

I.B. TAURIS

M. KEITH BOOKER and ISRA DARAISEH

# CONSUMERIST ORIENTALISM

THE CONVERGENCE OF ARAB AND AMERICAN POPULAR  
CULTURE IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM



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*We dedicate this book to each other and to our own collaboration, an example  
of cultural convergence that stands as proof of our main thesis.*

وانقسمت الى امرأتين  
فلا أنا شرقية  
ولا أنا غربية

I have been split into two women,  
So that I am not Eastern,  
So that I am not Western.

—Mahmoud Darwish

*But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth.*

*When two strong souls stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of  
the earth!*

—Rudyard Kipling, “The Ballad of East and West”  
(with a slight emendation.)

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# Introduction: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Transnational Flow in the Age of Global Capitalism

One character in Kim Stanley Robinson's American science fiction novel *New York 2140* (Amelia Black, the host of a "cloud" program that is the 2140 equivalent of today's "web series") complains about those who believe in maintaining "pure" versions of local environments or cultures:

We've been mixing things up for thousands of years now, poisoning some creatures and feeding others, and moving everything around. Ever since humans left Africa we've been doing that. So when people start to get upset about this, when they begin to insist on the purity of some place or some time, it drives me crazy, I can't stand it. It's a mongrel world. (259)

The "cloud" itself is, like today's "web," a key example of this mongrelization, aspects of which more scholarly observers have described with terms such as "globalization" or "transnational cultural flow." The eminent Palestinian American scholar Edward Said has himself noted that "partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic" (*Culture* xxv).

We agree with both Amelia Black and Said, except that we would argue that today's transnational flow of culture, while it has "empire" as an important part of its historical background, is enabled even more by the *fall* of the great European colonial empires, a demise that opened the way for today's global capitalist system. Transnational flow has, among other things, done a great deal to break down localized distinctions between cultures, rendering ideas such as the Orientalist notion of a polar opposition between Eastern and Western cultures spectacularly obsolete, but it has been able to do so partly because the empires that once upheld such distinctions have been replaced by a global capitalism that depends on free flow and interchangeability. Under such a system, the mongrelization of the world's cultures is inevitable.

This mongrelization, however, does not imply homogeneity, but in fact can produce interesting (if confusing and unsettling) new forms of diversity.

Human cultures have often been destroyed by contact with other cultures in our planet's bloody history, but cultures have also frequently been enriched and diversified through contact with outside forces. The culture of the Middle East might seem to be under threat due to the influence and power of the West in the region (many there certainly see it that way), but in fact the culture of the Arab world has never been more diverse—to the point that the very term “Arab world” is now useful primarily as a rhetorical convenience, rather than as a label for some actually existing phenomenon. Algeria is different from Saudi Arabia in many, many ways, for example, and even neighboring countries with intertwined histories (say, Egypt and Libya, or Jordan and Lebanon) have developed distinctly different cultural identities. Perhaps more importantly, even those identities themselves are complex and multiple. There is no Jordanian point of view or culture, for example, only points of view and cultures. Ramtha and Amman differ as much as Arkansas and New York, and the attitudes and opinions of individuals (especially in metropolitan centers) can vary significantly even in a given locale.

We are writing in the year 2018. Radical Islamist imams in the Middle East are at this moment furiously conjuring up *fatwas* against the evils of America and American culture. In retaliation for the threat to their beliefs that they find in Western culture and American foreign policy, extremist Islamist groups—their minds apparently immersed in the eighth century despite their facility with high-tech weaponry and communications—are no doubt currently planning more terrorist attacks against targets in the West. These Arabs live in a harsh and morally rigid world starkly opposed to the seductive gleam of Western consumer culture. On the other hand, their world is also starkly opposed to the world in which the majority of people in most Arab countries live their daily lives. Severe-looking Muslim men in flowing beards and robes walking down the street in an American town might make many nervous, but many Arabs would be made uncomfortable by this sight in their own towns as well. For every staunchly anti-American Arab who thinks American culture is a tool of Satan, many more Arabs are clustered around their television sets in modern living rooms that look like they might be in Peoria, watching Arabic-dubbed versions of the latest American action movies via satellite television, rooting for the same heroes that American audiences root for. And three- and four-year-old girls all over the Arab world are gleefully dancing and singing tunes from *Frozen* and dreaming of becoming Disney princesses; children of their age are often exposed to so much American popular culture that they speak English as well as or better than Arabic.

Most Americans, for their part, are very much aware of the extremists and the terrorists, but not so much aware of Arab television-viewing habits or Arab Disney princesses. They know about ISIS and its attacks in Europe, but many don't know that most ISIS violence occurs in the Middle East and is directed at other Muslims. They know that the Middle East has oil and deserts and camels and that there are Arab Islamist fanatics who are willing to blow themselves to bits in suicide bombings just to disrupt the peaceful pursuit of the Western democratic way of life. They know that Americans must be vigilant in order to protect themselves from these attacks. They are even vaguely aware that the American military machine visits its high-tech fury upon the Middle East on a regular basis in a supposed attempt to help provide this protection, though they might not like to think about the details of what this really entails. As British-Iraqi rapper Lowkey puts it in his 2011 song "Terrorist?," these attacks produce "screams" that never reach the "earholes" of the American public. Finally, most Americans know next to nothing about the history of the Middle East or about how we really got to this point.

