The Future of Zionism

It is no secret that Theodor Herzl's Judenstaat (1896)--"a country for Jews," rather than the more familiar "Jewish state" as proposed by Amos Elon (p. 132)--preached for a secular Jewish nationalism in which religion would play only a minor if not ambiguous role. Herzl was indeed no great champion of religion and was neither interested in ancient Judaism as such nor in its more modern nineteenth-century messianic evolution. Herzl was in fact thinking more in terms of a practical solution to anti-Semitism in both eastern and central Europe, even though the distinction between the two Europes (supposing he was aware of the political implications of such a distinction) did not seem to have mattered that much to him; nor did he operate between various brands of nationalisms for that matter. In addition, he was also thinking of the urgent need for a territorial state to the Jews of the world, which all by itself would be enough a measure to contain anti-Semitism. Zionism thus became the de facto ideology of the secular Jews who were looking for territorial nationalism as a way out to anti-Semitism.

In fact, Herzl's nationalism probably owed much more to the state formations of the large empires of eastern Europe than to the nation-states of central Europe. Thus, in the nationalistic tradition of the large empires and in particular the Austrian-Hungarian empire to which Herzl belonged, the full integration of all citizens on the basis of a combination of political, linguistic, and territorial loyalties was not expected. This seems to have been the luxury of the ruling Austrian-Hungarian elite (or Russian in the case of the Russian empire, or the Turkish ruling elite of the Ottoman empire), while the other dominated ethno-linguistic-religious groups were only supposed to manifest their overt "loyalty" to the ruling group polity, while maintaining their internal cohesiveness on their own (by means of their own patriarchal and authoritarian social structures).

It is no surprise therefore to realize that the bulk of Russian and east European Jewish immigrants (among them Ben-Gurion) were the ones who felt the most at home in Herzl's secular nationalism--but the ultra

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orthodox pious Hasidic Jews had their roots in eighteenth-century eastern Europe too, and they were among those who were overall not terribly excited about Zionism. The group of immigrants commonly referred to as the Ashkenazim--the Western Jews--and who worked out the association between socialism and secular Zionism were to dominate the Israeli political scene from 1948 and for three consecutive decades. In fact, it was only the election of 1977 that brought Labor down, and Menahem Begin, then at the head of the Likud, became prime minister. Since then, the Israeli political scene has proved even more uncertain, with the popularity of the two biggest parties wavering to the benefit of much smaller radical parties making their way to the Knesset and forcing coalitions with Labor and the Likud, and thus imposing their will on Israeli politics.

It is the ambition of Amos Elon's A Blood-Dimmed Tide to cover this post-1977 complex Israeli political scene and analyze how it changed lately with the advent of the peace process and its stumbling. The book is drafted in the form of "dispatches"--twenty-one in total, ranging from such diverse topics as the six-day war, a portrait of Moshe Dayan, visits to Egypt and Alexandria, the intifada, a meeting with Arafat in Tunis, and, of course, the aftermath of the Oslo agreements. The book borrows its title from the seventh dispatch, a reflection on the non-charismatic but ambitious Shimon Peres who for a long time "has been looking for his main chance" (p. 103) and seems to have always missed it. The dispatches, originally published between 1967 and 1995, were mostly aimed at the American audiences of The New Yorker and The New York Review of Books.

What brings all twenty-one dispatches (or chapters) in the book together into a coherent whole is probably a single concern (even though Elon does not explicitly state his problematic as such): What is the status of present day Zionism, and what significance should be attributed to the process of fragmentation of Israeli society? Such concerns are probably best expressed in Elon's lengthy introduction, which attempts to bring coherence to the chapters that follow. Elon looks at Zionism with a tragic irony: now that Zionism has "successfully achieved most of its purposes," it has become "in its current interpretation by nationalist hardliners and religious fundamentalists" a stumbling block towards peace (p. 2). In short, the problem with Zionism is that it has become a "state-ideology," and, paraphrasing Karl Kraus, one which could eventually gravitate toward war.

Looking back at the historical roots of Zionism (a fancier term for "Jewish Nationalism"), Elon sees its success partly in "that there was little evidence of Arab nationalism before 1908, and none at all of a specific

Arab-Palestinian variety" (p. 3). The date here seems to refer to a "national" Turkish elite movement known as the Committee of Union and Progress (C.U.P.): having for the first time in Ottoman history explicitly prompted a movement of "Turkification" within the empire, it is generally thought that, within the Arab provinces, a de facto counter-movement of "Arab nationalism" slowly established itself (George Antonius coined the term "Arab awakening" while others described it as a continuation of the nahḍa, a Renaissance movement of the mid-nineteenth century). The problem, however, in such sweeping generalizations regarding the birth of "nationalisms" within a fragmented Ottoman empire is that ambiguous social movements, which erupted at a time of harsh economic and political conditions, are often described in parallel terms to western movements of a totally different nature. Thus Elon does no better than Arab and Palestinian historians, among others, who would like to see "nationalist" movements at any price. (A great deal of research has been completed on the Arab side precisely to show that the Zionist claims, on the non-availability of forms of nationalism among Arabs, as totally unfounded.) Thus, having declared that "Zionism was a Risorgimento for Jews," Elon then states that "Zionism was part of the final wave of liberal European nationalism" (p. 12). The problem, however, is that when Zionism becomes purely and simply assimilated to a phenomenon with long and complex "European" roots, its utility as a concept loses a great deal of its significance. It is indeed my intention to argue that the concept of "nationalism," to be of any use in a Middle Eastern context, needs to be narrowed down to its basic--originally, European--constituents: civil society, individual "rights," separation of powers, the public sphere, the rule of law, and the role of the state.

The notion of "nation"/"nationhood" that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe was the outcome of political concepts partly derived from the British and French revolutions. At its most basic level, nationhood implied territorial and/or linguistic integration. Such an assimilation, however, implied a Hobbesian covenant in which the newly formed "citizens" be granted individual "rights" for having delegated to the state the right to monopolize violence. Such a contract--the basis of civil society--legally protects individuals from the coerciveness and abuse of state institutions, and guarantees--at least formally--the rule of law. Thus, besides what the dichotomy state/civil society implies, civil society is "a society of individuals" to be integrated on the basis of subjects whose individual rights are mutually recognized. To be sure, this was no easy process, and the assimilation of "minority groups" (e.g. the Jews and Protestants in France) led to xenophobia and anti-Semitism, while the legal and political fiction of "individual rights," and the gradual dissolution of privileged groups and classes into the common bourgeois melting pot, led in turn to fascist and proto-fascist movements in Europe.

Since then, "nationalism" has been associated with all kind of linguistic-religious-ethnic movements claiming some form of territorial sovereignty. Such a generalization, however, proves confusing unless the essential questions are genuinely posed: What kind of "civil society" do such nationalist movements assume? What is the status of the individual in society? Are individual rights granted? Such questions prove to be crucial because many of the so-called "nationalist" movements in eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere in the world, have bypassed individual rights, the rule of law, and a truly democratic public sphere.

As noted earlier, Elon only alludes to the difficulties facing Zionism--or, rather, of what Zionism has become at the turn of the twenty-first century. Having metamorphosed into a state-ideology, Zionism now runs the risk of promoting the collective rights of the Jewish people over individual rights, and of protecting the (Jewish) state over the autonomy of civil society. Consider, for example, what Elon refers to as "the deepening gulf between the legal Israel and the real Israel" (p. 132): more concretely, Elon is referring to the gulf between cities like Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv. Thus, while Tel-Aviv is often described as "the gate of modernity" (The Economist, April 25, 1998, survey, p. 18), Jerusalem, in contrast, bustles with orthodox Jews making their way to or from synagogue. In short, "the Sabbath in Haifa and Tel-Aviv today is much as it is in any European or North American city" (p. 132). To be sure, in a relatively new society composed mainly of successive wave of immigrants, such divisions are to be expected: Arabs and Jews, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Haredim and secular Jews, to name only a few of the main divisions. The point here is that over the years not only such divisions have tended to manifest themselves more overtly, but more importantly, some new ambiguous ones have developed. One such case in point are the immigrants from the ex-Soviet Union: with more than 700,000 since 1989, and now amounting to more than 15 percent of the population, those immigrants have created their own autonomous party in the 1996 elections (the Yisrael Ba'aliyah, 7 out of the 120 Knesset seats). Moreover, with the Israeli system of proportional representation giving full political representation to any small group, both Likud and Labor saw their seats declining. Coalition governments are now the norm rather than the exception.

Such divisions, eventually leading to a tribalization of Israeli political life, similar in some respects to its Arab neighbors, do not, however, solely operate on notions of territorial gains, for territory is usually the means rather than the end. Different groups fight for their own selfish interests, and, now that the Zionist ideology has been fully actualized, the common target is the state rather than any (real or fictitious) territory. Consider,

for example, the public embarrassment that each group of squatters causes to the state, and how much the state is weakened by such actions, a phenomenon which Elon describes so well and reduces to four major steps (p. 66): (1) a fact is established with the squatters imposing themselves on the ground; (2) a compromise comes through whereby the squatters agree to "temporarily" "vacate whatever spot they have occupied;" (3) "The government which first claimed to oppose the settlement, now gives in to these pressures;" and, finally, (4) "Land [is] seized for "security" reasons [and] turned over to the housing ministry."

