

# All the Rage

By James North

In much of *What Went Wrong?* Bernard Lewis maintains his usual persona: the elderly but vigorous scholar who has spent a lifetime mastering the Middle East's languages and studying its texts, crit-

**What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response**

By Bernard Lewis  
Oxford University Press  
180 pages, \$23

**The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity**

By Tariq Ali  
Verso  
342 pages, \$22

icizing its peoples with seeming reluctance and sorrowful detachment. After September 11, he was much in demand in the mainstream media, and this short book spent several months on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

But one chapter in *What Went Wrong?* perfectly reveals why Lewis is such a misleading and dangerous thinker. In "Time, Space and Modernity," he claims that in the Middle East there has been a "selective rejection of Western music." Lewis writes that "a distinguishing characteristic of Western music is polyphony, by harmony or counterpoint.... Different performers play together, from different scores, producing a result that is greater than the sum of its parts."

Lewis continues: "With a little imagination one may discern the same feature in other aspects of Western culture—in democratic politics and in team games, both of which require the cooperation, in harmony if not in unison, of different performers playing different parts in a common purpose."

He is cunning enough to leave the conclusion largely unsaid: Arabs and Muslims, with their harsh, discordant music, are incapable of the give and take of democracy. In

fact, they should even give up hope of ever winning soccer's World Cup.

You can use this kind of thinking to prove anything. Umm Kulthum, the great Egyptian singer who brought the Arab world to a standstill with her monthly radio concerts until her death in 1975, was renowned for, among other qualities, her perfect diction and for creatively reinterpreting the same line over and over again. You could, "with a little imagination," use her popularity to prove that Arabs possess an admirable combination of precision and originality and should prosper in high-tech design and production.

Most mainstream reviewers ignored Lewis' bizarre outburst. And in fact, most of the book is not so blatant, consisting mostly of the mundane presentation of various facts scattered across centuries of

largely unchanged over the past 14 centuries. They study that world by looking for this essence, much of which may be found in central texts like the Quran and other ancient works. Once they have grasped this fundamental nature, they feel they can readily understand the Muslim world today. As the brilliant Lebanese-born professor As'ad Abu Khalil has written, "People rush to study Islam as if it offers the skeleton key to understanding the political complexities of the Middle East."

So: Why are Egyptian college graduates angry at their own government and at the West? Don't try to explain their attitudes by looking at tremendous unemployment levels they suffer, the unelected military dictatorship they live under—one supported by America with billions of dollars of aid—or at the ongoing killing of Palestinian civilians and children right next door. Instead, point to what Lewis called, in an influential 1990 essay, vague, timeless "Muslim rage."

You have to pause for a moment to see just how inhuman the Orientalist view is.

You don't have to be an Orientalist to recognize differences between cultures, nor to criticize features of other cultures, such as the inferior status of women in much of the Middle East and South Asia. (Although you should also be prepared to acknowledge strengths: Cairo has one of the lowest crime rates of any big city in the world, not due to repression, but because of a dense network of mutually supportive family, community and workplace ties.) But once you presume a vast chasm between you and the Others, a fundamental difference embedded in your very natures, you are straying into some very ugly intellectual territory.



history. Yet Lewis' excursion into musical theory was not an unfortunate lapse, but central to his way of thinking.

Lewis is an "Orientalist," a term that may be growing unclear as it has become more widespread. Orientalist is by no means the same as "racist"; Lewis could comfortably pass a lie detector test that probed for overt prejudice. But his approach is nonetheless pernicious. Orientalists believe that the Muslim world is a unity, with an essential nature that is

Tariq Ali is a vital corrective to the simplicities of Orientalism. His book's title, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, and its cover (a composite photograph combining portraits of Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush) are misleading, giving the impression he deals equally with Islam and the West. In fact, Ali's sections about American imperialism are partly true, but too one-dimensional and therefore mercifully short.

Most of the book is a learned, thorough, engagingly written, at times appropriately

first-person survey of Muslim history and society, which reveals far more complexity and dissidence than the monolithic Orientalist view. Ali himself is from an elite Pakistani family, but his parents were both Communists and he, despite amusing encounters in his youth with Quran teachers, is a lifelong atheist. He reminds us that the Muslim world has never been a unity. Over the centuries, there have been heretics and rebels, along with a long tradition of passive, gentle Sufi mysticism. More recently, the Middle East and South Asia have had influential and secular nationalist movements and significant Communist parties.

He sets the record straight throughout this long but unfailingly interesting book, particularly in the sections on Pakistan, a misunderstood nation of almost 140 million. He gives a lively account of Islamic fundamentalism there, but then reminds us that the Islamists have never won much popular support—10 percent, at most. He points out, with a sly smile, that “The Pakistani electorate ... casts proportionately fewer votes for religious fundamentalists than voters in Israel.”

Lewis' work may have directly inspired Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, the 1996 effort to revive the Cold War in a new guise, but Ali reminds us that during World War I, Muslim Arabs allied with the “infidel” British to win independence from Muslim Turks. Saudi Arabia remains a staunch Western ally to this day. Iran and Iraq, both Muslim, fought a terrible war in the '80s that killed more than a million people. In Ali's own homeland, another 5,000 people have died in recent years in sectarian conflicts among Muslims.

Ali does overstate what he calls “the desperation and hatred that surfaces in large parts of the world against the United States and its allies.” He mentions a few anecdotes about people in various parts of the Third World (not just the Muslim world) celebrating after the September 11 attacks, but he extrapolates too much from them.