Americans do, however, come more and more into contact with Middle Eastern culture every day. The increasing penetration of Middle Eastern foods into American markets (and into the popular American consciousness) is a good case in point—and an important one, given the key role often played by food in establishing and maintaining cultural identities. Americans have been consuming various forms of Middle Eastern food as exotic specialties at least since the nineteenth century, of course, but the twenty-first century has seen a shift in which such foods are becoming less exotic and more routine.<sup>1</sup> What self-respecting American supermarket, for example, does not now stock a variety of brands and flavors of hummus? Granted, the leading line of hummus sold in America might be the Israeli brand Sabra, but other Arab foods are also becoming more and more popular in both restaurants and supermarkets nationwide. In the current age of globalization, this should come as no surprise. Indeed, American supermarkets routinely stock foods from all over the world. Virtually all of them sell French cheeses and Italian pasta sauces, for example, while various forms of Mexican and Asian foods are increasingly popular as well.

Even during the Cold War years, when their stock was significantly less international, American supermarkets became a key element of Western propaganda, their clean, well-lit spaces and well-stocked shelves, neatly stacked with an amazing variety of foods, standing in sharp contrast to the grungy, poorly stocked grocery stores of Eastern Europe. Such contrasts still exist around the world, and the quest for food and clean water is a daily struggle for many millions

of people on our planet. But supermarkets in general provide one of the best examples of globalization, with stores all over the world stocking products from all over the world. For that matter, some of the most popular of America's famed supermarkets are now foreign-owned, as in the case of the German-owned Aldi chain, which also happens to own as a subsidiary one of America's favorite (and most American-sounding) supermarket chains, Trader Joe's.

Of course, in places like the Middle East, there are still quaint shops specializing in local delicacies, providing still another sort of contrast—though these shops sometimes serve as many Western tourists as they do Eastern locals.

Meanwhile, it is also the case that urban centers in the Middle East typically feature small specialty shops that stock mainly (and often *only*) Western products. In addition, most cities of the Middle East feature large, ultra-modern supermarkets that can easily rival the best America has to offer in both quality and variety of food on offer, though many of these supermarkets are themselves Western-owned. For example, in Amman, Jordan, one can go to a huge, ultra-modern superstore operated by the French conglomerate Carrefour that includes a large, well-equipped supermarket section. (Carrefour also operates several smaller stores around the city, in addition to this superstore.) The Amman superstore certainly carries more Middle Eastern foodstuffs than the typical American supermarket (though there are American stores, such as Houston's Phoenicia Specialty Foods, that actually have more of a Middle Eastern flavor to their stock than does an Amman Carrefour). But Carrefour and other Middle Eastern supermarkets also stock a variety of international foods (including American ones, such as soft drinks) manufactured specifically for the Middle Eastern market, generally featuring labels printed in both English and Arabic—as are the store signs in Carrefour. And many international foods stocked in Carrefour—such as the aforementioned French cheeses and Italian pasta sauces—feature labels printed *only* in English, the international language of food (like so many other things). These products thus appear pretty much the same on the shelves of an Amman Carrefour (or a Lulu Hypermarket in the Gulf) as they would on those of an Arkansas Walmart.

## Orientalism and capitalism

Given such phenomena, we would surely seem to be nearing the end times for the sort of binary thinking described in Said's *Orientalism* (1978), thinking that would imagine the "East" as a mysterious and exotic (if degraded and inferior)

Other to the “West.” Yet Orientalist stereotyping persists, and Said’s book remains a useful, if now somewhat dated, text for understanding the history of interactions between the Eastern and the Western worlds—even if such separate worlds no longer really exist. *Orientalism* is also one of the founding texts of the contemporary discipline of postcolonial studies and one of the most important academic books of all time, even if some scholars have argued that it has done more harm than good.<sup>2</sup>

*Orientalism* hovers in the background of the current study, as we seek to use Said’s work as a springboard for a study of contemporary Arab popular culture in dialogue with contemporary Western (and especially American) culture. Both widely criticized and widely admired, Said’s book has certainly drawn attention to its topic in ways that cannot help but be useful, whatever the arguments about the specifics of Said’s methods or conclusions.<sup>3</sup> Using examples drawn primarily from eighteenth-to-twentieth-century French and English texts (both fiction and nonfiction, both scholarly and sensational) Said describes the long process by which the “Orient” (basically anything roughly east or south of Europe, though his interest is specifically in the Arab Middle East) has been described by Western writers through a systematic series of stereotypes designed to depict the Orient as the inferior Other of Europe in ways that have helped Europe (and later the United States) to exert political, cultural, and/or economic power over this Other.