My point is that when all kinds of independent groups and individuals impose their will on the state, a host of consequences are sure to follow: (1) the question to be posed in this context is what has become of "civil society" when the state consumes its energies in managing the affairs of conflicting groups acting on their own; (2) when autonomous groups impose their will on the state (and hence on other groups), the unlawful becomes lawful; state polity is then fated to be articulated on a piecemeal basis, and the state surrenders itself to an internal game of wicked politics rather than to the rule of law. In other words, the major weakness of Zionism as "territorial nationalism" has become even more apparent in the last two decades (since Labor lost its long established monopoly over Israeli politics and society). Having favored territory over civil society, the very foundations of Israeli state and society have thus become even more problematic, and the big risk now is indeed the future of democracy altogether. Elon does point out to a "decline in democratic values" (p. 129) in particular among the young and teenagers (p. 107), but he does not address the issue forcefully enough.

Interestingly, and in spite of a large gap in living conditions, some of the essential problems in Israeli society are becoming remarkably similar to those of its Arab neighbors. For one thing, the surrounding Arab states share in common authoritarian structures whose power-relations render it difficult, if not impossible, to construct a civil society along the lines outlined above. Even a distinction between state and civil society becomes difficult to operate since the state is literally eaten by sectarian conflicts and the like. In the case of the Palestinian National Authority (P.N.A.), not only a radical Islamic movement like Hamas succeeds in establishing itself as a "society" within the broader Palestinian "civil society," but even the groups now in support of Arafat and the P.N.A. could eventually fragment into competing factions for obvious reasons. As for Syria, Elon seems certain that "the remaining issues with Syria are more 'normal' problems of neighboring states: borders and water resources" (p. 5). I doubt, however, that a society with a per-capita gross domestic product of around $1,200 (compared to $17,000 for Israel), and

suffering from an internal unsafe environment (to say the least) would be mainly worried about territorial issues--what if the territorial issue is used for other purposes?

Yet, despite all the problems one could foresee, Elon sounds globally optimistic. Not only does he look favorably, albeit with few reservations, at the peace process, but he even postulates post-Zionism as a possible future ideology of the Jewish state. This newly professed after-Zionism "reflects a desire to move ahead to a more Western, more pluralistic, less 'ideological' form of patriotism and of citizenship" (p. 11). In Elon's understanding, post-Zionism even perceives the Law of Return as having become redundant (p. 18). The Jewish state would then become fully secular and would cease to be "Jewish"; citizenship would be granted on the basis of need and merit, and no ethno-religious group would be privileged. Citizens would be finally looked upon as individuals with rights rather than subjects of ethno-religious groups, and they would all be assimilated on this basis. Needless to say, such a project derives its main impulse from Western notions of the subject, civil society, and democracy. Elon looks at such a possibility as the logical conclusion of early Zionism--even though the early Zionists had never foreseen this. In a fully secular state, as in all Western democracies, there would still be a dominant group with few privileges, and the Jews in this scenario are expected to become the Israeli wasp, but the other less privileged groups would nevertheless fight their rights on the basis of some "affirmative action" principle.

I see two major problems facing the full secularization scenario: (1) Would it be possible for Israeli society to evolve on its own and independently from the problems facing the neighboring Arab states?, and (2) Can a move towards post-Zionism effectively take place without a radical critique of Zionism--a critique more radical than what Elon has attempted, and that looks at the serious shortcomings of Zionism with a cool eye--in particular the emphasis on territoriality and on secular Judaism over civil society, individual rights, and the rule of law.

Elon's Blood-Dimmed Tide definitely suffers serious shortcomings on both counts: Elon can neither fully assess the impact of neighboring societies with authoritarian power-relations and mostly state controlled economies, nor can he see the importance of the damage created by all kinds of groups within Israeli society whose actions are slowly dismantling state authority and the civil society that made it possible. Old Zionism might be breeding a divided society along weakly integrated power-relations.

Islamic Law in Contemporary Scholarship

DESPITE THE IMPORTANCE OF LAW in societal formations, and what looks like a revival in the field of legal studies, Islamic law is still by and large accessible to only a small group of specialists, and thus cannot claim a large audience even within Islamic and Middle (Near) Eastern studies, not to mention the much broader European and American legal scholarship. There are various reasons for such isolation, which are too complex to enumerate in a summary fashion, but which mostly involve the way the scholarship has evolved in the last few decades in Islamic societies, Europe, and North America, and which reflects the nature of Islamic law. First, unlike Roman law and all the continental codes that followed, and unlike the English and American common-law systems, what is commonly referred to as 'Islamic law' does not stand out as an organized set of codes, statutes, or even precedents. Instead, the body of Islamic law, which stretches over many centuries, has spawned several schools known as the madhāhib, so that a modern scholar who needs to look at the legal framework of, say, an institution of the early 'Abbasid period would have to dig hard into the labyrinth of the fiqh manuals only to realize that layers of interpretations follow each opinion, making it unrealistic to limit the 'law' to a set of codified norms. Second, modern scholars tend to look skeptically at the large corpus of Islamic law precisely because of its prescriptive nature and its uncertain historical evolution. We have consequently made little progress in assessing the nature of judicial decision making and how the normative values prescribed by jurists affect it. Third, throughout the twentieth century, the majority of Islamic and Middle Eastern societies have adopted a new set of codes, a process that began in the second half of the previous century with Ottoman reforms, and which for the most part were derived from European civil-code systems. Since the implications of this rupture

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with the past have attracted little attention from scholars, the relevance of the classical legal systems is the biggest issue of concern here: will the transplanted systems utterly eclipse the various Islamic legal schools, or will there be a revival of the legal schools so as to make up for the inadequacies that result from the civil systems? Indeed, a lot needs to be done before more comprehensively elaborated codes are drafted, in particular in such domains as property, contract, and tort, which, under present conditions, seem like a hybrid mixture of Ottoman feudal practices and modern but poorly implemented Western notions.

In this context, I would like briefly to discuss some of the recently published findings of Baber Johansen, a leading authority on the Hanafi fiqh.[1] Even though Johansen's book is no easy reading to the non-specialist, it nonetheless proposes in a long introduction an historical and critical overview of the scholarship throughout the twentieth century, which should be of interest to laymen and specialists alike. As to the thematically assembled articles, they could be read in different orders, depending on the reader's interests and knowledge of Islamic law.

The notion of 'contingency' associated with the title of this collection of essays refers to the idea that the various madhāhib that developed in Islamic law all assume that the fiqh in its interpretation of the revelation and in its prescription of normative rules for human conduct presumes the fallibility of reason, and hence ipso facto accepts the multiplicities of textual interpretations and their contingent character. Then, following both Max Weber and Joseph Schacht, Johansen accepts Islamic law as 'sacred law' in that its 'rationality,' associated with a quasi-oracular justice, prohibits it from being a fully rationalized system the way some modern legal systems are. But as Johansen reminds his readers in his long introduction, both notions—those of contingency and sacred law—are yet to receive full acceptance in western scholarship. Johansen construes his argument historically in terms of some of the most prominent representations of Islamic law in modern scholarship.

Even the idea that the fiqh is a legal system has not been widely accepted. Thus did the Dutch scholar Christiaan Snouck-Hurgronje, who together with Ignaz Goldziher inaugurated modern scholarship on the fiqh, claim that the fiqh was neither a legal system nor has any practical significance outside the field of liturgical acts and the like. Thus, by assuming that the fiqh is a deontology, Snouck-Hurgronje construed the system to function as an undifferentiated mass of normative rules under the control of religious norms. Not only did the differences among the madhāhib consequently become insignificant, but more important, even the different branches of 'ibādāt and mu'āmalāt are then subsumed under

an identical set of principles, which by definition must be tied to religious norms.

It was only thanks to Weber that the fiqh became finally perceived as 'sacred law.' Weber associated Islamic law with other legal systems such as rabbinic and canon laws, and Chinese and Hindu laws, which he labeled as 'sacred.' Weber coined the term 'substantive rationality' to describe the rationale behind such systems. He argued that despite their religious character such legal systems do have a rationality of their own in that they might share a set of systematized norms and procedures. Nevertheless, in the final analysis a great deal of judicial decision making depends on extra-legal influences. Weber was thus interested in such systems precisely because of the difficulties they encounter in becoming modern, that is to say, 'formally rational.'

