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'There is No Orient': Hodgson and Said

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Panel on Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*

On a sunny January afternoon in 1978, I met for lunch with Edward Said at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, California. He was spending the year while completing *Orientalism*, his major book, which would be published in the fall. After an enjoyable meal, Said walked me to my car. As I was preparing to drive away, he suddenly asked whether I thought he should review Hodgson's three volume work, *The Venture of Islam*. He'd been asked to consider including it as part of a review essay on books on the Middle East for the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*. Since my own lengthy review of Hodgson's book was forthcoming in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* I sought to encourage him to do so. But he swiftly cut me off: "C'est un Islamologue!" he exclaimed (in French). Coming from Said, this was not encouraging. Such a pity, I thought as I drove down the wooded drive, the encounter with Hodgson's thought might have surprised him. But of course Said knew what he was doing. When his *New York Times Book Review* appeared a few months later, it focused on the work of Bernard Lewis. Adding Hodgson would only have muddied the waters. The rest, as they say, is history! The phantom encounter between Hodgson and Said has continued to haunt me. This talk provides an opportunity to speculate on what they might have said to one another.

Never fashionable, instinctively a democrat, Hodgson was in some respects the antithesis of Edward Said (1935-2003), a cosmopolitan intellectual who craved the limelight, whereas Hodgson cared little for the comforts of his position, and lived simply, even austerely. At first this comparison may seem forced. Yet despite their obvious many differences, the two men resembled one another in important ways: always brilliant, driven, sometimes abrupt, they excelled in making passionate enemies as well as friends. More crucially, both were deeply suspicious of claims of the superiority of western civilization and the occluding power of discourse (the term *discourse* was of course unavailable to Hodgson, but as we shall see the concept would have been congenial). Since Hodgson explicitly employed a civilizational frame (indeed one explicitly tied to Islam) in *Venture*, Said was not wrong to call him an "Islamologue" (a fancy dress French word for an orientalist). Yet, to stop there would have been to miss Hodgson's penetrating critique of the concept of civilization, and of western imperialism as well. Similar tensions can be found in Said's thought between his humanist defense of Enlightenment ideals and his strong critique of European imperialism and colonial forms of knowledge. Had he reviewed *Venture* Said might have found Hodgson to be a congenial discussion partner. The other papers on this panel consider Hodgson's work as an Islamicist. Here I'd like to think about Hodgson and Said as humanists each of whom had a profound critique of the civilizational paradigm for doing world history.

Who was Marshall G. S. Hodgson? Little known today, Hodgson (1922-1968) was an orientalist and world historian whose best known work, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* was published in three volumes by The University of Chicago Press in 1974. His *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History* (1993) provides a powerful alternative way to the dominant civilizations model of conceptualizing world history. While these books only appeared posthumously, Hodgson was a formidable intellectual presence on the Chicago campus, where he was chair of the Committee on Social Thought (later to become a forcing ground for neo-conservative intellectuals). Always a bit of an oddity in the culture of The University of Chicago of the 1950s and 60s, Hodgson was a Midwestern Quaker intellectual and World War II conscientious objector. His first published essay (1944) was a strong endorsement of world history and world federalism, dated Camp Elkton, Oregon, where he had been interned for his views during the war. At a time when holding either belief would brand one a weirdo, Hodgson was a militant vegetarian and a strong anti-racist. During the University of Chicago's ghetto-busting days in the late 1950s, Hodgson was one of a small group of Chicago faculty to engage the black community across the Midway. The epigram from the eighteenth century American Quaker John Woolman, with which he began *The Venture of Islam*, points the way: "To consider mankind otherwise than brethren, to think favours are peculiar to one nation and exclude others, plainly supposes a darkness in the understanding." A practicing Sufi, he was welcome in the home of Elijah Muhammad (a fellow Hyde Park resident) for his ecumenical interest in Islam. An early opponent of the Vietnam war (one of a few U.C. tenured faculty to take this stand), Hodgson practiced what he preached. His brilliance, stubborn Quaker conscience and methodological self-consciousness make him an important reference point for those who seek firmer grounding in understanding Islamic civilization in our 9/11 world. I believe that it is highly appropriate for AHA to sponsor this panel today. I'd like to thank Barbara Weinstein, President of the AHA, for calling us together.

One important characteristic of Hodgson's approach is his methodological self-consciousness. Thus he precedes the first volume of *Venture* with a hundred page "Introduction to the Study of Islamic Civilization" much of which was taken up with definitional questions, spelling and pronunciation guides for beginners. Here for example he introduces the reader to some of the neologisms he coined for greater precision (for example, "Islamdom": the territory in which Muslims live under their own rule, and "Islamicate," a term for participated of non-Muslims in Islamic culture). In a particularly prescient section he identifies five basic *pre-commitments* (we might call them lenses, or basic personal orientations) that shaped how the history of Islamic civilization was written: religious adherence to Christianity, Judaism and Islam, Marxism (he was writing in the early 1960s) and what he referred to as Westernism. (Since The University of Chicago was a citadel of modernization theory at the time, this is an especially surprising choice). Westernism comprised two linked beliefs: the belief that the West was the motor of world history and that at least since the Renaissance (if not from the Greeks) history in the west followed a progressive narrative.