For Said, this Othering process proceeds according to a binary logic in which Europe and the Orient are conceived as polar opposites, with negative depictions of the East having less to do with the reality of the Orient than with the attempt to produce positive representations of the West. This kind of thinking, of course, is closely aligned with the ideology of colonialism. As Frantz Fanon famously states in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “The colonial world is a Manichean world” (41). Said (who, oddly, does not mention Fanon’s work directly in *Orientalism*<sup>4</sup>) notes that, in this kind of thinking, “On the one hand, there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things” (49). Or, as he puts it a few pages earlier, “the Orient is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’: thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (40).

Drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault, Said concludes that Orientalism is best understood as a discourse that sets the conditions under which one is able to think or talk about the Orient:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it,

authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (3)

Further, for Said, this discourse (which pertains both to scholarly study of the Orient and to artistic representation of the Orient) is inseparable from the history of real-world material relations between the East and the West, relations that have for centuries been informed by the domination and exploitation of the former by the latter: “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5). Indeed, it is the fact of these real-world power relations that gives Orientalism its strength and longevity, while simultaneously making it more sinister and harmful. However, Orientalism is a fundamental component of the modern Western mindset, and not simply something that is tacked on after the fact. In particular, Said argues that “to say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact” (39).

Going on, Said further elaborates on his Foucauldian vision of Orientalism as a discourse by noting that “Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine” (42). But Said is also heavily influenced by the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, whose pioneering work in describing how a bourgeois minority can use ideological manipulation to maintain the largely voluntary support and obedience of a working-class majority was a crucial breakthrough in our understanding of how modern societies function. It is thus no accident that Said’s description of Orientalism as a discourse often sounds so similar to modern Marxist descriptions of ideology. Indeed, the various readings of Western texts that Said produces in order to demonstrate the workings of Orientalism as a discourse in these texts can also be viewed as an essentially Marxian exercise in ideology critique.

We would argue, however, that Orientalism should not be regarded as an ideology in its own right, however ideological it might be. It is, like the colonialism with which it is intertwined, a particular manifestation of the bourgeois ideology of capitalism, an ideology which—with its individualist emphasis on a dynamic of self versus other and its glorification of competition—lends itself particularly well to the kind of binary thinking that underlies Orientalism (and colonialism). Bourgeois ideology, however, is a complex phenomenon that operates very differently in different contexts. In Western Europe in the eighteenth century, for

example, it was a radical ideology that challenged the power of the *ancien régime*, leading to the French Revolution and to what historian Eric Hobsbawm has dubbed “the age of revolution.” By the nineteenth century, however, capitalism was firmly established in Western Europe and the bourgeoisie became staunchly conservative, more interested in preserving what they had already gained than in trying anything new. In nineteenth-century Russia, on the other hand, bourgeois ideology remained a radical, progressive force amid a social and political system that was still essentially medieval.

The specifics are very different, of course, but today’s Middle East is in somewhat the same situation as nineteenth-century Russia with regard to the status of bourgeois ideology. While the basic content of that ideology is the same whether one is in Bentonville or Baghdad, the meaning (and some details) of this content can vary widely depending on the context in which it operates. The same ideology that serves to reinforce and maintain the status quo in the West represents a radical challenge to the powers-that-be in the Middle East, creating a tug of war of forces that creates an extremely complex and agonistic ideological climate. Thus, as opposed to the Western world of contemporary capitalism, in which the process of capitalist modernization is essentially complete, leaving capitalism itself in a thoroughly dominant position without any real rivals, the Arab world is very much contested terrain, with radically different ideologies—and radically different forms of social organization—striving for supremacy. The most important of these alternative ideologies is Islam, of course, but even Islam itself is contested terrain, with radical fundamentalists struggling with more modern and progressive Muslims for the power to define what Islam really is—not to mention other rifts within Islam, such as the Shia-Sunni conflict.<sup>5</sup> Even in the seemingly “pure” Wahhabist stronghold of Saudi Arabia, visions of Islam can vary greatly. As the narrator of Fahd al-Atiq’s 2004 Saudi novel *Ka’in mu’ajjal* (*Life on Hold*) puts it, describing the sweeping changes he has seen in Riyadh in his lifetime, “Society had split into two camps, one camp adopting the slogan that God is strict in punishment, the other insisting that God is forgiving and merciful” (19).

Similarly, it is obvious that the opposition between the West and the Middle East today is not a simple Manichean one between modernity and tradition. In a sense, it is an opposition between a Western society in which capitalist modernization is complete and an Eastern society in which modernization is very much incomplete, leaving room for alternative social visions, especially Islamic ones, but also showing a strong presence of capitalist modernity. But, in reality, “opposition” itself is no longer the appropriate term for the relationship between the East and the West, especially in the realm of culture, where



increasing globalization is far more complicated than the simple exportation of American culture to the rest of the world, which then absorbs the Westernizing messages of that culture—a model that Brian Edwards calls the “logic of broadcasting” (22). Instead, Edwards rightly insists that “circulation” is a better model for the way culture flows about the world, with different cultures interacting with one another in multiple (and multidirectional) ways.