Schacht, the leading authority on Islamic law in the twentieth century, accepts Weber's notion of 'substantive rationality' and pushes it even further so as to show more thoroughly the coherent system of norms. But Schacht, like Weber before him, did not differentiate between various types of norms, so that here again the distinction between the normative values of the ʿibādāt and muʿāmalāt and the significance of such a differentiation has been underestimated and never worked out fully. Thus Johansen sets his own program within the tradition of both Weber and Schacht in that he accepts Islamic law as a sacred law maintained by the contingent character of the jurists' opinions; but he also demarcates himself from them on at least two grounds. First, he argues that Islamic law could not possibly be rationalized as a legal system under one coherent set of norms. Indeed, an acknowledgement of differentiation between various sets of norms, such as those originating from the ʿibādāt and muʿāmalāt, is a necessity and no historical enterprise worthy of that name could do without it. Second, he believes that a similar type of differentiation must be acknowledged between the various madhāhib so as not to falsely assume that their differences are either insignificant or marginal to legal doctrine. In short, Johansen acknowledges the complexity of the historico-legal approach by means of an internal process of differentiation of the various sets of norms that make up the various branches of Islamic law. Only by looking at the rationale behind those normative values rather than subsuming them under one another can we fathom the complexity of the Islamic legal systems.

It is impossible, due to space limitations, to go over any of the articles grouped together for the purpose of illustrating Johansen's work method of the history of the fiqh. However, and considering that much still needs to be done before we seriously test Johansen's hypotheses and see their implications mainly regarding the historical nature of the differentiation

within the normative levels of the fiqh, on the one hand, and the various madhāhib, on the other, my preoccupation at this stage has more to do with some challenging assumptions behind the preliminary findings than with the general outline of the project. One such assumption which emerges most clearly in the article on "The Case of the Land Rent," which in turn is based on Johansen's previous work on "Islamic law on land tax,"[2] is the idea that legal doctrines do adapt to their own specific periods, meaning that they share a historical becoming of their own, constrained partly by their own internal logic and partly by the socio-economic and even political developments within a particular society. Johansen tests his views in the Ottoman period and brings together a combination of hitherto forgotten Hanafi texts from the shurūḥ, fatāwā, and shari'a court records, thus not limiting himself only to the usul and mutūn, which tend to be more resistant to historical change. He is thus able to show that by and large the classical Hanafi notions of tax and rent did not hold for the Ottoman Empire, and that the fuqaha' acknowledged the transformation. Such a willingness to show the 'historical' nature of the fiqh characterizes all the articles in Contingency in a Sacred Law.

There is a problem, though, which is that while one always can detect 'change' in one way or another and in various combinations of texts, the significance of a particular transformation at a specific juncture is unclear. Thus, to return to Johansen's thesis on Ottoman rents and taxes, one should ask whether the legal fiction of the death of the kharaj-payer and the consequent legitimation of ownership of sultanic lands (miri), which were supposedly "private" (milk), was by itself enough of a discursive achievement to label it as a significant shift in Hanafi legal doctrine. The problem here is that even if we assemble all relevant shurūḥ and fatāwā, the undeniable truth is that Hanafi practice in all its forms fails to provide us with anything coherent, systematic, and meaningful regarding either the miri-iltizam system or its predecessor. Not only are such texts inferior to the systematic treatises on kharaj from the classical period, but few of the jurists in Greater Syria and Egypt, who were the leading scholars of their time, dared to follow the precepts of sixteenth-century Istanbul muftis regarding the obsolete character of the classical taxation system. Instead, many of the texts plainly show an unwillingness to fully acknowledge the new Ottoman land-tenure system, which was part of what the Hanafis commonly referred to as the maṣāliḥ mursalah; that is to say, a set of public interest regulations imposed on a de facto basis as part of bureaucratic policies. Because such notions as property and contract did not develop in a way that would have accommodated the transformation of the land-tenure system, the Ottoman shari`a courts had to develop all kinds of procedural fictions in order to shelter the newly emerging forms of contractual settlements. Thus, in a strange way, legal doctrine and the practices of the courts did

finally come together, but not in terms of the conceptual transformations that Johansen would like us to believe.

The merging of doctrine and courts allowed the system to survive for several centuries, until the mid–1850s when newly drafted codes, based in turn on Napoleonic codes, were implemented. Had Hanafi doctrine worked out an incremental reformulation of its concepts, such a harsh break might have been avoided. Which brings us to the issue regarding the historicity of legal doctrines: considering that even for such domains as contract, property, and taxation, the congruence between legal doctrine and societal factors is not easy to discern, one would imagine that the ʿibādāt normative values should pose an even more serious challenge to the legal historian. In fact, it is one thing to establish that a set of ideas share a common history, and it is another to prove that they are congruent with an historical phenomenon. Western legal scholarship is beginning to question the association between codes and societal conditions, and develop several working hypotheses on the complexities of such relationships, and we should be skeptical of those who argue that everything has to fit within a well construed and evolutionary historical path.

[1] Baber Johansen. Contingency in a Sacred Law: Legal and Ethical Norms in the Muslim Fiqh (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

[2] _____. The Islamic Law on Land Tax and Rent: The Peasants' Loss of Property Rights as Interpreted in the Ḥanafite Legal Literature of the Mamluk and Ottoman Periods (London, 1988).

untitled & undated #1
It must be unfortunate that a minor country like Syria should get a worldwide attention only when an event associated with death should occur on its soil. First came the death of President Asad last June, which brought a trail of over a 1,000 reporters and a sudden interest in Syria and its people, but now with the Pope's visit scheduled for the end of this week, the death of Asad is bound to look like a manageable event. In fact, with at least 500 reporters covering the Pope's visit, the Syrian economy, whose state budget is one–tenth of a company like IBM (for a society of over 16 million), must experience a boom by the weekend. (Regrettably, and by a strange coincidence, I'll be in Rome this weekend, so I won't be able to see the Pope in person.) The Pope's busy schedule worldwide is in itself represented as a challenge to death by an aging and sick old man, whose death is perceived as imminent, and to whom the new Syrian president would look like a grand–grand–son (a face-to-face between the Pope and Asad-the-father, also riddled with a weakened body before he died, would have been a far less attractive media event). Obviously, the

intriguing question here is why should the Pope attract much attention in Syria, and what is it in his own physical presence that triggers such unreserved attraction. Is it the person himself, or is it the institution of papacy, or is it Catholicism as such?

To begin, we should first note the Pope's trajectory in his three-day visit, which in itself might provide us with some clues. First and foremost is a scheduled visit to the city of Qunaytira in the still occupied Golan Heights. The city itself was liberated from Israeli occupation as an outcome of the negotiations that followed the 1973 Yum Kippur October war (thanks to Henry Kissinger and associates), and has since then been left by and large mostly uninhabited, primarily as a propaganda to keep the stakes high for the Golan Heights. Going to Qunaytira is like traveling through a dark tunnel, surrounded by a military landscape, until you reach a devastated city whose signs of devastation have all been left in place to remind you of all those Zionist, colonialist, imperialist aggressions and the like, and also as a reminder that the rest of the Heights are still occupied (more accurately, "annexed") and therefore need their own dose of "liberation." The Pope will be praying, if all goes to schedule, in a major Greek Orthodox church in the city, so that his presence there will be the major event for the Syrian government who would look at such a visit as an endorsement to Syria's rights over the Golan Heights. We already touch here upon a major ideological foundation for many of the papal practices in recent years, the pièce de résistance of the entire system: from his pleadings to stop the coming execution of Timothy McVeigh, and his suspicions towards the death penalty in general, to his visits to Cuba, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, not to mention Poland, his birthplace, the Pope has been aggressively stating an ideology of the weak versus the strong, the south versus the north, the poor versus the rich, and the disfavored versus the affluent. His anti-death-penalty stances fall within what many in Europe perceive as a quasi-barbarism within American capitalism as such, namely that the most affluent society in world history can do no better than send some of its upper criminals to the death row. Stated differently, the anti-capitalist riots that began in Seattle against the WTO, and indirectly the IMF and the World Bank, and whose movement is perceived as anti-globalization, find their place within the more humane European capitalism, which in many of its core areas is infected with the ethos of Catholicism rather than the more perverse Protestantism.

In fact, and pace the Weberian thesis of a superiority of Protestantism when it comes to the core capitalist institutions, Catholicism has been lagging behind in the US and the rest of the world. Hence, even the Pope's visit to a wealthy society like the US a couple of years ago, and his mass rally in New York's Central park, were also a move towards the

disfavored in American society. In a nutshell, it is precisely this attractive side of Catholicism in the eyes of its beholders that also renders it a backward movement for its detractors. In fact, a major problem with Catholicism is the visibility of the cult's signs, beginning with the Vatican itself, which is represented as a "city" and as the Mecca of all believers. At the center of all this is, of course, the Pope himself, another visible sign of redemption on earth. By contrast, the production and circulation of the means of salvation in Protestantism remain invisible so that there is neither a "center" nor salvation as an instant gratification. I need go no further to show how this leads to the spirit of capitalism à la Weber. Suffice it to say, however, that Eastern Catholicism, in its Greek Orthodox variant, is even more prone to visible rituals and symbols (all seven of Tarkovski's films contain such manifestations of the Greek Orthodox rituals), and to a sense of community over the individual, and while Sunni Islam remains suspicious of all religious symbols in the form of art or otherwise—an icon-phobia that was all too evident in the destruction of Buddhist art by the Taliban—Shi'ism by contrast tends to be closer to Catholicism at least in this respect.

