**

Said developed a metaparadigm or a particular of way of looking at the vision of the Orient that the Western texts animated through an examination of a selected number of literary works, travel accounts and related texts. Borrowing from Foucault the coupling of knowledge and power, he argued that these texts and the broader field of the studies on the Orient embodied a regime of truth that constructed the vast terrain of the Orient as peopled by the infantile other sanctioning enduring domination over them.

The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial style” (Said, 1985:30).

Said provided three inter-related meanings of the term. First, Orientalism refers to an academic discipline consisting of intellectuals and scholars who write about and study the Orient. Secondly, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”. Said argues that in spite of all variations, the Orient to the Western mind had an ontological stability that endures over time. Orientalism is “… a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having autonomy over the Orient” (Said, 1985:3). It was not only a discourse. It was for him “…valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient…. (Said, 1985:6). The Western culture manifested rationality and order. The Oriental culture was its polar opposite displaying irrationality and mysticism. The Western people were free and constituted a superior race by developing its full faculties. In contrast, Orientals were child-like and sensuous and were destined to be a subject race. Thirdly, from the late 18th century the discourse of orientalism became institutionalized in the form of corporate institutions specifically engaged in the study of the Orient. These three definitions are inter-connected and represent structures, process and a particular world-views and increasingly over time an institutional regime.

Said does recognize that there are a number of qualifications to the idea of orientalism. First, it is not just mere idea. Secondly, it is a relationship of power and hegemony articulated through an elaborate and crystalized discourse. Thirdly, oriental discourses are not mere ‘tissue of lies’ (Said, 1985:5). They manifest both reality and a mode of ideology that conceals it.

Said also makes distinction between latent and manifest orientalism. Orientalism also varies with each orientalist. Thus orientalism is not a unified body of texts. Orientalism manifests itself in different forms. It is expressed through travel accounts, literary works, linguistic analysis, and regional studies and it also varies over 19th and 20th centuries. “There was (and is) a linguistic Orient, Freudian Orient, a Spenglerian Orient, a Darwinian Orient, a racist Orient--and so on.”(Said, 1985: 22)
Orientalism, discourse and power and the other

Said’s unique importance lies in the fact that he transferred and deployed the Foucauldian concepts of knowledge, discourse and power from the realm of the madness in the West to a vast world of the infantile Orientals and consequently to billions of people living in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It was a particular way of analyzing texts that he later called contrapuntal technique (Said, 1993). Said was not concerned with the whole corpus of the oriental knowledge, he was merely unmasking its pervading and silent underworld that was unable to talk back and represent itself. Orientalism manifested the mission of the West to construct the invisible continent of humanity as traces of its own past or its abominable other. The West had reached its pinnacle of glory leaving all others in an ‘area of darkness’ or it was an exceptional civilization of superior race with the mandate to rule over the world. Said mainly focused on the works of Silvestre de Stracy and Ernest Renan to trace the doctrine of Orientalism as “primitive accumulation” in the symbolic sphere that both triggered and justified colonialism and imperialism (Hart, 2004). It led to the growth of an ‘imaginative geography’ of strange and bizarre peoples and cultures of distant lands that Europe had begun to explore through its sciences constituting and reconstituting it in a variety of demonic forms.

Said spells out the development of Orientalism over three phases. The first phase spans a long history from antiquity to 18th century. The second phase starts from Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt which triggers objectification and visualization of the Orient by three of the major colonial powers – England, France and Germany. “Quite literally, the occupation gave birth to the entire modern experience of the Orient as interpreted from within the universe of discourse founded by Napoleon in Egypt” (Said, 1985:87). It was in this phase that Orientalism begun to be institutionalized in bodies like Asiatic Society, and courses of studies. In its final phase, from the Post-World II period, it expanded and crystallized as area studies in universities and specialized research centres, mainly in the USA.

Criticism

Said has faced criticism from both the left and the right of the contemporary intellectual landscape. Mustapha Marrouchi (2013) has observed that Said is now a forgotten name and Saidism is a thing of the past. One of fiercest critiques of Said from the right is Bernard Lewis, 1976). Lewis found that Said used the term in a restricted area – the Middle East and not even the whole of it, but only the Arab region. His dating of the emergence of Orientalism in modern times is also wrong. Orientalism became an established area of study in the 17th century. His selection of authors and texts were arbitrary and prejudiced. He also used texts that was not part of Oriental scholarship, even doctored their views and resorted to wrong translations in order to prove his views. His writings, in addition, contain many factual inaccuracies. “Apart from embodying a hitherto unknown theory of knowledge, Mr. Said expresses contempt for modern Arab scholarly achievement worse than anything that he attributes to his demonic
Clifford (2013) criticizes Said for inconsistency of his epistemic stand between Foucault’s discursive anti-humanism that merely plays with signifiers and his strong commitment to humanism. He also hovers between a representational Orient and a real Orient expressing an epistemological ambivalence. Said has also been accused of using selected authors and texts and emphasizing on works which was marginal to the Orientalist archive. European literature and thought had also concepts and ideas which were universalizing, self-reflexive and self-critical (Varisco, 2008; Warraq, 2007). Trautman (1997) has found that Said’s theory of Orientalism cannot be used for analyzing the case of colonial South Asia. Orientalism in India manifested both ‘Indomania’ and ‘Indophobia’ over time. Oriental discourses are not invariable.

Said has faced similar and harsh criticism from Marxist scholars. Ahmed (1992) has criticized him severely for the inadequacies of Orientalism as advanced by Said. He argues that Said has deployed three separate and contradictory definitions of Orientalism. Said firstly uses it as an academic area of research, secondly as a style of thought and thirdly as a corporate institution for studying the Orient. In addition, he accuses Said of borrowing from “…many kinds of conceptual frameworks and intellectual disciplines that one is simply bewildered” (Ahmed, 1992 182). What is more disturbing for Ahmed is his failure to account for the origin of Orientalism. Why should the West interiorize the Orient? Said uses both materialist accounts of colonialism and imperialism and also psychological categories. Thus his explanations remain disjointed. In the same vein, Sardar (2002) has found seven different meanings of the term Orientalism in Said’s work. “Using these all-embracing but contradictory definitions…” he accounts for an intellectual terrain “…from antiquity to contemporary times” (Sardar, 2002:68). Moreover Said did not acknowledge his debt to his predecessors. “On purely scholarly terms, Said’s contribution is not very significant when compared to Hodgson, Daniel and Southern on the one hand, and Tibawi, Alatas and Djait on the other” (Sardar, 2002:67). Habib (2005) has also criticized him harshly. He chastises Said for excluding significant and verifiable areas of Orientalist knowledge developed through synergic interaction between Western and Oriental scholars. His use of Marx was both unethical and irresponsible which tend to undermine his creditability (Habib, 2005).

Every new paradigm or metaparadigm generates a stream of criticism. What all his critics from the right or the left miss is that Said was not concerned with the whole corpus of Orientalist knowledge. What he did was a new and revolutionary way of looking at and reading of selected texts in true Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1970). Orientalism did not only manifest a body of knowledge, but also a universe of power. His novelty lies in his transposing of Foucault to a realm where he is most relevant. Neither colonialism nor imperialism is a display of firepower, but also a play of interlocking and dense body of metaphors that inspire and legitimate Western domination of the world. Texts are no less powerful than arms in preserving and perpetuating this domination. As one recent author observes:

…the critique of Said’s phenomenology does little to dim the luster of his analysis. As Derrida’s critique is merely a footnote to Foucault’s great achievement, so are similar critiques of Said’s
achievement. Despite its flaws, and much like Histoire de la folie, Orientalism remains a powerful analysis of a particular configuration of power/knowledge” (Hart, 2004:75).

Said, in fact, provides us with an extremely powerful tool for textual analysis perhaps no less significant than Derrida and Roland Barthes. It is both a technique of analysis and trope for resistance to Western hegemony. It has registered further elaboration in his book Culture and Imperialism (Said, 1993).

We read a text contrapuntally, for example, "when we read it with an understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England" (Culture and Imperialism, 1993: 78)

Texts embody and reveal the deep play of economy and material interests and are inexorably linked with culture, domination and exploitation.

There is first the authority of the European observer - traveler, merchant, scholar, historian, novelist. Then there is the hierarchy of spaces by which the metropolitan economy are seen as dependent upon an overseas system of territorial control, economic exploitation, and socio-cultural vision; without these stability and prosperity at ‘home’ ... would not be possible (Culture and Imperialism, 1993: 69).

It is not only that Said had tremendous impact on the development of post-colonialism and discourse analysis (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999), he is more relevant today as Vukovich (2012:xvi) observes, “…orientalism (as opposed to “bias”) may not be eternal in the way Althusser talked of ideology, but even with the rise of China it is still on the table, only more so.” It applies not only to China, but rest of the developing world. Said, if not immortal, seems to have a very long life.