Said’s *bête noire* Bernard Lewis has spoken of a civilizational “clash” between Islam and modernity in the Middle East. Ben Barber has spoken of a global confrontation between Islam on the one hand and the Americanization, or McDonaldization,<sup>6</sup> of the world on the other. But Jan Nederveen Pieterse more accurately describes the entanglement between Eastern and Western interests when he argues that “the interlacing of western capitalism and consumerism and Islamic values and institutions, is much closer to the mark” (139). Timothy Mitchell, for example, notes the extensive collusion among American oil interests, the Saudi government, and radical Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, referring to the outcome as “McJihad.”<sup>7</sup> It is this global mishmash of cultures that constitutes the mongrelized contemporary world, in which one might imagine a French novel inspiring an American television series, which is then adapted into a Bollywood film, which then supplies an idea for an Arab video clip, and so on. Importantly, though, each of these might add its own local touches to the product, in the process often referred to as “glocalization,” a term that originally arose in the 1980s to the adaptation of global business practices to local conditions (especially in Japan) but that has recently been increasingly used in a cultural context. Of course, in the era of global capitalism and postmodernism, business and culture are increasingly inseparable—as, for that matter, are the global and the local.<sup>8</sup>

Our thinking about the nature of contemporary capitalism is fundamentally informed by the work of Fredric Jameson, who follows Marxist thinkers such as Ernest Mandel in believing that, in the wake of the collapse of the great European colonial empires after the Second World War, capitalism has entered a new “late” era of globalization and transnationalism, informed by a

new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification on a now-global scale. (*Postmodernism* xix)

Also crucial to our thinking is Jameson's seminal theorization of postmodernism as the "cultural logic" of this late capitalism, that is, as the cultural dominant that appears when capitalist modernization is complete, leading to the incorporation of culture as simply another commodity within the capitalist economic system. All parts of the world now participate in this process, but that does not mean that some parts are not more thoroughly saturated by it, more thoroughly modernized, than others. In the West, especially in the United States, postmodernism thus reigns supreme as a cultural dominant, while in the Middle East postmodernism still contends for supremacy with other powerful cultural forces. In fact, while Jameson himself emphasizes that postmodernism, like late capitalism itself, is a global phenomenon, he has consistently insisted that the phenomenon is further advanced in the West than in what used to be called the "third world," where localized pockets of cultural resistance remain. This does not mean, however, that postmodernism exerts no gravitational pull there. It simply means that other forces (like Islam) still have power there as well and that these forces are not necessarily aligned with capitalism—or might even be aligned against it.

It is clear that this global situation is far different from the Manichean one with which Said associates Orientalism. The world has simply changed a great deal since the appearance of the texts on which Said concentrates—and even since the appearance of *Orientalism* itself in 1978. Because bourgeois ideology changes over time (as the capitalism it supports evolves through various phases), viewing Orientalism as the product of bourgeois ideology leads us to expect that Orientalism should change over time as well—in addition to operating differently in different contexts in general. In our view, a major weakness in Said's conception of Orientalism is his depiction of it as a monolithic and virtually transhistorical force, a view he takes because he believes Orientalism to be somehow more fundamental than capitalism, and thus somehow impervious to the historical changes wrought by capitalist modernization.

Our view of history is very different in that we see capitalist modernization as the principal driving force behind the evolution of world history in the past several centuries. While it is true that certain attitudes and ideas that might be described as "Orientalist" clearly predate capitalism, this fact does not make Orientalism a more fundamental driving force for history in the modern era. To us, it simply implies that capitalism has appropriated Orientalism for its own purposes over the centuries, just as it has appropriated so many other things, Christianity included. In the same way, we would argue that Orientalism has survived colonialism not because it is a more fundamental

historical phenomenon than colonialism, but because Orientalism is more fundamentally aligned with capitalism than with colonialism. Similarly, it is clear that the rise of modern capitalism in Europe was possible only after the colonization of the Americas had brought sufficient wealth (i.e., sufficient *capital*) to Europe to make the capitalist system viable there. But this does not mean that colonialism is more fundamental than capitalism or that colonialism is the force that drives capitalism. It simply means that colonialism was a valuable resource for capitalist modernization from the very beginnings of the modern era.

For us, Orientalism is deeply intertwined with the historical phenomenon of colonialism, but both Orientalism and colonialism, during the modern period, are *results* of capitalist modernization, not causes. And, of course, capitalist modernization is a dynamic historical phenomenon that takes on different characteristics (and has different results) over time. By extending his examples of Orientalism to twentieth-century American texts, Said demonstrates the ongoing relevance of his analysis of Orientalism to the vexed present-day relationship between the United States and the Middle East, something he would continue to demonstrate through the rest of his career, until his death in 2003. Unfortunately, we believe he took insufficient account of the ways in which twentieth-century Orientalism, especially in America, differs from the classic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Orientalism that he concentrates on in his analysis.