Elsewhere in the "Introduction," Hodgson makes it clear that religiously grounded identities were not the only source of bias in Islamic studies. Also prevalent was what he called "the Arabistic bias" according to which all authors who wrote in Arabic, whatever their ethnicity (or multi-linguality) were retrospectively claimed as "Arab." Hodgson also noted the existence of Persian bias and Turkish bias though he claimed these were much less common. The full list of *pre-commitments* therefore includes not only religious beliefs (or lack thereof) but also the linguistic nationalisms of the Middle Eastern region. In seeking to resolve these tensions, Hodgson sought to examine Islamic history through the prism of world history and to balance his humanistic concern for the individual conscience with a knowledge of the materialist and structural contexts of human action.

Hodgson was already a world historian as a young man when he decided to write a world history that he proposed to call "There is No Orient." "Mankind is the only tenable field of discourse of all human inquiry and consideration of meaningfulness" he declared in a famous essay. By this he meant that any less inclusive effort (he had in mind the civilizational approach to world history) was doomed to failure. For Hodgson the proper subject of world history was the interrelations of societies in history. He came to this position for philosophical as well as empirical reasons. The Hodgson Papers housed in the Regenstein Library at The University of Chicago, allow us to follow his evolving epistemological concerns in some detail. World history was his solution to the problem of undertaking the always fraught study of Islamic history. For Hodgson, doing world history was therefore not a diversion from Islamic history, but a necessary pre-condition to doing so, a clearing of methodological and conceptual space. The reciprocal was also true: for Hodgson the study of Islam was critical to the rethinking of European history. It had the potential of leading the historian of westernist persuasion to appreciate that Islam was molded of the same stuff as "the West": the heritage of West Asian prophetic monotheism, Hellenistic thought and agrarian-bureaucratic empires. In this sense, Islam too was "Western."

There is a deep tension in Hodgson's thought between his critique of the concept of civilization and his humanistic vision. On the one hand, as a world historian interested in human interactions across time and space, he was a natural foe not only of the civilizational approach but also of all lesser "container histories" (such as national history). On the other hand, in *Venture* Hodgson argues that the ethical and moral aspirations of humanity were embodied in its religiously grounded civilizations. As a consequence, religion was a central category for him. He saw the "venture of Islam" as the most recent effort to impregnate humanity with a moral conscience. (Other ventures included Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism/Taoism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity). It was the most important venture because it was the most universal and the most successful. Why was this the case? For Hodgson, the central ethical imperative of Islam was the moral struggle of the individual in a world of unequal power and wealth. Islam thus forwarded a radical critique of the old agrarian four class system, as well as of the abuses of priestcraft. The Arabic name of this moral struggle was *jihad*. What was the role of Islam in

world history? Hodgson asked in an important article. His answer was that it was the historical vehicle by which the fruits of Greek thought and prophetic monotheism were conveyed to the rest of Afro-Eurasia.

Said of course needs no introduction. *Orientalism*, his most important work, marked a paradigm shift in thinking about the relationship between the West and the non-West. Said sought to untangle the ways in which Western political, literary, and scholarly representations of the Middle East were fatally inflected by political power. Said coupled his critique of European discourse on the Middle East to issues of representation generally, demonstrating that Western discourse on the Middle East was linked to power, trafficked in racist stereotypes and continually reproduced itself. In naming this discourse "orientalism," Said made it available to all who had been seeking an effective means of intellectually opposing the canon in its various disciplinary manifestations. In a forthcoming book, *Genealogies of Orientalism* (with David Prochaska) I argue that despite *Orientalism's* undeniable political and intellectual success at the time, it ultimately failed adequately to historicize either its own history or the specific colonial histories that it sought to explain. Some of this is due to the main purpose of the book, which argued that orientalism as a discourse of power summoned the Orient into existence in the very act of examining it and dominating it. Written in the heady aftermath of Arafat's 1973 triumphal visit to the UN General Assembly and the 1975 defeat of the U.S. in Vietnam, *Orientalism* assumed that secular nationalism, especially as embodied in Palestinian nationalism and the PLO, was the road to progress. Twenty five years later it is clear that Said's vision of the end of empire and the end of orientalism were overly optimistic. Now orientalism (in the discursive if not the philological sense of the term) is back big-time, as is empire. (In the meantime, visions of remaking the Middle East in the wake of the U.S. incursion into Iraq have proved similarly evanescent). All this is enough, Hodgson might have thought, to make one think that teleological thinking is the historian's full employment act. (So much folly to explain, so little time!)

Here we touch on an important difference between Hodgson and Said. Well before the discovery that the benefits of modern life were incapable of being generalized on the scale of the planet, Hodgson viewed the claims of the modern state with deep suspicion. For his part, Said as Palestinian nationalist initially saw the achievement of a Palestinian state as the necessary solution of the trauma of colonialism. However, by the end of his life, Said's position came increasingly to resemble Hodgson's as his disillusion about the PLO and Arafat developed. Said's nationalism made him a humanist, even as his critique of the racist and teleological aspects of the Enlightenment aligned him with the emerging post-modern critics. Here is a place where he parted company with the more nihilist Derrideans. Insofar as Foucault (but less so Gramsci) was the crucial authorizing intellectual presence who enabled Said to formulate the central idea of orientalism as a discourse (even though as James Clifford has shown he used the term "discourse" in a very non-Foucaultian way), Foucault too in some ways can be seen as a humanist, although more ambiguously so. Foucault was greatly influenced by Weber (as was Pierre Bourdieu). Had Said read Hodgson, he would have been impressed by Hodgson's methodological rigor, especially by

his idea of “pre-commitments” which is a kind of pre-Foucaultian way of thinking about the discursive. He might also have come to appreciate the way in which Hodgson linked a kind of Weberian history of ideas to a deeply materialist approach. It’s a pity that Hodgson and Said never encountered one another.