**Evolution of the concept of orientalism**

The word Orient entered English language from old French by 1300 meaning east which was originally derived from Latin. Thus it came to signify all lands east of Europe (Etymological dictionary online). The idea that the Orient is different and other can be traced to ideas generated by wars of the Greek city-states, led by Athens with the Persians. In 480 BCE a Persian army captured and burned Athens, but eventually the Persians were defeated and compelled to withdraw from Greek lands. It led to the birth of an enemy discourse. In the texts of Greek philosophy, geography, history and literature, Greeks often identified themselves as different from and superior to the Orientals. Greeks were virtuous, freedom – loving and dynamic while the oriental people were servile and the rulers were despotic and society stationery. Romans also held similar views about the Orient. Later this image was transferred to the Ottoman Empire when it became a threat to Europe. Medieval scholars occasionally held negative image of the Orient. One of the key scholars of this period was John of Damascus of eighth century (Sardar, 2002). Since then a large number of Western scholars from Machiavelli (1469–1527) to Montesquieu made a distinction between the Orient and the West (App,2000).

**Travels and Orientalism**
The image of the Orient that went to shape the European vision was largely shaped by the accounts produced by large number of travellers who from 16th century visited the different countries and regions of Asia. In fact, this “…trans-epistemic exchange that intercontinental travel enabled….”(Kalra, 2014) expanded the foundation of Orientalism and reinforced it. With the invention of the printing press, the accounts of the travellers began to be widely circulated. Many of these travel accounts became popular undergoing as many as 30th or 40th editions. Both London and Amsterdam became major centres for the books on travels during the 17th and 18th centuries (Rasel, 2012). The beginning of English travel literature can be dated from 1555 when Richard Eden translated of a book entitled *The Decadence of the New World*. It was followed by Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations*. From the 17th century a continuous stream of travellers made their journey to the Orient. From England alone came 44 travel accounts. There were also travellers from the Netherlands and France. Even a less known traveller like Hodges wrote, “all the territories … were under the absolute direction of Mussulman tyrants” (cited in Islam and Das, 2017:6). Both Hegel and Marx were heavily influenced by such travel accounts and Bernier’s narratives of Mughal India, in particular.

Rubiés (2004) shows that in the seventeenth-century, Europe’s familiarity with Asia became extensive. A large number of travellers and missionaries came to Mughal India which led to the formation and crystallization of the image of South Asia – its people, social institutions and culture. It fed into a particular vision of the Orient. Many of these people were also associated with English and Dutch trading companies. There was also an influx of independent observers from France. One of the earliest image of South Asia that came from Alessandro Valignano who in the middle of 16th century described Indian people in a way that was echoed and re-echoed in all subsequent works Rubiés (2004:7)

> These people, who are almost black and go half naked, are universally contemptible and held to be base by the Portuguese and other Europeans; and the truth is that compared to them they are of little substance and lack refinement. They are, as Aristotle says, of a servile nature, because they are commonly poor, miserable and mean, and for any gain they will do the lowest things’.

He further wrote that the kings were avaricious and ruthlessly exploited the common people. They represented limitless tyranny and their religion was full of “many chimeras and monstrosities” (cited in Rubiés, 2004:7). In the hierarchy of civilization black-skinned Indians were only ahead of Africans. He represents “…an ideological imperative that went deep into Hispanic traditions of conquest and crusade” (cited in Rubiés, 2004:8). It was, however, Francois Bernier who came to India in 1658 or early 1659 and worked as a physician at the court of Aurangzeb for twelve years and wrote accounts of his experience in India entitled *Travels in the Mogul Empire* and other writings that exerted the greatest influence on his readers including some of the greatest minds in Europe. He along with two other fellow Frenchmen, Tavernier and Thevenot who were present in India at the same time and left powerful narratives of politics, economy, society and culture of the region (Karla, 1914). Bernier who is the intellectual father of racism in Europe, made a comparative analysis between France and India of his time and as a physician showed what ailed the empire of Aurangzeb. He articulated five major themes with vivid description. There was no private property. The state was despotic and arbitrary. There was no social class. The entire nobility lived on the mercy of the despot and they lose everything if they court the anger of the all-powerful emperor or any of his favourites. The Mughal cities were moving royal
camps. Bernier viewed that Indian cities were mainly administrative centres and often they were mere royal camps moving with the imperial armies. He held that Delhi or Agra “derives its chief support from the presence of the army” and “those cities resemble any place rather than Paris; they might more fittingly be compared to a camp, if the lodgings and accommodations were not a little superior to those found in the tents of armies.” (Bernier, 1791: 220). The absence of law of primogeniture led to cruel wars of succession at the end of the life of a despot.

Another such example is Willem Ysbrantsz Bontekoe’s Journael. His Journael was one of the most popular travelogues and was published in 1646 in the United Provinces. The book became immensely popular and had at least thirty editions in the seventeenth century. The travel book called Vervarelyke Schipbreuk van ’t Oost-Indisch Jacht Ter Schelling embodies cannibalism as a central theme of the book. It recurs again and again. He reports that cannibalism was practiced by people who lived near Assam (Rasel, 2012).

“Although very lively and quick with their savage and ferocious face, this was an amazingly savage kind of people... Therefore the Moors used to avoid them. It was just like that they wanted to eat people immediately. They eat human flesh most of the time” (cited in Rasel, 2012::37). Thus the Oriental other was at its worst a cannibal and savage and at its best depraved. It also finds its echo in the considered view of Charles Grant who lived and worked in India. “In fact, the people are universally and wholly corrupt, they are as depraved as they are blind, and as wretched as they are depraved” (cited in Sardar, 2002:42).

**Orientalism in Western Social Thought**

**Views of Montesquieu**

Like Aristotle and a host of other scholars since then, Montesquieu viewed that geography determined both human personality and social system. He mostly relied on the travel literature of his time to trace the differences between East and the Orient. Taking the description of the Ottoman state as a model, he developed his idea of despotism that characterized most of the Orient. Compared to the despotic Orient, the West was the home of freedom and liberty. This difference was fundamental and not amenable to change for it was determined by different geographical and climatic conditions of two regions. Europe was the home of freedom, law and liberty as a consequence of its climate. The hot and humid climate of the Orient gave birth to servile human personality, despotic rulers and social stagnation. As he observed, “laws, customs and manners of the ‘Orient’—even the most trivial, such as mode of dress— remain the same today as they were a thousand years ago” (cited in Anderson, 1974:464)

**Hegel on the Orient**

For Hegel the West was the theatre of unfolding of reason and freedom culminating in universal history in the form of modernity. Although the Orient witnessed the beginning of history and its early stage, it
could not advance any further. India for Hegel was a land of dream and fantasy that found full expression in the powerful sociological theory of Weber. “So the Indians are like wholly debased persons who, devoid of all spirituality, empty and in despair, acquire for themselves a dream world by the use of opium, a world or bliss of insanity” (Hegel, 2011:252). The caste system produced rigid distinctions that chained men only to a capricious fate. Everything is petrified into these distinctions, and over this petrification a capricious destiny holds sway. Morality and human dignity are unknown; evil passions have their full swing; the Spirit wanders into the Dream-World, and the highest state is Annihilation (Hegel, 2001:165).

Indian religions produce a state of human life which is more like death. “To attain this Death of Life during life itself—to constitute this abstraction — requires the disappearance of all moral activity and volition, and of all intellection too, as in the Religion of Fo;” (Hegel, 2001:174). Thus Indians knew only about negative freedom. “This lack of freedom that marks the Hindu’s concrete life, what we call the state, purpose, wholeness, rational law, or ethical life can have no place, cannot be present” (Hegel, 2011:282). For these reasons, Indians have not been able to attain state as a political form. “So everything necessary for a state is lacking. Therefore in India there can be no state whatsoever” (Hegel, 2011: 256). What India instead gave birth to was the extreme form of despotism. “In India, therefore, the most arbitrary, wicked, degrading despotism has its full swing” (Hegel, 282). “China, Persia, Turkey — in fact Asia generally, is the breeding ground (boden) of despotism…” (Hegel, 2011: 257), “and, in a bad sense, of tyranny;” (Hegel, 2001:179). Hegel gave emphasis to self-sufficient, isolated and indifferent village communities. As ordinary people experienced negative freedom, they were indifferent to what was happening to the polity which underwent “. . . a ceaseless interplay of uprisings, conspiracies and brutal episodes ... the main history consists of these upheavals and intrigues, these murderous deeds, these atrocities” (Hegel, 211: 283). As a result, Indians had no history. These were the founding themes of orientalism that Marx in his early writings repeated and found culmination in the sociological theory of neo-Kantian Weber and which continues to feed the doctrine of European exceptionalism until now.