One reason for this failure might be the fact that Said largely limits his twentieth-century examples to the work of academic Orientalists, diminishing his coverage of culture and instead concentrating on the work of scholars such as H. A. R. Gibb and Bernard Lewis—reserving particular choler for the latter. There can be no doubt that such explorations of more contemporary Orientalist scholarship continue to be necessary—perhaps more urgently than ever before—as of this writing in 2018, when the complexities of increasing globalization make understanding and communication among different cultures more important than ever before, but when *mis*understanding between the United States and the Middle East seems to have reached an all-time high. However, we feel that these explorations need to include culture, and particularly *popular* culture in order to understand the true relationships between American and Arab cultures in the changed circumstances of today's world system.

In particular, popular culture tends to be more in tune with the currents of capitalism than does scholarship or high art, partly because it is itself so thoroughly commodified. Moreover, popular culture in its contemporary form

is very much a product of capitalist modernization. Cultural phenomena such as the films, television programs, and video clips discussed in this study only came into existence as a result of capitalist modernization and took the form they did only as a result of the way in which capitalism transformed itself from the classic production-oriented nineteenth-century form that produced the great European colonial empires to the late consumer-oriented form that has produced the phenomenon of globalization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Capitalism underwent sweeping changes in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, changes whose ramifications ultimately brought about the late capitalism of today. If one believes, as we do, that Orientalism is a product of capitalist modernization, then it only makes sense that Orientalism, too, would take on different forms during this time period. Moreover, given the increasingly pluralist nature of capitalism and the ideology that supports it since the beginning of the twentieth century, it only makes sense that Orientalism would be plural as well. In Chapter 1 of this study we examine the ways in which the rise of a consumerist form of capitalism in the United States led to the development of a distinctively new form of Orientalist discourse that was related less to colonial power relations between the West and the East and more to the tendency of consumer capitalism to treat any and all images from any and all cultures as fodder for its marketing machine. This new consumerist Orientalism has been an important strain of American Orientalism ever since, though elements of European-style colonial Orientalism have continued to exist in America as well, seeing periodic resurgences—as in anti-Ottoman sentiment during the First World War or anti-Arab sentiment in the wake of the 9/11 bombings. There are also other forms of Orientalism in American culture, as in the special emphasis placed on the Holy Land in much of the thought of the religious Right.

Orientalism in general is a form of Othering that can usefully be described via Julia Kristeva's theorization of the concept of abjection, a process through which certain objects or ideas are identified as wholly foreign to us, then regarded on the one hand with horror and revulsion and on the other hand with an odd sort of fascination, both aspects of this twinned response going well beyond what is rationally justified. Kristeva describes the process largely in psychological terms, though large-scale phenomena such as Orientalism are clearly best described in ideological ones. Still, the analogy remains. One can then say that the classic colonialist Orientalism described by Said includes both horror and fascination, but tends more toward horror, while the consumerist Orientalism we describe

in this book tends more toward the pole of fascination, while also still including elements of horror.

As consumerist (and American) capitalism has become more and more ascendant, the new style of consumerist Orientalism has gained traction worldwide, helping to set the stage for the transnational cultural flows that are a central concern of this study. We particularly seek to outline some of the many ways in which the popular culture of the Arab Middle East (for better or worse) is coming more and more to resemble the culture of the United States, or, more accurately, the culture produced and distributed globally by a late capitalism that, however international, remains centered in the United States.

We believe our shift in focus (relative to Said) from high culture and classical scholarship to contemporary popular culture, especially from the Middle East, is desirable, even necessary, to fully understand the contemporary cultural relationship between the United States and the Middle East. For one thing, today's popular culture, driven by advances in media and communications, is inherently more mobile than the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts explored by Said, facilitating much more rapid and extensive cultural exchange between the East and the West. In addition, popular culture exerts a more powerful influence on more people than do the texts of high culture or academia. Indeed, the explosion in Middle Eastern pop cultural production (influenced heavily by American popular culture) in recent years means that the cultures of the East and the West are now engaged in a much more extensive dialogue than they were when *Orientalism* was written and published—and certainly more than they were when the texts with which *Orientalism* mostly deals were originally written. Of course, the growing similarities between contemporary Arab popular culture and American popular culture should themselves be enough to demonstrate that the kind of strict binary logic through which Orientalist thinking views the West and the East as polar opposites has no basis in contemporary reality. However, most Americans are not even aware of the growing convergence of American and Middle Eastern culture, while many in the Arab world view this phenomenon primarily as an occasion for horror and dismay.