No doubt the humanitarian and anti-capitalist messages inherent in many of the papal movements around the globe would have their impact on Syrian society at large. But the Christians will look at his visit a bit differently, in particular that their communities, which make up 10% of the Syrian population, have been more drained by immigration than others. We tend to forget that for many of the countries outside North America and Europe, there are very few "economies" that function properly, if at all. Indeed, as is the case with Syria, there isn't even anything that would be close to an "economy," and hence there isn't much at stake. Like all political representations, religion in economies where there isn't anything at stake has in the final analysis the upper hand, if not the last word. I'm sure the Pope will have a great time in Damascus.

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One of our colleagues surprised me a couple of weeks ago with the information that our glorious university loses around a $100,000 daily. At this rate, and considering that the endowment is currently in the $300 million range, we will not survive more than five years at best. Some of the unhappy signals are already there: the end of the classics program, the employment freeze and the layoffs, the drastic cuts on part-timers, and more recently, the decision to keep all wages at their previous -- already low-- level. (Regrettably, this colleague of ours who teaches sections twenty times the size of mine, or larger, and serves in more committees than I could afford to remember, ends up like myself with a zero raise: death makes all mortals humble in the face of God.)

Considering that the finances of this university are at an abysmal state --
something that only reminds me of the Syrian economy at its best, but
with no Lebanon to terrorize and suck a surplus from-- I'm dismayed at
how lightly academic problems are perceived in conjunction with their
economic implications. A case in point was our last departmental meeting
(which I must wriggly admit, I only attended after intensive pressures
from the Chair) where, once more, the issue of the Core came into being,
only to be discussed in the all too familiar language of how much we
need the Greeks and Romans and how much we love them: it's the herd
mentality of departmental politics über alles.

In fact, the real issue at stake here is to figure out the economic cost of
the Core, and whether, assuming it proves too costly, it's still worth
maintaining when the university is going downhill financially. How can we
then assess the real costs of a Core like ours? Even a casual glance at the
recently released Fall 2001 schedule reveals that the 101-102
combination takes off at least half of the department's offerings, so that
the other half is divided between the senior seminars and the graduate
courses, which is odd, considering that it's in fact the last two categories
that ought to define what historical research is all about. Moreover, since
the dwindling finances of the university mean much less reliance on a
small army of slave laborers, there are little chances that the
undergraduate and graduate seminars will get the attention they deserve.
Actually, with the Core remaining as it is, and with the loss of devoted
history majors, there is little hope that anything would get better in terms
of original offerings at the upper levels. We're all doomed, it seems, to do
the 101-102 combo each semester whether we like it or not, so forget
about imagination and the longue durée: it's all about small attention
spans. Vive la courte durée!

The Core thus seems to be the pièce de résistance that is clogging all
efforts, but it primarily needs to be assessed in terms of its costs on both
sides of the equation. The costs are indeed minimal from an instructor's
point of view. No doubt everyone loves the Greeks and Romans, but the
repetitive nature of the 101-102 combo, and the fact that they are mainly
covered from text-books (another of those strange American idiomatic
expressions: since a book is by definition a "text," what's text-book
supposed to mean?) that hardly change over the years, plus the long
nature of the surveyed periods implies that we're not looking much for a
great historical accuracy but only for minimalist points of reference, all
such factors push for a low investment from an instructor's point of view,
so that even the tedious fact of correcting exams and papers could be left
to teaching assistants whenever needed. Similarly, those courses
represent little investment from the part of the students: the excuse here

is that they're meant to be introductory, hence they require no work at all.

But someone must be paying the bill, and that's of course, the administration. In fact, to keep up with all three sectors alive --the Core, undergraduate seminars, and graduate seminars-- the university had to hire, under the now defunct ancien régime, an army of slave laborers paid slightly above $1,000 per section, in order to maintain that bulky Core, and so that at least part of the faculty gets focused on the upper level courses, out of which all programs derive their prestige and raison d'être. To be sure, there was a blend of cynicism and humanism (the two always go well together) in such arrangements. For one, students were shielded from the upper division courses, and the instructors protected such courses from the barbarism of the majority of our students on the basis that they're unable to handle such sophisticated material unless they complete the Core first. However, the ideology of the Core is that it's offered to keep up with the liberal arts traditions of western civilization, and indirectly to some kind of Jesuit mission attached to it.

But when we add all three sectors, in addition to other course requirements, such as the writing intensive courses, freshman seminars (with a numerus clausus of 20), and, last but not least, the venerable honors program, the cost is enormous, and in the old régime it sucked a great deal of the hospital's $20 million or so surplus. In fact, besides the sheer number of all those courses and offerings, the system is meant to be exclusivist in the first place. Like medieval feudalism, it's a system that operates by not giving courses that could be open to everyone. Thus, even though the Core does not in principle forbid a student from moving directly to the upper level courses, still acts as a distraction for at least two semesters, so that an upper level course is kept for a remote future, assuming that it will ever come. We thus end up with a de facto system of privileges, which is costly to maintain considering all its requirements of special courses and the like.

The bottom line is this. Like the Core or hate it, the university will not be able to maintain all three sectors functioning properly in their current configuration, and considering that a trimming of the Core would be the most obvious solution (not to mention the trimming of departments), it would be better for us as a department to state our objectives more cogently without the usual protectionist attitude that is oblivious to financial matters; or else, some of us at least might end up unemployed. (I might have to seek permanent residency in Rome, assuming that an Italian soprano will be generous enough to fund my legal and economic research.) To minimize cost, the optimal solution would be to open all courses to all students, which in practice means cutting the Core to one

course only per department (How about a History 100: "History for Dummies"?); then abolish other feudal privileges (that reminds me all too well of the timar system of the Ottoman Empire): the honors program, writing intensive courses (all courses should be reading and writing intensive), and the Freshman seminars, and I'm sure I've forgotten many other privileges, ranks, and seigniorial dues and the like. Economists know all too well that privileges, hierarchies, and protectionist attitudes only increase the transaction costs and thus limit access to particular commodities and services.

Our courses in their complexity look in between the Italian telephone system and the Ottoman Empire exploding on the eve of the First World War. They therefore need to be simplified greatly to cut on transaction costs. All hierarchies, privileges, special programs, etc., constitute enormous transaction costs, and only reducing them to their bare minimum would help our university survive.

academe
Saturday, June 2, 2001

It is, of course, always refreshing to see professors blaming and taking action against their own administration. That the administration stands as the bouc émissaire of modern academia only translates the profound malaise we've been into for some time, and which will only get worse in the decade to come. The truth of the matter is that American academia has expanded considerably beyond its means since the second world war. There was first the GI Bill which pulled for the first time in history a much larger number of men and women into higher education (or as Hobsbawm noted, we now have more students than peasants), then came all the special programs that were added to the departmental units to accommodate America's new role as a superpower and as a guardian against communism, not to mention all the new programs that were the outcome of changing values at home, so that anything from civil rights and the rule of law to gender values and feminism, and the suspicions raised against imperialism, colonialism, and orientalism, or, in short, anything that monitors the relationship between the west and the rest of the world, had to find some kind of niche of its own and be accommodated in higher education. Then, thanks to French post-war thought (the pre-war folks, such as Bergson and Durkheim, are now considered dépassé), we've been told by Foucault and Derrida, which have been endlessly and monotonously rehearsed by their American disciples, that we're into discourses of power 24 hours a day no matter how much we deconstruct the logo-centric discourse of the west.

The proliferation of such programs, side-by-side to the more traditional departments, has created since the 1950s and 1960s up to the present, an army of bureaucrats, which with the security of tenure combined to their non-demanding but paying audiences, have become like a soviet politburo. A fortunate combination of historical and political event within the last two decades has suddenly rendered many of those services redundant. Consider, for example, all the so-called "area studies," which, to be sure, were meant to let America understand the world it had just begun to dominate. Europe had to be reassessed and looked upon closely simply because the US had poured billions of dollars to save the European economies form devastation after a deadly war; Japan had been finally secularized and brought down to earth thanks to a new constitution; the creation of the Israeli state in 1948 has reshaped since then all the political map of the Middle East; and, last but not least, the Chinese revolution might have posed a threat to the rest of Asia, so it had to be contained, hence Korea and Vietnam. But all such issues mattered simply because of the temporary di-visions created by and articulated throughout the cold war. After the fall of the Berlin wall, however, it was as if those "area studies" had suddenly lost their alphabet. More importantly, their raison d'être has become a problem all by itself, and with one superpower in sight there was not much to fight for anymore.