Theoretical Foundation of Orientalism: Marx, Max Weber and Wittfogel: Asiatic Mode of Production, Oriental cultures and Oriental Despotism

The orientalist thought that evolved through the intellectual landscape of Europe over a period of more than two millennia found strong theoretical foundation in the works three modern social theorists— Karl Marx, Max Weber and Karl Wittfogel. Although three scholars differed in all possible ways, they arrived at a common view of the Orient.

Marx on the Orient

Marx’s views on the Orient and the Asiatic Mode of Production have been a focus of scholarly debate over a long period of time and still persist (Anderson, 1974; Krader, 1975; Dunn, 1982; Melotti, 1977; Ahmed, 1992: Anderson, 2010). The curtain over the Asiatic society rose on 7 April, 1853 after Marx became interested in the Eastern question and filed his first dispatch on it (Marx, 1897). It snowballed into a series of dispatches on colonies and other contemporary issues for the New York Herald Tribune, a considerable number of letters he wrote on the colonial question that kept him engaged with the issue
of the Asiatic society for his whole life. He filed in all 33 dispatches on India (Ahmed, 1992). In these journalistic pieces and in his writings for the next thirty years, Marx had an abiding interest about the Orient reading about it and making occasional comments on the theme. Although he did develop any systematic account on the social formation of the orient, his ideas on it continued to mature and he abandoned his older ideas as he found new materials on the Asiatic society. As Anderson (2010) shows he began to revise his views on the Orient and developed a much more sophisticated view. So the themes I discuss below are from his earlier writings. With his dispatch of 7 April, 1853, he began surprisingly with the words “But Turkey no more than the rest of the world remains stationary….”(Marx in Avelling, 1897:3). He first mentioned ‘Oriental’ and ‘Asiatic’ and India in his third dispatch which was published in the New Herald Tribune on 12 April, 1853. He wrote, “Before the discovery of the direct route to India, Constantinople was the mart of an extensive commerce; and even now, though the products of India find their way into Europe by the overland route through Persia….”(Marx in Avelling, 1897:14). He even condemns the Times for starting a “crusade” against the Saracens. “We find The Times advocating the dismemberment of Turkey, and proclaiming the unfitness of the Turkish race to govern any longer in that beautiful corner of Europe…. The whole of the talent at the disposal of that paper is exerted to… enlist British sympathies for a new crusade against the remnant of the Saracens” (Marx in 1897 in Avelling : 23 ). But then came a curious change of mind. On 2 June, when he talked about India, it was a different Marx who again underwent a change of heart later in his life. It is also worth noting that if he harshly criticized the Orient, he was no less scathing against the colonial rulers of Europe.

London, June 2, 1853

. . . Bernier rightly considered the basis of all phenomena in the East — he refers to Turkey, Persia, and Hindustan— to be the absence of private property in land. This is the real key, even to the Oriental heaven. . . .Marx and Engels, nd.:313

In reply Engels wrote back to Marx:

Manchester, June 6, 1853

. . . The absence of property in land is indeed the key to the whole of the East. Herein lies its political and religious history. But how does it come about that the Orientals did not arrive at landed property, even in its feudal form? I think it is mainly due to the climate, taken in connection with the nature of the soil, especially with the great stretches of desert which extend from the Sahara straight across Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary up to the highest Asiatic plateau. Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of agriculture and this is a matter either for the communes, the provinces or the central government. An Oriental government never had more than three departments: finance (plunder at home), war (plunder at home and abroad), and public works (provision for reproduction) (Marx and Engels, nd: 314).

In the Critique of political economy, Marx wrote in 1859, “[I]n broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as the progressive epochs in the economic formation of society (Krader, 1975: 93).

Marx wrote in the Grundrisse,
Because the unity as real proprietor and the real presupposition of communal property, it follows that this unity can appear as a particular entity above the many real particular communities. a unity realized in the form of the despot, the father of many communities to the individual through the mediation of the particular commune (Marx, 1973: 473).

From Adam Smith and Richard Jones Marx derived the idea that in the Orient because the despot owned all land, the state could collect both tax and revenue from people. This is totally different from the West where the institution of private ownership ensures that the revenue goes to the landlord. The state only claims taxes for public works. Although Marx mentioned the Asiatic mode of production only once in his writings, it has fuelled an unending controversy. Many have rejected it, a few have accepted it with or without modifications. In spite of Perry Anderson’s call for a ‘decent burial’ of the concept (Anderson, 1974: 548), it has continued to have a life of its own.

To reiterate briefly, Marx held that the Asiatic society was changeless. It was a society without history. In spite of the rise and fall of political dynasties and regimes, its economy was motionless. The political storms on the surface did not affect its material foundation over hundreds of years. It remained a pre-class society and did not register any change in the absence of the dialectics of class conflict. Marx agreed with Engels that the Asiatic society was stationary because its climatic conditions called for complex system of irrigation that could be achieved only by a centralized bureaucracy leading to the rise of the state before the class-society. It gave rise to despotic state which claimed both tax and rent from the subject population. The impoverished peasants continued to hold stubbornly to the simplest techniques of production with plough and loom within a self-sufficient and self-enclosed village community that produced bare necessities with which they lived on generations after generations as if in an eternal slumber reproducing the same material foundation unaffected by the dialectics of motion. But the British arms destroyed this tranquility and planted the material foundation of capitalism and introduced the play of dialectics and possibility for its future development at the end of colonialism. Krader, Habib and Anderson have shown that Marx had changed his views on the Asiatic society towards the end of life as new materials became available to him. However, it remained in the form of scattered notes. He was not able to leave before his death any coherent account of his new ideas. By 1879, he had realized that many of his earlier views were wrong. Later he found that India had a complex system of land ownership including private ownership of land. Trade and commerce had flourished and even Delhi had become the greatest city of the world (Anderson, 2010; Krader, 1974).

**Weber on the Orient**

Max Weber in his influential books—*Religion of India* and *Religion of China* (Weber, 1958b;1958c) developed a complex theory to analyze why the Orient failed to develop capitalism. He found that Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism had given birth to a cultural universe and institutional complex that blocked India’s road to capitalism. Similar were the fate of China and the Islamic society. The culture of other –worldliness, irrationality, magic, the doctrine of reincarnation and the caste system contributed to the economic and cultural stagnation of India. He found that although India once was on the road to urban development similar to Europe, several factors prevented such development. Hinduism is so open in terms of its holy ends that Weber doubted whether it was a religion at all. In
Hinduism it was rituals that mattered; it was a religion of rituals. Its two basic doctrines are re-incarnation or transmigration of souls and karma. The totality of deeds in this life was to determine the status of a person in his/her re-birth. These two doctrines proclaimed that only way to a better life was adherence to one’s caste obligations through which one could hope for higher caste status at re-birth. It led to traditionalism at its highest intensity. “So long as the karma doctrine was unshaken, revolutionary ideas or progressivism were inconceivable….It was impossible to shatter traditionalism based on caste ritualism, anchored in karma doctrine by rationalizing the economy” (Weber, 1958b: 123).

The caste system came to rest upon magic. Brahmins enjoyed predominantly high status for the magical charisma they commanded on the basis of their command over sacred language and ritual knowledge. It placed them close to the centre of power as land owners and priests. The royal power had to be legitimated through appropriate rituals and ceremonies administered only by Brahmins. Under Hinduism it was not possible for concepts like citizenship or even subjects to emerge for all was subsumed under the concept of dhrama. The development of salvation doctrines took the form of mystical union with the divine being. “All religious holy seeking on such a foundation had to take the form of mystical seeking of god, mystical possession, or, finally, mystical communion with the godhead”(Weber,1958b:152). “The world is an eternal, meaningless “wheel” of recurring births and deaths steadily rolling on through all eternity” (Weber, 1958:167). All salvation religions of India , Weber argued, seek complete flight from the realm of everyday life (Weber, 1958b).

The patrimonial state did not allow the bourgeoisie to flourish in autonomous cities. In India, “[A]ll cities were fortresses of the realm” (Weber, 1958b: 127). In India the struggle by the bourgeoisie against the patrimonial rulers failed due to ‘absolute pacification’ of the salvation religions such as Buddhism and Jainism which emerged in the cities and the caste system did not allow cities to have autonomous military power and thus blocked the development of the city in the Western sense. In Indian cities, the king had despotic and arbitrary power which manifested in extreme form under what he termed sultanism and had control over the guilds. The sovereign was also able to use caste divisions to foreclose a cohesive urban community that became the institutional scaffold for the rise of capitalism in the West as was the Protestant ethic that created the leitmotiv or spirit of capitalism or the ‘Prometheus Unbound’ as a latter day scholar (Landes,1969) called it.