Meanwhile, the kind of binary thinking that underlies Orientalism continues to hold sway on both sides of this supposed binary, with each viewing the other as a dangerous and mysterious Other that represents a fundamental threat to their most basic values and even their very way of life. In the West, the classic time-honored Orientalist images of the Arab world—such as fiercely savage men riding about the desert on camels or exotically seductive women undulating in belly-dance costumes that might have been borrowed from

Barbara Eden—continue to maintain a surprising grip on the American mind. Indeed, if such images are losing any purchase at all, it is because they are being replaced by even more harmful images of obscenely rich (and sexually depraved) oil sheikhs, crazed suicide bombers, beaten-down and submissive veiled women, and hooded executioners lopping off the heads of children because they were caught listening to Western music. Meanwhile, on the other side of the East-West divide, in a surge of what one might call “Occidentalism,” the tendency to view Western culture in stereotypical terms that lead to the notion of America as the “Great Satan” seems to be gaining, not losing purchase in the contemporary Arab world.

## Orientalism and Occidentalism

It is not difficult to see why Iranians, Iraqis, and others in the Middle East, given their special experience with American interventionism, might be suspicious of the agenda of the United States in the region. For example, it is clear why so many Arabs in the Middle East might view the United States with fear and loathing, given events such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the continued US support for an Israeli regime that seems to have gone over into all-out anti-Arab fanaticism. Indeed, it would be difficult to overestimate the extent to which anti-American sentiment in the Arab world is tied up with the seemingly blind US support for an extremist Israel, widely regarded in the Arab world as America’s pampered child. For their own part, from the 9/11 bombings to the continuing atrocities being committed by ISIS and other fundamentalist groups in the Middle East itself, Arabs have provided plenty of fuel for Orientalist antagonism toward their world in the United States. Indeed, rising religious fundamentalism on both sides of the Atlantic would seem to provide key fuel for both Orientalism and Occidentalism in the twenty-first century, with both Christian and Muslim fundamentalists being so convinced of the righteousness of their views (and the downright evil of any who oppose those views) that intercultural dialogue becomes well-nigh impossible.

Christian fundamentalists in the West and Muslim fundamentalists in the East (as well as Jewish fundamentalists in Israel) have a great deal in common in terms of their basic inability to understand and appreciate perspectives other than their own. They also have other things in common, such as a patriarchal tendency to view women as less than fully human and as a possible threat to moral rectitude whose sexuality must be contained and controlled at all costs. Indeed, the noted

Egyptian writer and social activist Nawal El Saadawi has argued that such similarities among these different fundamentalisms are far from coincidental, and that this patriarchal tendency (along with economic systems that support class inequality) overrides what seem to be glaring differences among these points of view. “Everything,” she said in a 2006 interview, “is linked—George Bush and Bin Laden are twins. All the fundamentalist movements—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—they all have the same face. It is a religious revival to protect patriarchy, linked to class and gender oppression” (Bhaduri).

In short, even the extremist positions that would seem to oppose the East to the West in the starkest of terms are underwritten by certain fundamental similarities in our globalized age. A common reliance on systems of oppression and inequality in terms of class and gender and a common tendency toward suspicion of racial Others might not, of course, provide the most positive and fruitful basis for intercultural communication between the East and the West. In this study, we remain cognizant of these ominous similarities, but seek to focus on developments in the contemporary cultures of America and the Middle East that might further cross-cultural communication in more positive ways, overcoming tendencies toward Orientalist thought in the West and Occidentalism thought in the East.

These developments, we believe, are related to transnational forces that potentially have a strong utopian potential, just as globalization itself has considerable utopian potential. Even Jameson, who sees globalization primarily as the process by which capitalism exerts its global supremacy, squelching utopian energies along the way, grants that globalization can “pass effortlessly from a dystopian vision of world control to the celebration of world multiculturalism with the mere changing of a valence” (*Archaeologies* 215). Robert Tally, meanwhile, points to specific examples—such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement—that suggest that this change in valence might well already be underway. As Patrick Hayden puts it, “utopia and globalization are intrinsically linked,” both being driven by “the desire to transgress borders and to encounter other lands and peoples, to connect together otherwise disparate places and identities across the globe” (51).<sup>9</sup> Much of our work in this volume is in the spirit of such observations.

Of course, negative forces circulate freely in today’s world as well, and even such seemingly rigid ideologies as Orientalism are in many ways quite fluid. Stereotyping is notoriously portable, given that stereotypes reside primarily in the mind of the beholder rather than in physical reality. Much of the work of Foucault, who is so important to Said in *Orientalism*, illustrates this very

point. Indeed, Said draws extensively upon the work of Foucault not only in elaborating the idea of Orientalism as a discourse, but in his focus on the way in which European society has long developed positive images of itself through contrast with despised Others. For Foucault, these Others might be lepers, or madmen, or criminals, or homosexuals. One might add women and the poor to this list as well, though Foucault does not explicitly examine these categories. Very much the same mechanisms of stereotyping (and even many of the same stereotypes) operate in all of these cases, in which affluent, white, law-abiding, heterosexual, male Westerners hold themselves up as paragons of capability and virtue in contrast to the laziness, depravity, and untrustworthiness of the poor, the nonwhite, the criminal, the homosexual, the female, or the Oriental.