The Arts in particular became crowded with instructors and professors who on their own, and for the specialty they were in, could not even cover the costs of their tenure appointment. So all kinds of courses and programs had to be devised so as to keep this bureaucracy busy, and we tend to forget --now that administrators have become the target-- that both an administration and its faculty are structured around the same -- or at least similar-- bureaucratic principles, which inevitably led to an academe dissociated from the interests of its clients. In fact, we tend to forget that the students make a living out of their diploma, no matter how poorly they perform. Moreover, and unlike Europe where there's a tendency to separate among professions so that a law student would be always with other fellow law students, American academia mixes all brands together in those venerable colleges of arts and sciences, so that all the pre-laws and pre-meds, are side-by-side with business and arts students. All of them are now held hostage to bulky, costly, and ineffective programs, mostly (though not exclusively) in the form of "core" requirements, and which for the most part are not even remotely linked to their own interests. There are very few courses, if at all, in a typical arts curriculum, which address the professional needs of pre-law, pre-med, business and economics, the natural sciences, and computer science students, who as a group --which are the most well paid professionals in the US-- must numerically be close to half of the student body in an arts & sciences college. Instead, and in a typical four-year

framework that leads from the freshman entry-level year to graduation, those future professionals have to limit themselves to their raw-material major courses, which are oblivious to history, anthropology, and philosophy, on the one hand, and the more general arts courses, on the other, which mostly cover western civilization as a socio-cultural unit. But it's that missing "in-between" that would have made precisely all the difference and that would have provided those professionals with a sense of balance: I mean all those courses that would have provided them with a sense of history, anthropology, and philosophy (epistemology) of their own disciplines, but which regrettably hardly exist in any curriculum.

So, the truth of the matter is that across the nation (the American umma, as the Arabs would say) departments and programs have been overstuffed far beyond their needs, and the creation of all those so-called "core" requirements was only a cynical and short-sighted measure to distribute teaching hours and students among faculty who otherwise would have been at God's mercy. But, and in spite of all those busy core sections filled to the last student, core programs end up financially as a losing enterprise, a loss that in wealthy universities is covered by their endowments, and in less prominent colleges the loss generates endless debates about the beauty of the Greek and Roman cultures every time the administration proposes cuts. But now there's a realization among administrators that a more compact core would be more attractive to students. By giving them more opportunities to make their own choices with a reduced core, students might be more inclined to go for a particular college that would not push them for an endless array of arts requirements. But in some of the wealthier universities, such as The University of Chicago, proposals by administrators to make core programs more attractive have only backfired, and with the ex-president's resignation in mind, the new one will not be tempted soon enough to reopen the lid.

The double identity of labor
Sunday, June 3, 2001

After winning a general victory in a landslide universal-suffrage election, and as soon as he was appointed Prime Minister a couple of months ago, Ariel Sharon made a long and detailed digression of "the state of Israel" --a kind of upgraded Judenstaat-- to a French news agency in which, besides reiterating some basics of the Zionist doctrine --that the settlements in Judea and Samaria (the present West Bank) are there to stay whatever the peace talks amount to-- he made the surprising remark that he does not expect the economies of the neighboring Arab states (referring in particular to Syria and Egypt) to significantly improve in the decade to come, and that such weaknesses will be "beneficial" to

Israel. What is surprising here is not that the economic (and political) performance of many Arab states has been going awry, and might remain so for the first half of the 21st century, but that such a misfortune "on the other side" will be "beneficial" to the Jewish state. I tend to see that the economic divide between Arabs and Israelis is even more fundamental than the political divide (not to mention the religious and legal aspects of those societies; but then if you're a Weberian you know for sure that even religion "affects" the economic), and that the impasse is socio-economic before anything else.

We'll have to begin with the early settlers (or pilgrims) in the 1870s and later, most of which were Russian Jews who flew the pogrom campaigns in tsarist Russia. They were to be joined in the 1880s by Eastern European Jews who for the most part had enough of the rampant antisemitism within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Those were mostly individuals that immigrated collectively and worked and behaved as a collectivity, and were imbued for the most part with a utopian socialism, which they mixed with their Judaic Messianic culture, and all of which were popular in the Germanic cultures of eastern and central Europe. When those "pilgrims" created their first "labor camps," with the Rothschilds as their prime financiers, in zones of Ottoman Palestine with little or no Arab populations, there was a prima facie realization that they would be unable to survive economically (not to mention the pitfalls of their physical survival) without separating their own labor from the rest of the Arabs, thus what came to be known as "Jewish labor."

It is that separation that eventually --and unexpectedly one should add-- made the existence of the Jewish community in Ottoman Palestine possible, so that by the time of the British Mandate in the early 1920s, the grounds were ripe enough to begin the struggle that eventually led to the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948. But were it not for those early four decades, between the 1880s and 1920s, in which the doctrine of a di-vision of labor between Arabs and Jews had been elaborated and practiced, the British Mandate would have been a pure waste in terms of the possibilities accorded to the Jews in the period between 1920 and 1948. That is often forgotten and tend to be minimized in the dialogue des sourds that Arabs, Israelis, and Jews, and pundits alike are engaged in these days, and which for the most part lacks that socio-economic and historical perspective, and focuses instead on dubious moral and "rights" issues. The Israelis are probably just beginning to realize --with great pain-- that granting the Palestinians a state of their own is like giving someone a home without furniture, electricity, water and gas supplies, and where the recipients are jobless. When no economic infrastructure exists, and no matter what political rights you give to a people, even if you make them all your equal, those rights will prove of little help for

economic survival. When the only economic value that the Palestinians possess is their own physical labor, and which they export to the Israelis as cheap underpaid labor (and which ironically is the kind of labor that greatly helped the construction of settlements), it means that there is no Palestinian economy, but only a proletarian labor force which has nothing to lose and not much to gain with or without Jerusalem. As there isn't much at stake, the second intifada could go on forever.

The Israelis will at some point have to realize that granting the Palestinians their political rights in the form of independent state -- whatever its borders, even with the inclusion of east Jerusalem as the future capital-- will not be enough, and that there's much more at stake here, an outcome of a century of labor practices, which in turn epitomize infrastructural differences between western civilization and Islamdom. The point is that Israelis will soon find themselves in a situation similar in some respects to the Americans by the mid-19th century, when slavery was already declining, but for which an adequate political framework was yet to be found. But that eventually implied a full political, legal, and socio-economic integration --in short, one that was total-- and when we look at the ghettos still flourishing in many American cities today we realize that the process of integration is at its beginnings. The Israelis might have to opt for such a total integration, one that would imply above all integrating the Palestinian labor force on an equal footing with the Israeli --a solution that requires an adequate legal framework, and that would be hard to conceive in a bi-lateral state --hence a possible moratorium on the notion of the Jewish state altogether, with a juxtaposed Palestinian state --and not simply the expansion of settlements-- in favor of a single Jewish-Palestinian state. In light of the hardenings created by modern nationalisms, and the failures of bi-lingual states (e.g. the Canadian Anglo-French confederation), that will definitely not be that easy to digest. But what are the alternatives?

To understand why such a drastic re-conceptualization is beneficial, we need to go back to the historical roots of the conflict and the double identity of labor in particular. In fact, the division of labor between "Jewish" and "Arab" labor implied more than a physical reordering of things. It implied above all that they had to be structured very differently from one another. On the Arab side, the bulk of labor was offered by a peasantry that was abused of by centuries of corvées, and as a result occasionally moved around searching for new landlords and arable lands. That invariably gave a peasantry that was only loosely tied its land, on the one, and even more loosely connected to its urban notables, which were also the de facto landowners and tax-farmers, on the other. Such a situation pushed the early Jewish settlers towards adopting a labor infrastructure whose foundations merged notions of 19th-century

capitalism together with a utopian socialism. Competition was indeed essential but the individual had to sacrifice himself first and to his or her own community. That led a decade or two later to the whole notion of the kibbutz, the labor camps that every Jewish settler had to participate in and that provided every one of them with a total and totalizing experience, one that associated labor with communal values, religion with education, as well as a commitment to the values of the future Jewish state.

That the two communities were structured on different systems of values is beyond any doubt. The problem, however, is that such differences tend to be flattened within a politically correct discourse, one that is unjustly pernicious to the strong, and soft towards the weaknesses of the dispossessed. The differences are visible even in the way the two parties have been waging "war" at one another. When Arafat unilaterally declared a cease-fire right after the deadly suicide bomb-attack on a Tel Aviv discothèque this past Friday (6/1), one wonders what kind of "war" the Palestinians are waging in the first place? The protracted and slow-moving street-war that the Palestinians have been into since last September reflects the endless divisions and sub-divisions in that society, in which the suicide "martyrs" make their decisions on their own, within small "military" cells, and independently of the political stratum at the top which is supposed to internationally represent them. But when Sharon threatened on a couple of occasions to wage a "real war," the implication is that for the Hebrew state such acts of violence, despite the enormous damage that they've created, are no "war" at all: the modern state is Clausewitzian by nature and thus needs a "decisive victory"; otherwise it would be internally eaten by the poisonous and unstructured relations that pervade in the Third World today.