By now a considerable body of literature has accumulated that shows that Weber was wrong in most of what he wrote about the Orient. Protestantism did not lead to rationalization in the West; rather in some cases it reinforced belief in magical practices. Rather, rationalization had its origin, as Hobson argues (2004), in the Muslim world and China. Most autonomous cites in Europe had gone under the tutelage of powerful monarchs over the seventeen and eighteenth century and had little role in economic development of the West (Ogilvie, 2011). Isin (2013) argues that Weber’s concept of citizenship as a unique property of the West is contestable. The example of Ottoman Turkey shows that waqf was an instrument that provided examples of civic responsibilities in which women also played an important role.
Critics have shown that Weber developed his views of Indian religions on the basis of texts on religions. What he held can be called Brahmonic view of Hinduism (Thaper https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQnWQpkKBqM). In their actual practice Indian religions were much more flexible and there were variations in the practice of religious rituals in everyday life. A textual view blinded his vision so much so that he failed to notice that in everyday life Indians could adapt to different political and economic situations. Vaishyas could be more this-worldly than any other people in the world. He did not have any idea of the flexibility of the caste system which was documented much later by M.N. Srinivas (1966). He showed that social mobility was an inexorable part of the caste system. People regularly rose up or went down the caste ladder.

Karl Wittfogel and Oriental Despotism

Karl Wittfogel (1957) borrowing from Marx and Weber developed his theory of hydraulic society which could be found in all regions of the Orient and Russia. In his view, hydraulic society is a specific form of society that manifests total and absolute power of the state. It resulted from the need for artificial irrigation on a vast scale in the arid landscape of the Orient. Such a complex task could only be developed by a centralized bureaucracy and despotic state. So in the Orient, state emerged before the classes.

Large-scale irrigation produces high agricultural surplus which give rise to the agro-managerial class as an apparatus of the state. Power becomes concentrated in the hands of this class. It results in a despotic state - a state more powerful than the civil society. The state conscripts corvee labour, confiscates property at will, tends to absorb religion within its apparatus, destroys all autonomous fountains of power and silences all resistance. It precluded the development of the bourgeoisie and capitalism in the Orient. Although Wittfogel found that there were regions which manifested despotism, yet they lacked hydraulic structures, he resorted to cultural diffusion to account for its presence in these areas. As we will see later what Wittfogel produced was in the words of Nietzsche (1954: 46) “…mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, anthropomorphisms….”

Wittfogel’s work has attracted huge scholarly attention. The Oriental Despotism contains 556 pages of text including a bibliography that runs into 38 pages. But surprisingly the index of the book Oriental Despotism has a solitary entry under irrigation which is concerned with its origin. The related entry-water-works has six references to irrigation works and seven to flood control. None of these entries provide any information of irrigation works. He does, however, mention two empirical instances. One is about a canal in China and another from Bengal, a land of rebels. Ironically, he found from Bengal that mighty rivers of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra produced enormous hydrological problems and so by 1900 it had ninety seven miles of irrigation works and 1,298 miles of embankments. What he failed to realize was that whatever irrigation canals and embankments Bengal had were constructed mostly under the British rule. He does mention the hydraulic works of China merely by referring to Wilcock’s book Egyptian Irrigation. Two of the most important missing items in his bibliography are Statistics of Hydraulic Works and Hydrology of England, Canada, Egypt, and India published in 1885 by Jackson, and Wilson’s Irrigation in India which was published in 1903. Both Jackson and Wilson visited India and
made an empirical study of water works. They found that pre-colonial India had three major water works which were not meant for irrigation and most of the water structures were built during the colonial period. Egyptian water works on the Nile had not led to the rise of despotism. “In other words, there is no direct causal relationship between hydraulic agriculture and the development of the Pharaonic political structure and society” (Butzer, 1976: 110).

All subsequent attempts to confirm his hypothesis until 2017 have failed to find any support for his theory. Thus Orientalism forms a continuous stream of discourse from antiquity to early years of 21st century and hardly shows any sign of abating. According to Hobson (2008), “… Eurocentric thinkers constructed …an imaginary line of civilizational apartheid between East and West” (Hobson2008:57, emphasis in the original). “Conversely, the East was painted as series of absences” (Hobson, 2008:57).

Marx, Weber and Wittfogel reinforced, expanded and articulated a complex vision of the Orient that had following key features which was aptly summarized by Karim (1956). Many historians and social scientists of South Asia directly or indirectly came under the spell of the ideas of Orientalism that continue to persist even today best epitomized by the expression Homo Hierarchicus (Dumont, 1972).

Some of these eminent scholars include G. S. Ghurye and D. P. Mukerji T. N. Madan(Patel, 2013), Desai, 1946; Karim, 1956; Sen, 1982).

The oriental society was characterized by:

- Absence of history
- Absence of dynamic linkage among people and self-sufficient village community
- Absence of geographical linkage and Isolated villages
- Absence of private property
- Absence of landed aristocracy
- Absence of temperate climate and centralized irrigation system
- Absence of freedom and despotic state
- Absence of cities
- Absence of strong merchant class
- Absence of classes
- Absence of formal law
- Absence of human quality
- Absence of rationality
- Absence of Change in society

**A Society without history**

It was Hegel as shown above who described the Orient as a region without history. It failed to march onward like Europe and join its universal history and remained motionless producing a graveyard of civilization. Marx in his early writings voiced a similar view. “Indian society has no history at all, at least
no known history. What we call its history is but the history of successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society” (Marx, nd.: 83).

But a host of recent authors like Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), Andre Gunder Frank (1998), Pomeranz (2001) Hobson, Fergusson (2004a; 2004b), and others have shown that until 1800 South Asia and China were almost equal partners of the global economy and there was hardly any difference between the economies of Western Europe and the two regions of Asia.

Self-sufficient village community

Another well-trenched myth about India was the concept of self-sufficient villages. Sir Henry Maine was the most important architect of this myth. Metcalf (1997) shows the myth of Indian village communities served three functions. First, it created a polarity between the ancient and the modern. The essence of ancient India was the division of society into self-contained inwardly-turned communities consisting of co-operative communal villagers. Secondly, it was an entity that was different and opposed to the colonial state. Finally, village in this myth as Marx and many others including nationalists assumed survived in their primordial form through centuries in spite of all upheavals of political regimes.

Ludden (1985) shows that such 19th century narratives are “quaint historical fiction” (Ludden, 1985:7). Indian villages were interacting with state, markets and cities and manifested changes over time. In particular, the method of taxation in cash from Akbar’s time forced peasants to sell their products in nearby towns to pay taxes and it led to the end of whatever self-sufficiency villages had. Pioneering works by Andre Gunder Frank, Janet Abu-Lughod, Chaudhuri (1990) and many other historians have shown that Indian villages were linked to local, regional and even international trade networks from the remote past. Tavernier (1925:24) wrote: “In India a village must be very small if it has not a money-changer, whom they call sharoff, who acts as banker to make remittances of money and issues letters of exchange.” Ludden (1999) demonstrates that far from being stagnant, in many areas of the Punjab, Gujarat, Bengal, and southeastern plains—a far-flung network of manufacturing involving cotton farming and production of textiles had emerged to feed international trade. These regions made up some of “…the great industrial regions of the early modern world, and they produced the bulk of cotton cloth in world markets in 1750” (Ludden, 1999:146). He also describes how villages in Tamil Nadu had become extensively commercialized and commoditized even before the 18th century. He notes the rise of agrarian urbanism in the coastal regions closely linked to the global trading network through the Indian Ocean by 1700.

Tavernier mentions that even the smallest villages sold all sorts of foodstuff from rice to sweetmeats and he found 4,000 pilgrims travelling without taking with them any provisions for their daily needs as they could procure those locally. Literary sources from Bengal indicate that in some places there were two and more days of markets in a day. Other evidences indicate that markets were widespread in pre-colonial India. The villages were so open to new information and cultivation of new crops that when
tobacco was brought to India in 1600, it began to be cultivated all over India within half a century-1650. Maize which came from the new world also began to be cultivated widely. Sericulture was unknown in Bengal before the 15th century, by the 17th century it became one of the largest producers of silk in the world (Habib, 1982b).