Stereotypes, generated by the assumptions of a discourse and thus unmoored from material reality, are free to float about in this way, operating very much in the same manner as commodities, which are endlessly interchangeable. Indeed, at least as it operates under the auspices of capitalism, such stereotyping is essentially a form of commodification, removing Arabs (or gays, or manual workers, or whomever) from the real world of use value and plunging them instead into the abstractly artificial world of exchange value. The representations involved in these stereotypes derive value not from how well they describe reality but from how well they allow one to achieve what one wants to achieve with them. Said, of course, is aware that the kind of stereotyping that he associates with Orientalism is part of a broader tendency in Western social history, a fact that he makes especially clear in the "Afterword" that he wrote, not long before his death, for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism*:

Each age and society re-creates its "Others." From a static thing then, identity of self or of "other" is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies. (332)

Said's work has prompted decades of intense academic investigation of the phenomena he describes in *Orientalism*, so that the complex of rhetorical strategies by which the West has historically described, contained, and to an extent even created the East is now fairly well understood in academia. On the other hand, ongoing suspicion of Arabs and Muslims (the two are barely distinguished among many Americans) in the popular press and in the general American population suggests that this knowledge has not quite sunk in on a wider level. But the same can be said for the panoply of stereotypes, suspicions, and even downright superstitions that inform popular attitudes toward the



West—and especially the United States—in the Arab world. These attitudes in themselves constitute the discourse that one might call Occidentalism, though this discourse is of course less fully supported by scholarly study and less involved in the exertion of dominative power in the East than Orientalism is in the West.

The relationship between Orientalism and Occidentalism is itself, however, not a binary one. The two discourses are extensively intertwined. Among other things, as Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit have convincingly argued, the discourse of Occidentalism actually originated in the West, in critical reactions to the phenomenon of modernity, according to which the lure of wealth leads to greed and depravity, while devotion to change leads to a dehumanizing impermanence, instability, and loss of values. For example, the novels of Honoré de Balzac in the early nineteenth century (still perhaps showing a hint of the medieval Catholic horror of money and commerce) depict a postrevolutionary France in which Gordon Gekko might have found himself very much at home amid a mad scramble for cash that leads to a furious struggle of each against all. Meanwhile, Balzac's novels, while positioning themselves resolutely in opposition to modernity as whole, are shot through with a bourgeois ideology that helped them to become one of the paradigms of realist fiction, the ultimate bourgeois literary form. Bourgeois ideology is so complex, multiple, and nefarious that it is virtually impossible to position oneself in direct polar opposition to it or to engage with it without being seduced by it to some extent.

Karl Marx understood this property of bourgeois ideology (and of capitalism as a whole) quite well. He and Friedrich Engels, then, positioned themselves not in polar opposition to capitalist modernity, but in dialectical relation to it, launching a critique of that phenomenon from within modernity itself. Thus, in the *Communist Manifesto*, they express not only considerable admiration for the ability of capitalism to transform traditional societies into modern ones, but also considerable dismay at the brutal way in which this transformation sweeps away everything in its path, leading to an arrant economism that reduces human relationships (and human beings) to mere commodities. Meanwhile, the capitalist devotion to seeking greater profits leads to a fierce emphasis on change and innovation that leaves individuals disoriented and dehumanized. In one of their more famous passages, they note that

constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudice and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all

that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, in his relations with his kind. (Marx and Engels 6)

Such concerns about the instability and lack of substance of life under capitalism form a crucial part of the background of contemporary Occidentalism. However, contemporary Islamic fundamentalism has introduced a new stridency in the furious moral indignation of its thoroughgoing rejection of modernity and everything it represents. Thus, Buruma and Margalit note that

Islamism, as an ideology, was only partly influenced by Western ideas. Its depiction of Western civilization as a form of idolatrous barbarism is an original contribution to the rich history of Occidentalism. This goes much further than the old prejudice that the West is addicted to money and greed. Idolatry is the most heinous religious sin and must therefore be countered with all the force and sanctions at the true believers' disposal. (102)

Marx and Engels, of course, would predict that Islamism is here fighting a losing battle. For them, capitalist modernity is an irresistible force that can only be defeated when it finally collapses beneath its own weight, brought down by the proletarian class that it itself created. They base this analysis, of course, on primarily economic terms, well before the birth of today's global capitalist popular culture, a force that makes capitalism considerably more formidable than it had been in the nineteenth-century context in which Marx and Engels worked.