Loft Story
Tuesday, July 24, 2001

There are societies where entities such as the state, the economy, the market, and the law, act not only as mythical abstractions, but also as oppressive entities whose very existence seems paradoxically nowhere and, at the same time, in every body and mind. Those second- and third-world societies, whose range varies considerably from the ex-Soviet Union to Columbia, Guatemala, China, Egypt and Syria, had at some point until the nineteenth century, some kind of ancien régime of their own, which had kept for a long time a minimal sense of harmony and cohesion for the various heterogeneous populations of those regions —or at least that's what we would like to think, considering the amount of damage that the glorious twentieth century has created.

The fragmentation of space and its abstraction have become the landmark of all those post-colonial states in their unsuccessful attempts to control a poorly defined and heterogeneous territory. But time is no better, since the idea of connecting a population to its historical heritage has become a luxury all by itself, one that only the wealthiest nations could afford. The "others" are left to their own sensual experiences, with a broad mythological history which hardly excites the mind, as it has been so much ritualistically rehearsed, repeated, only to be betrayed by a more modernist spirit.

Modern capitalism is a force of its own and has its own logic, independently of national territories, we are told. Yet those second- and third-world "territories" have "missed" "their" capitalisms all the way through. First, through a poor and very partial implementation of its principles, and then through a hegemonic state on the top whose ineffective bureaucracy selectively chooses what needs to circulate within the national territory and through its borders. Capital, Marx repeated ad nauseam, likes to circulate indefinitely. If a commodity finally finds its resting place --or its value as a utility-- in the hands of its happy user, capital cannot find a resting place since it's abstract by definition. But that's precisely what many of those territorial states would like to do: they want to know where your capital is moving --and that's why they look so busy, with all those pseudo-bureaucracies nested within other repressive bodies.

I got into the habit of picking up one of those many Syrian intelligence officers few miles before crossing the coastal border between Lebanon and Syria. On weekends they wait for single-passenger cars at the Syrian checkpoints a couple of miles after exiting from the northern city of Tripoli. As I like to travel on my own, I'm always a happy target. Those officers tend to be usually just-married young men, with a housewife and a couple of kids waiting for them in a village in the 'Alaouite mountains. They also tend to be polite chain smokers, always apologizing for every cigarette they burn in the small space of my air-conditioned Honda, and, knowing the current tension among the Lebanese populace and the Syrians, they apologetically conceal their arrogance. But there's no mistake about it: serving in Lebanon, even with a meager salary, is more prestigious than being in Syria --even though the economic benefits of such a transfer remain uncertain, considering that each extra-cash has to be bargained individually, and that it's usually their superiors (who never ask anyone for a ride) who get the real cash.

I was happy when I realized that the young 'Alaouite I picked up on an early Friday morning in late June did fit exactly with my general portrait. He was stationed in the northern mountainous region of the Cedars (from

which Lebanon receives its flag-symbol), and was coming home for the weekend. He began mentioning the agriculture in his village, the importance of family and kin, his recent marriage, etc. But we then came to our fundamental topic of the day: the hashish plantations which have begun to reemerge in some of the plains of eastern Lebanon. "Yes," he said, "I've seen some of them with my own eyes even though the Cedars is not overall touched by the phenomenon. A French photographer and journalist had his film burned by angry peasants, but at least they gave him back his camera."

The mathematics goes on as follows. For every kilogram of hashish, the peasants receive on average $1,500. At the end of the process, that same kilogram is sold for over $100,000 in the streets of Miami. Conclusion: those who benefit from the process are neither the peasants nor their region for that matter --that would be asking too much-- but only the intermediaries who make the middle process possible, meaning all kinds of local politicians, army officers, dealers, merchants, international traffickers, etc.

In a celebrated chapter of Kapital, which has attracted the attention of Walter Benjamin, Marx describes what he calls the "fetishism of commodities." Commodities are not exchanged anymore for their use value, but even their exchange value --for which Marx has spent his lifetime arguing that it was based on the quantum of labor invested in it (wrongly, I should add, but that's another story)-- is not what matters anymore. Once an object becomes fetish, it loses contact with the rational, only to be invested into the mythical and religious realms. Under capitalism, a set of objects designate status, lifestyle, prestige, age, sex, a philosophical orientation, aggressiveness, and above all an ability to look "cool" (to quote an American saying, which must have begun as an advertisement). The Virgin Megastore which just opened in downtown Beirut has already an aura to it. To begin, it is situated in a renovated building, and occupying it in toto, and which used to be, prior to its damage in the civil war, a theater and opera house --that's enough to tell you where "culture" is heading these days: the French-oriental architecture of the 1920s and 1930s is being rehabilitated stone-by-stone, only to transform the haute culture of the Mandate into a haute couture. The upper floor of the Megastore has a trendy restaurant, whose tables overlook the floor below where layers upon layers of CDs are stacked. But the upper floor, where the restaurant is now located, used to be the upper spectators' lounge. All of this trucage is very well done, I dare to add, and adds to the fetish nature of the store and its aura. (The Virgin store on Chicago's Magnificent Mile looks by contrast dull in its straightforward squared architecture, but then transforming the Chicago opera house into a store that sells CDs would have created an uproar.)

But there is more to it than the incessant trompe-l'oeil in that kind of architecture. The importance of the exhibited commodities is that they're only nominally for exchange. In effect, what is exchanged is not the commodity itself as much as all the symbolic values it imparts on its bearer. To begin, the store displays an array of object-commodities which seem unrelated at first sight: cell phones, books, magazines, DVDs, CDs, cameras, computers, etc. Then, second, their average price is affordable, if not low --$20 on average-- so that even if you're leading an impecunious life there are ad infinitum symbols to exchange. In effect --and that's the genius of the whole operation-- you're constructing a lifestyle through such symbols, and in a way that's much more refined than simply owning a nice home or a car (or a woman). Hence their apparent non-relatedness only "relates" through each consumer's mind: as a set of symbols whose value denotes a lifestyle, or a "personality" if you wish. There's indeed something Tocquevillian in all those people rushing to consume those gadgets: it's as if they're all looking for their "political rights" through the consumption of such objects. Modern capitalism dislocates individuals and breaks their natural bonds, while transforming them into narcissistic entities unable to become the political animals that all philosophers since Aristotle wanted them to be. So we're left with stylish individuals, whose very act of consumption signals a cosmos of its own.

I could go on for ever with that kind of stuff, in particular that those globalization megastores are flourishing. There's at the other end of Virgin the new Nike store whose huge banner of a black athlete is only partly hidden by the nearby mosque. (I managed a photograph of a gigantic Nike sneakers with the upper tower of the mosque all in one frame.) But even though all those stores are spreading around like a disease, I'm not sure that their symbols are always the same: we need to be patient and see whether a sneaker in Beirut carries the same symbolic value as in Chicago. (Ironically, the Virgin and Nike superstores on Chicago's Magnificent Mile reproduce their Beirut face-to-face location.) Starbucks, which has already three stores in Beirut, has made the decision to tackle difficult cities such as Rome and Vienna, namely places with a long tradition for coffee drinking: Will they succumb to the new American style? International companies these days do not think in terms of a "need" only, but always in terms of adventure and conquest. The folks at Starbucks in Seattle must have gotten pretty bored with all their successes conquering all those easy cities such as Tokyo and Beirut, where people are dying for a new cheap symbol of gratification, so let's see if Rome and Vienna will work out for a change, even though the Italians and Austrians must be already saturated with coffee up to the next century.

After this long détour on fetishism, I need to come back to my Syrian trip. I finally reached the border early in the morning with the young man in my car. The northern Lebanese–Syrian border is marked by the Awwali river that demarcates the two countries. The economics of demarcation, however, is much stronger. In effect, and due to the 5:1 ratio in the standard of living between the two countries, the circulation of labor from Syria to Lebanon achieves gigantic proportions with estimates ranging from 200,000 to a million worker. More importantly, a Syrian concierge in Beirut receives a salary equivalent to a fully tenured university professor in Damascus, namely $300 on average per month, which is still more than what a high-ranking judge would receive.

The Dabbousiyeh border was quiet that early morning with the officers still sipping their coffees, having spent their night bargaining with and receiving their dues from smugglers. But on my way back ten days later, in a hot and humid afternoon, the border was crowded with Syrian workers trying to get their passes stamped. It all looked like those "gates" that the Israelis have constructed all along the Gaza strip and the West Bank, and which serve as filters for the cheap Palestinian labor. The bulk of the third-world does not have the luxury of an "economic" rationale, but only fragmented spaces --euphemistically denoted as "national" territories-- where bodies circulate as labor. The body as a sign for an exchange value: the phenomenon becomes even more visible in those rare occasions when the juxtaposed borders manifest a substantial difference in the standard of living --the US-Mexican border, for one, being its quintessential phenomenon, but so is the Syrian-Lebanese border. In most cases, however, the circulation of labor implies smuggling bodies through international borders, mountains, rivers and seas. Thus, a Syrian attempting to find a job in Lebanon is still romantic compared to a Kurd crossing hidden in a truck half a dozen borders before reaching Germany, only to be incarcerated in one of those labor-camps around Berlin.