Absence of private property in pre-colonial South Asia

The pattern of land ownership in such a vast land as pre-colonial India is complex and varied. It did have different forms in different parts of the empire. It defies any simple generalization. Now increasing evidences show that private property existed in South Asia from the Vedic times. Radha Kumud Mookherji, a member of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission in the colonial period who prepared a report for the government wrote, “Since the beginning of history, Society in India has been based on the principle of private property and private property in land”. (Mookherji, 1958: 1). It is always the head of the family who owned land, and could transmit his rights to his heirs (Mookherji, 1958: 3). Mookherji quoted from the most important Hindu law book of Jaimani to the effect “… the king cannot give away the earth because it is not his property…. “ (Mookherji, 1958:17). The Arthashastra made it clear. It advocated that “[T]ax-payers shall sell or mortgage their fields to tax-payers alone; Brahmans shall sell or mortgage their Brahmdeya or gifted land only to those who with such lands…..” (Chaturvedi, 2006:105) Mookherji (1958) quoted from Macdonald and Keith’s work that Vedic literature did not show any trace of communal ownership of land. The community ownership probably referred to waste land or pasture. Smritisasstras mention that even the king was not owner of the land; he as a sovereign was under obligation to pay taxes. Jaunpur Brick Inscription of CE 1207 mentions land given as security to two bankers for a loan. The cave inscription of Usavâdata mentions that he donated the land after purchasing it from a Brahmin. Chola inscriptions provide documents of 276 land sales including houses which involved peasants, merchants and even members of the royal household(Ayer, 1937).

The form of land ownership did not change much in Mughal India. In Islam, kharaj lands constituted privately owned land. “Kharaj lands were the full property of their owners, and therefore they had right to sell them as they liked; when the owner of the land died, it was divided between his heirs” (Orhanlu cited in Islahi, 2014:29 ). There is documentary evidence of land sales in Mughal India. David Ludden shows that the term rayot that emerged in Mughal India meant “… an individual tax-paying property owner who had a receipt for revenue payments that constitutes an official title to land, a pattah(Ludden,1985: 141). From the Deccan, we find evidence of land sale. A document of 1594 provides evidence of land sale in Petalachor sub-district duly attested by the Qazi. Another document from Poona in the middle of the 18th century shows a farmer selling seven bighas of his mirasdari land at Rs. 250. The village assembly could sell even waste land (Fukazwa, 1982). According to Habib (1982a: 246), Zamindari had become inheritable. It could be sold and mortgaged. “Still more striking was the way in which zamindiri right was freely sold.” One land document of 1682 pertaining to a village in Bhowal (near Dhaka) shows that an inhabitant named Tita Khan purchased a plot of land marked by boundaries at a cost of 12 taka. What is often forgotten as Douglas C. North and Robert Paul Thomas in their classic work on the rise of the West (1995:63) show private ownership emerged in England only in 13th century and even then”… it applied to a minority of English land.”
Centralized irrigation

Neither India nor Bengal ever had any centralized hydraulic work as claimed by Wittfogel. Koshambi (1957) in one of the earliest reviews of the book shows that in ancient India water works, flood control and irrigation was also locally organized. Ibn Batuta observed absence of irrigation in India in the early 14th century. Babur records his surprise at not finding any irrigation network in India in his autobiography (Baburnama.1970). "Wells were", according to the authoritative *Cambridge Economic History of India*, “probably the major source of artificial irrigation in most areas” (Habib, 1982b:49). Firuz Tughluk (1351-86) was a major figure who built several canals in India. Two of his largest canals were constructed to supply water to a newly built city. Other canals that he built were small and the state had little responsibility for their upkeeping. As one of his governors asserted “…the excavation and maintenance of public canals’ (anhdh-i ‘ammo) was the responsibility of the local people and landholders” (cited in Habib, 1982b: 49).

By now a considerable body of literature has grown up that shows that a centralized system of irrigation did not exist in any other region of the Orient. Leach (1959) showed admirably that the extensive water works of Sri Lanka were produced gradually over a long period of time and in a piecemeal way that did not require great state involvement. Even the impressive water works of Java and Khamer Empire have proved to be a fiction of imagination. In a recent work, Harrower (2009) shows that in South West Arabia large-scale irrigation was neither necessary nor provided food for large population. Dry farming, terrace farming and community-based irrigation seem to have contributed most to agricultural production. Yet the myth refuses to die (Bechtel, 2016)

Oriental Despotism

The idea of Oriental despotism that originated with the Greeks found great popularity in the 17th century. Lucette Valensi (1993) argues that modern conceptions of the despotic Oriental state originated in Venetian ambassadors’ reports from the Ottoman Sultan’s court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They fixed, in the European mind, the memorable image of an all-powerful despot. It gained greater currency over the 18th century with the translation and publication of the Arabian Nights in 1704 that began to define the Sultan as a despot. In spite of Voltaire’s critical stance that the term originally meant master of the house in Greek and later on a petty European prince, the myth has continued to flourish.

As Toynbee (1958) points out, “the worst cases of total power and atrocious abuse of it …”can be found in non-hydraulic regions: Socialist Germany, Tsarist and Communist Russia.” The Oriental cultivators were not slaves; there is a single instance of plantation slavery in Asia. It rather flourished in Roman Italy, West Indies and America. Many of the sultans, kings and emperors of the Orient were weak rulers. Kosambi (1957) noted that Wittfogel made considerable use of *Arthashastra* to highlight his theory, yet it is a mystery why the same hydraulic society produced a mild ruler like Asoke after a short period of 50 years. The Chinese travellers provided evidence that under the Guptas during 4th and 5th centuries
and Harsha in the early 7th century “penal legislation was extremely mild” (Kosambi, 1957: 1417). Many European states, on the other hand, was more autocratic. In 1533, the English Parliament passed an Act that gave the king “plenary, whole, and entire power “over the “body politic” and demanded “natural and humble obedience “to the king (Chengdan, 2010:6688). In fact, Prussian kings, Austrian emperors and the Russian Czars were all omnipresent rulers without exception.

The absence of city

In Grundrisse Marx (1973) wrote,”[I]n Asiatic Society, where the monarch appears as the exclusive proprietor of the agricultural surplus product, whole cities arise, which are at bottom nothing more than wandering encampments…..”.(Marx,1973 :467). One of the key arguments of Max Weber was also that urban autonomy in the West was a major factor in the development of capitalism in the West. The Orient lacked it and thus it also lacked city in the proper sense of the term. This view has proved to be wrong. India from the ancient times had developed a vast network of cities. In spite of their decadence during the later period of Hindu rule, they revived and registered remarkable growth for several centuries under the Muslim rule. The largest Indian city in the seventeenth century was Agra with a population estimated to be 800,000. In 1580s, Lahore closely followed it with a population of 700,000 in 1615. Delhi by 1660s had a population of 500,000 and thus equal to Paris. Dhaka, Patna, Ahmedabad and Surat each could boast of a population as high as 200,000 in early 17th century. In Akbar’s time there were more than 3200 towns and 450 small markets called qasba had grown up (Habib1982b). Not all these cities were royal forts or centres of administration. Surat provides an important example of a city based upon trade and commerce. The rich bankers of Surat, observes Chaudhuri (1990), provided finance for traders of a large number of cities across a vast region extending from Delhi to Hormuz and Bandar Abbas. Habib(1982a) also points out that some cities like Multan or Lahore depended on international trade and flourished or fell into ruin as trade routes changed. John Henry Grose who visited the city in the middle of 18th century found it to be one of the finest examples of a commercial city that rose to great prosperity through trade (Chaudhuri, 1990). Many cities of South Asia, Middle east or China of the early centuries of our common era had attained an enduring ‘civic form’(Chaudhui,1990:361). One of its best examples is Nanking. Nanking attained its primacy on the basis of industrial production and trade after the capital of China moved to Peking (Beijing). Major cities like Cairo, Alexandria, Surat, Cambay, Malacca, and Canton provided all necessary support to the merchants and bankers involved in transcontinental trade. Muslim cities were connected with a vast network of trade straddling Asia, Europe and Africa. Lombard (1975:10) found these to have grown up on the basis of trade. They were a “series of urban islands linked by trade routes.”

Pomeranz and Topik (2015) show how cities in the orient led to a cosmopolitan world. “Diasporas of trading peoples –such as the overseas Chinese, Muslims, and the Hindus—joined together in an enormous and complex network of commerce” (Pomeranz and Topic, 2015:5). They further go on to suggest that business men from the different parts of the world including Gujratis, Fujianese, Persians,
Armenians, Jews and Arabs lived in the Asian port cities. The merchants of these cities had developed a code of conduct that included honesty and sound principles of business. "All of these cities and areas of the Islamic World, from Spain and North Africa in the west to Afghanistan and India in the east, were in constant touch with each other, with apparently no restrictions at all on the free flow of people, ideas, techniques, fashions, goods, and capital" (Pomeranz and Topik, 2015:60-61).