The American Muslim journalist and writer G. Willow Wilson (whose 2012 World Fantasy Award-winning novel *Alif the Unseen* is a key example of the flow of Middle Eastern culture into American culture) has argued that Arab antipathy toward the United States comes in two distinctly different flavors, which one might describe as two different strains of Occidentalism. More moderate Middle Easterners, she argues, are resentfully aware of the military and economic power of the United States and of the way in which this kind of American muscle has often been flexed to the detriment of the Middle East. This sort of antipathy, she concludes, has very little to do with religion, but has everything to do with a perceived imbalance of power (*Butterfly* 135). On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalists base their hostility toward the United States very much on religious principles, informed by a fierce sense of the sinfulness not of American foreign policy, but of American popular culture. For these fundamentalists, she argues, American culture is like a cancer spreading through the Middle East, bringing materialism and loss of traditional Islamic values in its wake. The fundamentalists she observed while living in Egypt "hated the materialism that

was spreading through Egypt and the Gulf like a parasite, turning whole cities—Dubai, Jeddah—into virtual shopping malls, and blamed this materialism on Western influence” (136).

We would argue that these two forms of Occidentalism are far more intertwined than Wilson indicates, with many in the Middle East making little distinction between American political power and American cultural power. Meanwhile, Wilson (perhaps falling into more problematic binary logic) argues that materialism is very much at home in the West and so does relatively little damage there. “But the Middle East,” she argues, “is peopled by cultures that struggled for centuries to rid themselves of anything iconic or graphic or unnecessary; there, materialism acts as a kind of cultural smallpox, leaving mindless ostentation and artistic sterility in its wake” (136). The messages conveyed by American-style popular culture are thus, at least to Islamic fundamentalists, like a disease.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, they are a disease that is very hard to treat except by extreme measures. These fundamentalists “knew they could not make the ritualized, morally appraising culture of traditional Arab Islam—in which one must be worthy of truth, love, and God to attain them—more attractive than the lifestyle endorsed in the West. So they demonized attraction itself” (137).

Wilson’s two versions of Arab Occidentalism—which might be described as political (or anticolonial) Occidentalism and cultural (or anti-consumerist) Occidentalism—correspond in many ways to the two principal forms of Orientalism that we discuss in this study. In any case, Wilson sees Islam (at least of the fundamentalist variety) as inherently at odds with the culture of the West, though this does not mean that more progressive forms of Islam cannot reach an accommodation with that culture—as has Wilson herself in, for example, her work in the American comic book industry, as well as in *Alif the Unseen*. In any case, her comments help to shed light on one of the central points we make in this volume—that Arab popular culture is heavily informed by Western (especially American) influences, though it has often taken ownership of those influences and made them into something new—which means that it mostly falls within the realm of the postmodern.

The many anti-consumerist Occidentalists Muslims who see Islam as the polar opposite of American culture do not produce pop cultural alternatives to that culture directly, but instead opt out of the Arab Culture Industry as inherently contaminated by the West.<sup>11</sup> This form of Islam rejects that industry out of hand, as when ISIS urges its followers to destroy satellite dishes throughout the Arab world to cut off access of the Culture Industry to the hearts and

minds of its Arab consumers.<sup>12</sup> ISIS, of course, represents an extreme case, but conservative Arabs have been highly critical of the Westernization of Arab popular culture in recent years, especially in areas such as music video clips, which have been widely seen in the Arab world as scandalous, especially in their representation of women and sexuality, though also in their seeming endorsement of materialism. This sort of reaction might seem to verify certain Orientalist stereotypes about Arab culture, but it in fact has numerous Western equivalents, as when (especially white) American parents saw the newly emergent black-inflected rock music of the 1950s as the “devil’s music.” Similarly, Elouardaoui has specifically argued that the reaction against Arab video clips resembles the reaction of older, more conservative elements of British culture against the musical culture of British youth, as discussed by Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel. In any case, as Mellor notes, media-based popular culture remains contested terrain in the Arab world, with many seeing it as having great promise for building a viable pan-Arab cultural identity and others seeing it as destroying Arab identities and replacing them with Western ones (27).

While much has been made (especially in the West) of the rapid growth of Islamic fundamentalism in recent years, much less has been said about the even faster growth of the Western-style Culture Industry in the Middle East in the past couple of decades. The proliferation of delivery systems such as satellite television and the internet has facilitated greater access not only to works imported from the West but to the rapidly growing number of films, television programs, and music video clips that now form such an important part of popular culture in the Arab world. And Arab audiences have eagerly consumed this new culture, a phenomenon that might well demonstrate the seductive power of American popular culture, proving one of the fundamentalists’ points. However, the fact that this same seduction works so well on both Arabs and Americans can surely also be taken as an indication that Arabs and Americans are not as different as the fundamentalists on both sides would have us believe.

## Contemporary transnational flow

We demonstrate in this volume that American popular culture now exerts a powerful influence in the Arab world, where it is both consumed directly and used as a model for the creation of Arab popular culture. We argue, though, that the impact of American popular culture on the Arab world—however much it