But between those wealthier and poorer nations if bodies circulate as labor, commodities on the other hand become sacrosanct, meaning that they are doubly fetishized. There is always something "of value" that the Syrian border officers are searching for: Do you have a video camera? There was a time, in the early 1990s, when the video camera became a popular consumer object in Syria, as everywhere else in the world, and passengers began buying them in Beirut and smuggling them inland. But since then the prices have dropped dramatically, besides the fact that cameras have become so ubiquitous that there's no need for the hardship of smuggling anymore. But in Syria, even if the entire world collapses,

routine has still to be followed. Otherwise, there would be nothing to believe in anymore.

So the officer, out of pure routine, repeats his question: Do you have a video camera? No, I don't. But as I opened my two suitcases, the officer was in fact interested in something else. He pointed to a green box. That's regular color film --20 rolls in total. When a French photographer who visited Russia has published his book last year, I was astonished by the quality of the Rembrandt-like colors, so I decided to opt for the same grain, and bought a stock from New York. When I told the officer that I'll be staying for two weeks, and with two rolls a day 20 rolls are not that extravagant, he insisted that all this be reported to his superior. We're talking quantity here rather than value. Never mind that the 20-roll pack costs only $50, and that had I sold it in toto in Aleppo I would have made no more than a $5 profit --I wouldn't go that low, despite my horrific salary-- the number "20" must have a ring to it. A couple years ago I've had the same problem with a dozen T-shirts: all were black and nicely packed in my suitcase. So I ended up packing T-shirts of different colors and brands this time to minimize suspicion.

But now I'm stuck with those damned rolls. He reported me to his superior, and was taken like a prisoner of war to his office. The commander of the post greeted me with a simile, and then ordered that, since I'm an immigrant living abroad and now on a short visit to my "mother country," to let me in with the 20 rolls. But back to the customs, the lower officer insisted that a note be appended to my pass-card: "You can use whatever you like, but you still have to come out with 20 rolls. We're doing it for your safety," he added, "What if one of those police patrols stops you and discovers the rolls?" "But why should I smuggle 20 rolls? And besides, you're now forcing me to process them in Beirut." But he missed my point. Once in his office we argued on how to spell Fujicolor: "Are you French or English educated?," he asked, "The J and G are spelled differently from one language to the other."

I've always looked at writing and intellectual activity in general like visiting your psychoanalyst once a week: you organize your past and present gradually by talking about it, and if things are progressing you might feel better. There are cities like Paris or New York which have a rich body of artistic and scientific representations, while others, such as Aleppo or Damascus, are next to nothing in this respect --I'm not even aware of a single photographic portfolio for either city, or a film, or a fiction, while their histories remain fragmented at best, with no beginning and no end in sight. But as I reached one of Aleppo's southern entrances, I thought that it all didn't matter. Whether you're in Paris, Rome, New York, or a forgotten city like Aleppo, "reality"-as-representation is never

mastered, and is always "there" to be discovered. We tend to forget this simple fact because we're saved by our daily routines, achievements, and the things we've accumulated as achievements such as wealth, status, and knowledge. Western civilization has constructed an impassioned objective stance for representing nature and society, but in the meantime it has left the subject screaming for help. Modern education and research focus so much on objective notions of knowledge to the point that the individual subject has lost all interest in knowledge as such. Such an epistemology has created an unprecedented barrier between object and subject to the point that we badly need a subjective takeover of that objective knowledge --and a fortiori in the natural and social sciences.

Modern video cameras have a magical side-screen that instantaneously frames in colored pixels. It gives you that illusion of framing -- representing-- every moment of your life as a never ending work in continuous flux. It could then be edited, reproduced, and transmitted without any quality loss. But once you leave behind you the routines of academia, of achievements and honors, you're left with that instantaneous "reality" that needs to be framed in words and images. That's particularly true for societies whose cultural symbols are getting juxtaposed from a wide array of cultures. Disconnected from their past, their present has an immediacy that directly hits your nervous system.

The Baron hotel at the center of Aleppo is one of the last architectural vestiges of the late Ottoman period. Constructed by Armenians at the turn of the century, it was supposed to represent a rationalized and modern architecture. But besides its golden period throughout the French Mandate and later, it began to fall apart with the nationalizations in the 1960s, to the point that should Agatha Christie, who had a room there at one point, come back to write another mystery from her balcony, she would still feel at home. Time stands still. And so does the time in my room. The air-conditioning machine was Russian made, with a 110/220 converter half its size. It made a horrific noise that I was unable to dominate because all the instructions were in Russian, so I opted for the excessive heat and turned it off. From the 1960s up to perestroika, Syria kept a large debt towards the ex-USSR, and in return, the Syrians have been exporting all kinds of goods to the ex-Soviet Republics. The Syrian economy thus got into the habit of producing low-quality products that no one wants, and with Gorby in power the system was already dead by the late 1980s. But still, the so-called public sector produces the same stuff, and with no buyers in mind.

Having been permanently exonerated from my military service after a $5,000 payment in cash, I drove the following day to my family's hometown in Idlib hoping to receive my passport. It must have been I was

fifteen when I last received a Syrian passport, so my excitement was great, but to no avail: it turned out that there was an arrest warrant lingering since 1995 for having "escaped" from my military service. I began an argument with the officer on the basis that the warrant should have been automatically cancelled after my exoneration. What's the point of keeping it? But there was no point arguing: the state institutions are independent from one another --as if the "separation of powers" of Montesquieu has only been applied in this country: those institutions work individually on their own and do not make sense as a totality. The arrest warrant came originally from the army offices, then transferred to the executive (police, etc.), and here I was in an office that provides passports and has no connection with either the army or the executive. The officer explained to me the long road to Damascus. First, appear in front of a military tribunal in Aleppo and ask their forgiveness for not having served in the army; then, second, clear my name permanently from the police headquarters in Damascus; and, finally, last but not least, receive an authorization from the office of immigration and passports (in Damascus) for my own passport.

People without literary imagination like myself tend to describe any strangely inhabited bureaucratic environment as Kafkaesque, for lack of a better terminology. But by the time I received my final authorization from Damascus I was half-dead, so I thought that I need a better word for that kind of environment. How about the Hegelianism of the poor? The bureaucracy gets sophisticated only when it needs to control the circulation of individuals over its territory, and it does so by means of newly installed IBM terminals over all its borders and some of its offices. The officer in Damascus --the last one I've met and with whom I've completed a $10 deal to set me off once and for all-- told me how "lucky" I was for having my name vanish with the click of a mouse -- information at your fingertips.

Back to Aleppo and the Baron. I've now requested one of the new revamped rooms hoping to get a decent night's sleep before going to Idlib the following day. The Japanese air conditioning machine was extremely silent, but all the instructions were now in Japanese, so I froze all night for not knowing that language.

The following day I received my Syrian passport.

No one asked me about the 20 rolls on my way back.

The power of the image
Roma, in the wake of 9/11

In the fall of 1991 a car filled with explosives managed its way through the well guarded American University campus in Beirut, then suddenly rushed towards the main administrative building on the upper side of the campus, and as the driver jumped out of the car and run away before the explosion took place, the totality of the building collapsed in seconds and was reduced to rubble, but as the attack took place by midnight there were no extreme casualties. The building, known as College Hall, was the first one in a series constructed by Protestant missionaries from Boston in the second half of the nineteenth century for what was to become the Syrian Protestant College (the association of Protestant with Syrian must make Max Weber smile in his grave), and later the American University of Beirut. The Boston missionaries had made the point in their first inaugural statement that they wanted the people of the region, which was still part of the Ottoman Empire (the sick man of Europe), "to have a better life."

In the wake of such a disaster, where anything from the administrative and departmental offices to the mainframes of the university have all been suddenly destroyed, the administration made the decision the following day, in an emergency meeting with faculty, staff, and students in Chapel Hall, to reconstruct College Hall stone-by-stone as it had been originally planned by the Boston missionaries. For that purpose, the administration had deployed all its efforts in the following years to complete the reconstruction, with a total cost of at least fifteen million dollars, most of it alumni donations. The new building kept the layout of the old one, but with a high-tech infrastructure, and one that would resist the shock of kamikaze bombers.