Even Marx changed his views on the Oriental city later in his life. Marx probably made his sixteen thousand–word notes on Phear’s The Aryan Village in India and Ceylon in 1881. At one point in his notes, he writes of Mughal Emperor Akbar, “He made Delhi into the greatest and finest city then existing in the world” (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 33 cited in Anderson, 2010). A number of recent studies, on the other hand, have shown that urban autonomy was not helpful for economic growth in Europe or at best played a positive role at an early phase capitalistic development as they were monopolistic and became a barrier to entry(Oklives, 2011). The textile industry in Venice, Wallerstein (1974) shows, declined due to guild restrictions. In England it flourished because it was located in the suburbs outside the direct control of the cities.

Absence of classes and the caste system

Marx held that caste was “some sort of neurosis in Indian civilization” (le://K://east west lecture/EPWAsiatic_Mode_of_Production_Caste_and_the_Indian_Left.pdf). Weber went further to identify it as the central institution that paralyzed the Indian society. The caste system completely restricted social mobility and failed to produce social dynamism necessary for development of a capitalist society in India. M.N. Srinivas(1966), however, shows that social mobility was an enduring and continuous feature of the caste system. The original Kshatriyas varna did not exist over a period of 2000 years. All the Kshatriyas during this period came from lower castes. The caste system showed a continuous upward mobility through a process called sanskritisation. It is ironic for Max Weber that the caste system is still strong in India and Hinduism as powerful as ever. Yet India is projected to grow into the third largest economy of the world by 2050.

Absence of change and economic stagnation in the Orient

There is now a remarkable body of literature that shows that the Orient was not economically stagnant. Janet Abu-Lughod (1989), in her path-breaking work, Before European Hegemony: The World System AD1250-1350, showed how the Indian Ocean region had become part of a global trading network traversing the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, and South China Sea in the 13th and 14th centuries. Andre Gunder Frank, in a more revolutionary work entitled ReOrient : Global Economy in the Asian Age claimed that rather than isolated countries and regions, Asia constituted a capitalist world system for over 5000 years. The rise of the West in modern times is a misnomer, a product of Eurocentricism. It is a myth which has been constructed by the hegemonic West. Frank shows that a world system had developed over a period of five thousand years from Mesopotamia and Egypt from 2700 BCE based on international and inter-regional trade. These regions had become linked to the Indus Valley civilization and to central Asia and Africa. This world system continued over eight phases of rise and
fall until 1600 CE when Europe came to dominate the world. Thus the European domination was nothing new. Neither the Protestant ethic nor any other exceptionalism explains Europe’s rise or development of capitalism. Contemporary European travellers also provide graphic accounts of how villages, cities, regions and continents had become interlinked through trade networks. South Asia became dynamic hotbed of economic development. A vast network of roads and waterways including oceans connected them and a regular and extensive system of transport of boats, caravans and ships operated in the region.

The Grand Trunk Road which was first built by Chandragupta, the Maurya Emperor and rebuilt by Sher Shah that ran 2700 kilometres from Chittagong in Bangladesh through Delhi and ended in Kabul and became connected to the Black Sea and the Caspian turned into a major artery of international trade. By first millennium, South Asia had flourished as a major hub of international trade being connected with central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East, Ottoman Empire and Africa. The Muslim civilization also became connected with all the known regions of the world giving rise to a global network for the movements of goods, ideas and people.

John Fryer, an English physician found in 1679 during his journey from Surat to Broach that a huge caravan of oxen and camels ‘clogged’ the roads and he saw one day a single caravan of 500 oxen. This inter-regional trade had become linked with a large fleet of ships that moved among cities across the Indian Ocean (Chaudhuri, 190). As Fitch provides a graphic account of what he saw in course of his travels in India during 1583-1591.

I went from Agra to Satagam in Bengala, in the companie of one hundred and four score boates laden with salt, opium, hinge [asafetida: Hindustani hing], lead, carjwts, and divers other commodities, downe the river Jemena. The chiefe marchants are Moores and Gentiles." p18 from above Ralph Fitch 1583-1591p 1-47…Here in Bengala they have every day in one place or other a great market which they call Chandeau, and they have many great boats which they call pericose, wherewithal! They go from place to place and buy rice and many other things; these boates have 24 or 26 oares to rowed them; they be great of burthen, but have no coverture (Fitch in Foster, 1921: 25).

It is worth mentioning that Thomas Roe, an English diplomat who came to the court of Mughal Emperor Jahangir stayed between 1614 and 1618 observed as he travelled in 1615 from Surat to Khandesh a caravan of 10,000 bullocks loaded with goods. Several years later, another traveller Mundy another caravan of 14,000 bullocks equally loaded with a variety of merchandise(Habib,1993). Habib(1993) calculates these people called Banjâeas carried about 821 million metric ton-miles of goods in the 17th century compared to 2,500 million-metric ton-miles the Indian railway carried in 1882.

As Frank has argued and the evidence provided by a number of recent historians have provided strong evidence and this paper also reinforces that the Nobel Prize-winning economic Robert North and his co-author Paul Thomas’s highly lauded book *The Rise of the West* and the paradigm of institutionalism which still remains a powerful theoretical paradigm for development economics is wrong. Blaut (1993)
effectively demonstrates that each of the imputed European exceptionalism and the whole European miracle are no more than myths firmly based only in Eurocentric ideology.

Hobson (2015) also effectively unmasks the myth of the rise of the West and describes it as Eurocentric “big bang” theory that assumes the Orient as stationary for hundreds of years and Europe enjoyed some exceptional attributes that produced the miracle of capitalism. He argues that Europe is a late developing continent. What we see as the rise of China and the same argument can be applied to India in recent years is the fact that it is returning to its previous supremacy. The received knowledge that Italian city states were the crucible of capitalist development is not true. These cities only served as the intermediaries of inter-continental trade and it equally holds for the rest of Europe. The silver that Spain and Portugal Plundered from the New World found came to sink in China and India and as Alexander Dow observed Bengal “… was the sink where gold and silver disappeared without the least prospect of return...”(Dow,1792,vol.3: xxii).

Why did pre-colonial India fail to produce capitalism?

For Marx the question why the Orient failed to produce capitalism came naturally because he was looking at the Orient from an evolutionary perspective that he found in the West. For Weber and many others who constructed Orientalism the West had inherent and exceptional qualities that allowed it to develop the unique civilization of capitalism. It was not possible for the Orient to achieve it. It was fated to be colonized and ruled by the West that would drive it towards capitalism.

In recent years, both the evolutionary perspective and the doctrine of European exceptionalism have come under increasing attack by a number of eminent historians, particularly by the California School. The California School led by Kenneth Pomeeranz whose book The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy published in 2000 triggered a new interpretation of the divergence between the Orient and the West which was developed earlier by Janet Abu-Lughod, Andre Funder Frank and a number of other authors. The leading scholars of this school include Roy Bin Wong and Jack Goldstone. They argue that there was little difference between India, China, and Ottoman Empire and the Western Europe until late 18th century.

The World-system theory of Wallerstein had earlier shown powerfully that the development of modern capitalism undergoes a cyclical change and what the 18th century witnessed was the movement of the core from South Asia and China to the city states of Italy. Although Wallerstein (2011) provides a meticulous analysis of the historical process of change, he does not provide a general theory why the cores move from one region to another. But Chase-Dunn and his associates (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997) have done highly important works to understand the rise and fall of societies.

In the context of this new body of research, I would argue that the answer can be found in the now-abandoned cyclical perspective of social change. Although it was Ibn Khaldun (1967) who first developed a cyclical theory of social change, it was later reformulated by sociologists such as Sorokin.
But this perspective could not develop and remained at best crude. It now registers powerful comeback. Glubb (1976) found that empires and civilizations rise and fall regularly over an average period of 250 years. Kennedy (1988) also came up with his persuasive theory of the rise and fall of great powers in modern times and provided the reason for why it happens. In his book *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, he argued with evidence that great powers tend to collapse over time as the administration of vast territories entail huge costs that become increasingly impossible for empires to bear. As a consequence, there is a regular cycle of rise and fall of great empires in history. It occurs because of what he calls imperial overstretching.

Peter Turchin (2006) has redeployed Khaldûn’s concept of Ashabiyya to suggest that every empire develops a fault line along its border where multi-ethnic groups exist. The poorer ethnic group or a multi-ethnic group outside the faultline may show high Ashabiyya and in course of time overwhelm the empire signaling the rise of a new empire. In his view, multi-ethnic frontier serves as a competitive pressure point where groups with low solidarity disappear and groups based on high solidarity triumph and overwhelm the old empire.