In fact, violent Islam has been on the decline across the Muslim world. Attacks on Western tourists in Egypt in the '90s prompted such overwhelming revulsion among the Egyptian people that the largest violent Islamic group had to declare a cease-fire, and the country is safe for visitors once again. With the exception of Iran in 1979, and Algeria in 1990-91, militant Islamists have never won overwhelming

popular support anywhere. People in the Muslim world do have understandable political grievances with the United States, but you are not going to find blind, widespread, violent hatred there.

**Y**et a minority of fanatics can still cause terrible havoc. Ali does not disregard dangerous social and political instability in the Middle East and South Asia. Specifically, he uses his detailed understanding of Pakistan to warn that fundamentalist Islam, although a minority view, has infiltrated the national army to a dangerous extent. He has an excellent chapter on the conflict between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, and he genuinely worries that it could provoke a regional nuclear war.

Rather than rely on some vague notion of Muslim rage, Ali investigates by looking at history (not just 12th-century history), class formations, political competition and so on. His work shows why Orientalism not only demeans other human beings, but is also useless as analysis. Until only 10 or 15 years ago, you could read Orientalist-type views about Latin Americans and their supposedly innate incapacity for political democracy. Some so-called experts said the long history of military coups there was the

inevitable legacy of the Spanish conquest, of a Catholic culture of authoritarianism and indolence. Now that Latin Americans have largely maintained democracy under economic conditions at least as trying as Europe in the 1930s, you don't hear such twaddle anymore.

Orientalism is also worthless as a program of action. Ali's analysis implies, for instance, that economic change in the Middle East and South Asia that eased unemployment would reduce political violence, both within the region and elsewhere. This may be a tough goal, but it is at least conceivable. By contrast, Lewis is pessimistic. “If the peoples of the Middle East continue on their present path,” he hysterically warns, “the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region, and there will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression.”

It is sad that a lifetime of scholarship produced a conclusion that is so simple-minded, and so wrong. ■

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# Living the Highlife

By G. Pascal Zachary

To watch U2 singer Bono traveling around Africa, relentlessly advocating for debt relief alongside the secretary of the U.S. Treasury, is to be reminded of the old connection between rock stars and African humanitarian causes. Bono may be imbued with an Irish compassion, but he is only the latest

## Kedu America

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rockers to trumpet the cause of the African poor and afflicted. I was a grade-school boy when the Beatles took America by storm in the '60s, and I will never forget my first images of Africa, which I associated with one Beatle in particular.

The pictures showed gaunt, starving babies from a place called Biafra, which George Harrison had taken a liking to. Biafra was created when a tribe called the Ibo, prominent around the Niger River Delta, seceded in 1967 from the West African nation of Nigeria. The Nigerian army, after initial setbacks, laid siege to the Ibo who, in their desperation, appealed to the rest of the world for help. (This had the perverse effect of prolonging the war—it lasted more than two years—and adding immensely to the casualties.) The plight of Biafrans captured Harrison's conscience and gave birth to a new pattern in pop culture: the singer who cared about the Fate of the Earth and then held a benefit concert to prove it.

Harrison's concert brought great attention to the cause of the Ibo, giving birth to another iron law of pop culture: The defining images of the South, or of Africa at least, are often constructed by the singers and poets of the North ... and then fed back to the South. The frantic race by rockers to find their own causes

among the wretched of the earth almost obscures the fact that the poor of the developing world have their own singers and songs.

The Ibo, for instance, are famously cultivated. Their members include Chinua Achebe, author of Africa's most literary novel in English, *Things Fall Apart*, a haunting depiction of the collision between Ibo traditions and European imperialism. Notable for lacking a monarchy, the Ibo instead invested ultimate power in the political structures within each village, giving rise to a form of politics that anticipated the "town hall" democracy of New England. Participation extended to Ibo women, who became a formidable force in public life.

The British, used to getting their way with colonial Africans, were repeatedly

the women." In recent years, militant Ibo activists, in the face of growing tensions within an unmanageable Nigeria, have called for greater autonomy and even revived the secessionist dream.

The Ibo, who number upward of 20 million today, have made their mark on music as well as literature. The Biafrans knew little of the Beatles, but they embraced a swinging bandleader named Stephen Osita Osadebe. Singing in the Ibo language, with a sprinkling of pidgin English, Osadebe began recording in 1958 and cemented his popularity by remaining in Iboland during the war. The '70s saw a transformation of Nigerian music as horn-driven dance tunes—better known as highlife—gave way to a funky sound influenced by soul singer James Brown. Fela Kuti was the embodiment of Nigerian funk.

While Fela and the "juju" musician Sunny Ade, a member of the Yoruba people, dominated the music exported from Nigeria to America, within the country Osadebe thrived. He carried on a tradition of highlife associated with the great Nigerian trumpeter Rex Lawson. Osadebe retained a strong brass element in his bands, even when acoustic sounds went out of fashion. He remains partial to trumpet solos of the same sort that Duke Ellington used to give his band a wistful color.

In 1984, as Ade and Fela were giving Nigerian music a ribald and confrontational image around the world, Osadebe retained his folksy roots, releasing his most successful album, *Osondi Owendi* ("sweetness and bitterness"). A social critic whose language is more polite than Fela's, Osadebe sings of the joys and disappointments of ordinary life, poking fun at pretension and celebrating the importance

of perseverance.

At nearly the age of 60, in 1995 Osadebe made his first tour of the United States and recorded what counts as among the finest West African albums available, *Kedu America*. Recorded in



Chief Stephen Osita Osadebe

stung by loud, angry and even violent protests against their policies by Ibo women. "When the character of the riots themselves is reviewed," one British observer wrote, "the overwhelming impression is of the vigor and solidarity of