In more recent years, societal collapse has emerged as a new field of research which looks into the factors that lead to sudden collapse of complex societies. Jaret Diamond (2006) has chronicled how past societies collapsed as a consequence of ecological change, over-population, elite—inertia and bad rational policies which may seem apparently sound policy but have long-term negative consequences. As Tainter observes, “Disintegration of the social order has been a recurrent concern in Western history…..” (Tainter, 1988:2). In the same vein, I would argue that the Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb had overstretched and was destined to collapse. Although India of his time showed great commercial expansion and had become part of global capitalism, yet it was doomed to collapse due to a complex configuration of causes. Almost all these causes have been noted by historians as isolated factors without showing any necessary and organic linkage. They register as mere scattergram of historical narratives.

**Towards a New Turn in Sociological Theory**

What Gouldner (Gouldner, 1972) saw as the looming crisis of Western sociology in 1970s has now paralyzed the discipline and our time marks the end of sociological theory (Islam, 2005). The prime cause of the crisis lies in the fact that both classical and contemporary sociology is the outgrowth of Orientalism. It is not possible to move beyond the current impasse in sociology without moving beyond the mainstream sociological theories of classical and contemporary sociology. Orientalism provides an essential starting point for any such venture. Pre-colonial South Asia led to the formation of the discourse of Orientalism and thus it will remain the point of departure for any sociological understanding of the region. In this context, I would like to propose that his theory of social change can serve as a foundation of a new direction in sociology. Khaldûn provides a cyclical theory of social change in which history is a theatre of ceaseless rise and fall of civilizations (Khaldûn, 1967; Dhaouadi, 2006; Alatas,
Sorokin (1991) provided a cyclical theory of social change that viewed societies alternating between sensate culture of materialistic progress and an ideational culture that invokes spiritualism and idealism with a mixed type in between. Civilizations are endowed with ‘an immanent principle’ that give shape to their potentialities and soon it reaches its limit to growth beginning a new cycle. Toynbee (1974) argued from his survey of 21 civilizations that every civilization has a limited life span. They arise from challenges people face and their psychological and spiritual responses to the threats they face. Each of them undergoes deterministic phases in their life cycles: birth, growth, disintegration and breakdown.

I would argue that the current impasse in sociological theory can be overcome only by moving beyond what I would like to call the “here and now” perspective of contemporary sociology. It entails construction of a broader social theory that takes as its central focus the rise and fall of civilizations. It is in this context that I introduce below an outline of a broader social theory embodying Kahlûn, Sorokin and Toynbee’s cyclical theory of social change, the neo-Kahlûnian theory of Peter Turchin (2006) and Farid Alatas (2014), the idea of uneven development, Kennedy’s concept of imperial overstretching, the world-system theory’s concepts of core, semi-periphery and periphery as developed by Wallerstein (1974), recent works of Chase-Dunn and his associates (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1997) and ideas from the recent literature on collapse. I would argue that the world-system theory of Wallerstein, in fact, is a cyclical theory. From the perspective individual civilizations and empires, what Wallerstein describes is a rise and fall of empires within the modern capitalism. This new theoretical perspective combines evolutionary and cyclical views of social change in the form of a four-phase model. It comprises evolutionary spiral, involution circle, decline circle and collapse circle. It is always a relatively backward society or a peripheral region from a multiethnic frontier which begins to ascend and establish an empire or civilization on the strength of a new charismatic leadership, either of ashabyya or a combination of ashabyya and a new or advanced production and military technology.

The beginning of a new civilization unfolds huge energy and dynamism. It develops new vision, new technology, new ideology that marks its superiority over others. The first phase may thus be called evolutionary spiral in which a civilization remains open, absorbs new ideas and achieves great opulence reaching the ‘magic mountain.’ Then it begins to lose its solidarity and cohesion within a sea of prosperity. It begins to encounter threats from its distant multi-ethnic frontier as new social groups become dominant and challenge the old civilization or empire. The material interests of the ruling class bind it to the existing techno-economic regime. As Marx famously argued, the material interests of the ruling class becomes so many fetters that an existing mode of production fails to develop new forces of production. Only a new class brings into play fundamentally new forces of production (Cohen, 1978). Thus the old empire experiences internal and external crisis leading to state of involution or what I call Involution Circle. In this stage, it goes on functioning and may experience static expansion without undergoing further development (Geertz, 1970). It becomes overstretched and too costly to keep it functioning. It enters a Crisis Phase in which it turns inward. The civilization turns inward and fails to absorb new innovations or adopt it in piecemeal way that does not operate to stop the decline. The crisis becomes multi-faceted and ensures its gradual decline turning it into a Decline Circle. The decline
circle creates a constellation of factors that lead to downward spiral. Finally, there comes the Collapse Circle in which a complex sequence of factors and events result in the collapse of the society. The decline phase may last a long time. But collapse often occurs suddenly. The factors that work together may be external, internal and random. It can be combined with the notion of core, semi-periphery and periphery model of the world-system theory. In the decline phase, a particular polity moves to semi-periphery and finally to periphery if the descent continues. It may then enter a collapse circle or remain stuck in the decline phase. The collapse phase has operated so far in the pre-capitalist societies and civilizations. In the case of post-colonial societies, evolutionary spiral may not work for many countries and may remain frozen in the declining circle. The four-phase model is presented in figure 1.

Figure1: The Four-Phase Model of Collapse
Causes of collapse of the Mughal Empire

The collapse of the Mughal Empire has been explained in different ways. The Aligarh School, particularly Satish Chandra (2004) and Atahar Ali (1997) have given particular emphasis to factional conflicts and crisis of the Mughal nobility. Ali (2006) has also stressed on the cultural failure or lack of technological innovation of the Mughal times. Habib (1999) has given particular importance to the Maratha invasion peasant revolts as key factors in the fall of the Mughal Empire. Leonard (1979) has underscored the alienation of the indigenous merchants and banking houses from the Mughal imperial order. These accounts, however, remain mere chronicle of events without logical sequence among them. What we need is an analysis of broader configuration of factors, forces and events that made the collapse of the empire inevitable. Below I provide a preliminary sketch of such an analysis on the basis of the model developed above.

Until a decade after the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707), the Mughal state was expanding. It had reached the limit of its ascent. It had become one of the largest empires of the world. It had become overstretched. It faced triple threats. There was nomadic threat from the northeast. There was Maratha threat in the southern frontier. Finally, there was distant naval threat from the Portuguese both in the Indian Ocean region and in Bengal. With the expansion of the empire there occurred vast increase of the Mughal nobility. Yet there was not enough land to support the nobility. Thus the internal threat was how to pacify the nobility and ensure their loyalty. In order to satisfy his nobility, Aurangzeb had to launch further conquests. The long warfare in the Deccan became extremely expensive. The conquered territories were less fertile and did not much increase the revenue of the state. The long absence of the emperor from the capital intensified the conflicts among them. They went to extract as much surplus from them as possible. In addition, the state also imposed new taxes. The empire experienced crop losses and famines. It fuelled widespread peasant unrest and revolts.

The Mughal Empire had begun to experience a series of rebellions from the reign of Shah Jahan launched by Khan Jahān Lodī, governor of the Deccan, followed by Jujhar Singh, a Hindu chief of Orichha and Budelkhand. Since then Deccan became the multi-ethnic pressure point for the Mughal Empire. Shah Jahan tried to pacify it through forging an alliance with two of the regional kingdoms in the south. But the Mughal Empire began also to face Portuguese piracy in Bengal from the sea. Shah Jahan shifted his capital from Agra to Delhi to solve the crisis. The emperor ignored these signals of the coming storm and went on to launch an attack on Kabul in a bid expand his empire further. The Mughal army failed with great losses.

As stated earlier, with the expansion of the empire, the Mughal nobility and the bureaucracy had also expanded enormously. In spite of the vastness of the empire, there was not enough land to support the huge bureaucracy and its luxurious lifestyle. It became the decisive factor that led to the ultimate fall of the Mughal Empire. Every effort to solve the problem led to more problems escalating and deepening the crisis leading to the collapse of the empire. It gradually and sequentially spiralled into a vicious circle.
without any escape route. I discuss below in a sketchy way the expanding spiral of the fall. Figures 2 describes the fall of the Mughal Empire.
First, as stated earlier, the Mughal Empire had become overstretched and too expensive to govern. Secondly, the nobility and the bureaucracy of the empire expanded vastly in the second half of the 17th century causing a shortage of crown land to support them. The size of the Amirs or mansabdars having ranks of 1000 zat or more nearly doubled during the latter half of the reign of the Emperor Aurangzeb. It had difficult to find jigirs for them. Secondly, it led to intensive and pervading conflict within the ruling class. Thirdly, Aurangzeb was forced to go for further conquest to find more land to accommodate the nobility. It triggered a broad-ranging crisis. Warfare in the south became very expensive. The newly acquired territories were less fertile and did not yield much revenue. The state began to suffer from escalating fiscal crisis. The long absence of Aurangzeb from the capital because of his engagement in war against Marathas exacerbated the factional conflicts within the nobility. It was not possible to restore the loyalty, cohesion and stability of the ruling class. It produced endemic crisis of governance. Fourthly, this long warfare in the south had become highly expensive leading to tax-raise and imposition of new taxes. The nobility and the bureaucracy pressed for money tried to extract as much rent as possible from the peasantry. It caused widespread peasant unrest and revolts in different parts of the empire which became again almost impossible to contain.

Fifthly, Leonard (1979) argues that a major cause of the decline of the Mughal Empire in the 18th century was the role of the indigenous merchant class, particularly the banking houses who in the past were useful allies of the Mughal Government. During a century between 1650 and 1750, the merchants and banking houses became much more involved in revenue collection. Yet they became alienated from the ruling class and began to move away from the declining state which was pressed for money as they found new allies and source of investment into the European companies. The breakdown of the alliance between the Mughal state and the indigenous merchant class and banking houses turned into a powerful factor in the fall of the empire. Sixthly, Aurangzeb pressed with the disunity and discontent of the nobility resorted to the imposition of a strict Islamic ideology for restoring its loyalty. The outcome, however, was decrease in the loyalty of his Hindu nobility and subjects that drained the legitimacy of the emperor as a vast majority of his subjects were non-Muslims.

Seventhly, as Ali (2006) emphasizes the Mughal regime suffered from cultural failure. India was not only example of it. All agrarian empires of the Orient had experienced it. The Islamic world had in spite of its brilliant achievement in science and technology later turned away from it. The same thing happened in the case of China. They failed to adopt new technological innovations from the West. Neither clock nor printing press was adopted. The failure was most evident in the field of military technology and naval technology in particular. Although Akbar’s court poet Faizi (Joshi, 2016) had dreamt of voyaging safely in the sea, it never happened. It was, however, impossible for Aurangzeb to do it in the face of immediate threats from its multi-ethnic land frontier. Both the Maratha threat in the Deccan and nomadic threat from the northeast kept him engaged. The decline of Muslim science and knowledge also contributed to it. Neither clock nor the printing press nor the new naval technology was adopted.
Finally, after the death of Aurangzeb, his weak successors failed to govern a fast disintegrating empire. A decisive blow to the wounded empire was struck with the invasions of Nadir Shah in 1739 that resulted in massive plunder and widespread massacre. The Mughal Empire almost collapsed and it was not possible for weak successors of Aurangzeb to reverse the fall of the empire. The sudden burst of monsoon rainfall drenching the uncovered magazine that sealed the fate of the Nawab of Bengal in the plains of Plassey marked the triumph of the sea-power against the outdated military technology of the Mughals and enabled travel stories to fill up and expand the ideological space for the rising West to dominate the rest of the world.

The rise of the West

Herman Hesse wrote in Steps,

“A magic dwells in each new beginning
protecting us, telling us how to live”

The ‘magic’ of the rise of the West has captivated the scholarly mind not only of the West, but all over the world. Yet what the past received knowledge has masked is the West’s cultural debt to Oriental civilizations. As Hobson (2015) demonstrates most of the scientific and technological inventions which are generally attributed to Europe, in fact, are products of cultural diffusion from the Orient. Europe which was the periphery of the global phase of early capitalism moved to the centre-stage of capitalistic development on the strength of ideas and technologies that emerged in the Orient. The key ideas and innovations of Italian Renaissance are of Oriental origin. Europe borrowed from the Muslim civilization basic ideas of algebra and trigonometry. Ibn Sina’s Canon of Medicine came to be widely used in European universities. Aryabhata, Brahmagupta and Bhaskara and their later improvement in Kerala, India led to sophisticated mathematical models without which Europe would have been unable to achieve its scientific breakthrough. The idea of rationalism that Weber made as the foundation of his theory of Western modernity was first developed by Muslim philosophers and the Chinese. The idea of experimental science also originated in the Muslim civilization. The lateen sail, compass and other important naval techniques which were crucial for European voyages of discovery owe their origin either to the Muslims or the Chinese. The gunpowder, paper and the model of printing press and possibly the prototype of cannon developed earlier in China flowed to Europe through trade routes and carried by travellers. Even Enlightenment owes its origin to China. The political economy of Adam Smith, in fact, springs from Confucius. China supplied most of the agricultural technology and practices including heavy plough that enabled Europe to launch its agricultural revolution. Even James Watt’s idea of steam engine may have come from China. In a similar way, the models of steel and cotton manufacturing had Oriental origin. A relatively backward Europe had absorbed the knowledge science and technology of the Orient and created a well-spring of innovations that allowed it to develop capitalism and its global domination. The Western capitalism now faces the same threat of decline as the Orient faced in the 18th century. It remains to be seen whether China or India can overtake the West within the next half a century or more. The Owl of Minerva began its flight through the twilight of the Orient to herald a new ‘magic’ beginning in the West. It was Columbus, Copernicus, coal and colony that led to the
development of the Western power and hegemony that started its ascent in a former Roman colony—Great Britain which became the master of the world and culminated after the Second World War into what Cromwell described as "a cold, poor and useless place,"—the New World (Findlay and O'Rourke, 2007: 233).

Conclusion

Said never attempted to explore the whole corpus of Oriental scholarship. His aim was to map out the underworld of Western civilization through an analysis of selected fictional and non-fictional texts and narratives. He has been immensely successful in this venture by developing what Kuhn (1970) calls paradigm in the broader sense of a world view and a technique of textual analysis. He only invented a specific way of seeing a key aspect orientalist discourse. Western culture like all other cultures manifests humanism and liberalism of enduring value. Said himself is a product of it. He no less than any other intellectual who prized it highly. To deny this essential humanism that he has cherished all life will be an injustice to him. In our troubled times when extremism of different kinds have reared their heads, Said becomes more relevant than any other intellectual.

Four decades after Said unmasked Orientalism, it is not enough just to elaborate the nature of Orientalism. We need to move beyond him to understand what gave rise to Orientalism as an ideology by locating it within the dynamics of the rise and fall of civilizations and how every dominant civilization rises on the basis of a fundamentally new technology and a new ideology. Although Said provides powerful perspective to unlearn, we need to develop a more complex and unified theoretical perspective to account for how civilizations rise and fall and how capitalism took over a minor ideological stream and turned it into a vast ideological arsenal of great power to exert its global dominance. Sociology and social sciences which were born in the interstices of colonialism (Wallerstein, 1978) and embody it and continues to hold sway over us. The superior knowledge and technology of the West continue to keep the discourse of Orientalism alive in different shapes and forms and it is likely to persist as long as it maintains its superiority of knowledge and hence power as Foucault asserted in the context of Europe. Through the power of discourse the West was able to turn the Orient into its other marked by a series and sequence of absences. The rise of India and China however, as the new core of global capitalism has largely undercut the political and economic foundation of Orientalism. It gives us new scope to move towards an enlarged horizon of historical and social scientific knowledge. Recent studies from the world-system perspective by Wallerstein, Frank, Chase-Dunn and his associates and the growing literature on how societies collapse lead us towards a new frontier of social theory grounded in a much more complex cyclical theory of social change. This paper is intended to make a small contribution towards this direction through a theoretical and historical review of the literature on Orientalism highlighting Said's contribution and providing the sketch of a new model of social theory and apply it in the context pre-colonial South Asia. It is, however, necessary to emphasize that it is useless and sterile to eulogize the Oriental past and privilege the local ideologies to replace Orientalism. Nor it is enough to chronicle spread of Western ideology by 'provincializing' (Chakrabarty, 2000) the West. The task ahead is to enrich and expand the horizon of sociology to understand why a particular civilization emerges and then falls and how it transmits its heritage to a new civilization. All civilizations emerge on the ruins of
the old and absorbing their wisdom. Europe rose on the shoulders of the Orient absorbing its knowledge and technology. The emergence of China and India rests on the knowledge and technology of the West. As long as they continue to absorb Western knowledge and technology and add to it, they will enjoy the evolutionary spiral. It is neither necessary nor inevitable to develop an ideology of counter-orientalsim. What is more necessary is to articulate the essential humanism of both Oriental and Western civilizations that Said symbolized and at the same time developing and deploying more complex social theory to understand better the barbarism of our time and stand against it. It is also necessary in our battle for survival against the looming risks and threats including climate change and dangerous biotechnological experiments that we will confront more and more in the 21st century. It is equally important as Weber reminded us many years ago in his conclusion to the essay entitled "Science and Vocation", we must not succumb to and 'obey' the 'demon' ‘who' holds ‘the fibers' of our ‘very life' (Weber, 1958:196).

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