But the costs and pains of the reconstruction notwithstanding, the real problem was elsewhere. In fact, and as the investigations pointed to no visible and convincing culprit, no one ever claimed the bombing. No one ever threatened the university or requested anything from the administration. No one had made the request from faculty and staff to change anything in the programs and curricula, or in the way recruitments among them were made, or in the way higher administrators were appointed. The university thus suddenly found itself and for no visible reason with a no-name and no-face "enemy," one who brings down a complete building without making any request. No apologies either. We're into an assumed anti-American, anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, anti-Zionist, anti-orientalist, anti-capitalist, anti-liberal, and anti-globalization discourse, which has become so malleable and so passe-partout (in a way similar to the many post-modernist discourses circulating in academia these days) that it has been shared over the years by radical Islamic groups and Marxists and liberals alike. The only difference, however, is in the construction of such groups, their aims, and

what they consider as their techniques of resistance to a world-hegemony. Thus, in the case of the so-called G-8 ("group-of-eight") summit in Genoa this past summer, the anti-globalization militants, which apparently destroyed between 20 to 25 million dollars worth of property to make their point (assuming, of course, they had one), were at least "visible" groups with real bodies and spirits, who came to confront the security forces protecting the summit face-to-face. In that kind of situation one at least hopes a "rational" discussion at some point, or at least that they will turn to one of those "green" parties in Europe once into their forties in an effort to sublimate their anger.

When Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said only few hours after the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) that the twin towers will be reconstructed from scratch exactly as they were, I immediately had in mind College Hall and the no-voice-no-face-anonymous aggressor. The United States and the rest of the world will have to "reconstruct" a culprit who never came forth openly as if committing a private family crime rather than a political one. That will be in fact the biggest malaise that the "free" world will be facing in the days, months, and years ahead: namely, that there is no specific reason for such acts, and no one that could be pinned down with certainty. The FBI, we are told, has already managed the list of the eighteen or so men that hijacked the four planes, and that we thus already have prime "leads" or "circumstantial evidence" pointing to the Saudi born terrorist Usama bin Laden. But, as was the case with PanAm 101, or the WTC episode one in 1993, or the bombing of the two US embassies in Africa in 1998, such preliminary "evidence" will become more and more "circumstantial" as the plot thickens, only pointing to more networks within networks, organizations within organizations, and proxies acting on behalf of clients who paid them well and who prefer to remain hidden with their wives and children rather than opt for an open debate.

In that context, bin Laden acts like a nebulous name, more like a founding father who might have lived and died centuries ago, than a "real" institutional framework. If we patch together every bit of an interview that was videotaped or recorded from bin Laden, each memo that might have originated either from him personally or from his organization (the Qa'ida), we will be ever more confused and puzzled at the general tone of the discourse, its parochial nature and its unwillingness to be time-specific (or "real") on any issue, and would look without much personality of its own when placed within similar discourses that have populated Arab and Islamic societies within the last few centuries. Bin Laden's "base" --his Qa'ida-- looks more like the "foundations" (usul) of the old schools of jurisprudence or the mystical (sufi) brotherhoods --or even the notorious order of the Assassins-- of

medieval and early modern Islam, in that it conveys a particular discursive practice, which has presumably originated and been uttered at some point by its mythical "founder," and to which others kept pouring layers over layers of interpretation and personal praxis. Thus, bin Laden's Qa'ida is a never ending hermeneutical process, which has characterized many institutional and non-institutional frameworks within Islamicate societies, and which under advanced capitalism looks and behaves more like a pay-as-you-go system where potential clients come forward with their deadly "proposals," only to check whether the Master would be interested in pursuing that particular task. In that "open" system, anyone could become a potential client, or anyone could become a potential target.

Thus, in the weekend right before the tragedy of September 11, the Afghani opposition leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud, had apparently been assassinated by two Arabs (which some identified as Moroccans, while others as two Algerians) that posed as journalists and who detonated a bomb placed in a camera. If the official Iranian sources which claimed that bin Laden was behind the killing, turn out to be true --but is it possible to get into any "truth" in that system?-- or at least plausible, then the Saudi terrorist must have been very busy that weekend. First, he got rid of Massoud as a further gesture of reconciliation with the Taliban --some kind of "gift" to his main clients and hosts-- and then went on with a systematic attack on US symbols.

It's the image that finally matters and makes all the difference --not discourse. The video images and still photographs of the twin towers being attacked by hijacked planes forms an unprecedented case of a major event being directly "live" on the air, and to which the so-called Gulf war would look in hindsight as having been staged by the US military. By the time the second hijacked plane was approaching the southern WTC tower, there were already so many reporters and cameramen on the ground and in nearby adjacent towers, or even on the other side of the Hudson river, that the second explosion had the privilege to have been videotaped from six different angles, each one worthy on its own of the attention we normally give to images produced by geniuses like Antonioni and Bergman. The commonly accepted view regarding the distinctive nature of video and film versus photography has been blurred thanks to all those newspapers which, the morning after, carried photographs on their front pages which in reality were no more but manipulations, through sophisticated software programs, of the video images that most networks around the world had already carried.

The point here is the "sophistication" of those terrorists' "minds." They had nothing to say, but they realized the importance of the image. An image does not "say" anything as such, but only conveys emotions. Who

cares to listen to the incessant anti-Americanism of many of the discourses around the world, including in the US itself? The terrorists realized that their words would be redundant, lost in the sea of emptiness and indifference that the printed word generates these days. So they opted for the spectacular and visual, and in such a way that no Hollywood movie would even dare to compete with, at least for some time to come. The WTC episode in particular reveals for the first time, and in the most wired and photographed city of all times, that an "event" could become a publicly photographed movie instantaneously relayed across the world, and with no specific metteur-en-scène. Under such circumstances, there is always one to "hold" the "event." Thus, when the first northern tower was hit, it was thought that no one witnessed it. But then a young Frenchman presented to the Gamma agency his own footage which he had shot in a counter-field position from below, and which CNN had put on the air by midnight eastern time. In Rome's largest Internet café, people were downloading those video clips through fast ISDN connections, and analyzing them frame-by-frame, something that they would not do --I know that as an educator-- for a written text.

An Iranian in Hamburg had apparently prematurely alerted the German police by the weekend that there will be sometime this past week a massive attack against US symbols such as the White House, Capitol Hill and the Pentagon. He even insisted on calling the White House and speak to the president in person. But no one took him seriously. And no one knows for certain whether he is in fact connected to the terrorists in any way. Actually, the German police thinks that he is not and that he is a "madman" suffering from delusions, and he simply made at some point the "right guess." But that's the whole point: all images are on the verge of delusions, and that's why they could be shared and imagined by so many people from so many different cultures.

the anthropology of war
Roma, aftermath of 9/11

Are we at war? Is there a war going on somewhere out there? Now that the Taliban and bin Laden have become less and less of a real target, and more and more as an excuse for a fraudulent war (in the sense of Machiavelli), how can we think what is going on right now, at this moment? From the vintage point of a peaceful and decadent Europe -- more specifically, Rome under the authority of a pariah like Berlusconi-- life goes on as normal, as if the tens of thousands that have been thus far displaced in Afghanistan are not even a concern for the media --most of it controlled by a corrupt Berlusconi, including the Internet service I'm using to login every day. We're already in our fourth week of Operation Enduring Freedom, and we're told that it might last much longer, maybe

until the next summer, or maybe longer, like another year or two, until terrorism is brought down to its knees. We're also reminded that, despite the thousand plus sorties, the bombing is far below a Vietnam carpet style, so that many options are still left in case the Taliban do not surrender. But the problem is precisely that the Taliban are neither an army, nor a bureaucracy, nor a "regime" that controls a territory. It's a loosely knit militia based on kin groups, with an archaic and Wahhabi imposed moral code, and which has been successful in controlling most of Afghanistan in its post-Soviet era precisely because of its lack of ambition to modernize and control by means of a Soviet-style bureaucracy and apparatus.

The black-and-white video clips smell the victory of a self-esteemed little boys club: all the so-called smart-bombs have hit their targets, or so we're told, even though in Kabul the Red Cross warehouses have been already hit twice in the past week. Was this a mistake? Collateral damage? Or the outcome of a wary and faulty intelligence, which, in the Kosovo war had bombed the Chinese embassy even though it could have checked its address in the Belgrade yellow pages? They're thus supposed to present "us" with "evidence" that it all went as planned, and that the "enemy" has been targeted in the right place, and at the right moment. But does technology replace man? A question already posed by Machiavelli (and later by Heidegger) in his Discorsi five-hundred years ago: Does the horse as the new technological achievement of the Roman military replace what the infantry should and should not do in the first place?

Yet, those images have inundated our bedrooms and living rooms with complete boredom and indifference. Not only are those "clips" not telling us anything more, but they're lying. Fernand Braudel once noted that the sixteenth-century Mediterranean measured sixty days, which implied that news, mail, and commodities (including gold and silver) were slow to circulate, even though exact calculations of their transfer from one place to another signaled the early capitalism of the Italian city-states. A fundamental aspect of modern warfare is how fast can one lie, and how fast can the lie be reversed by one's opponent in the battlefield. The interesting thing about evidence (whether documentary or oral) is how much it suppresses, and how much it leaves aside: not only human casualties have no place in those clips, but even what's destroyed on the ground is arrogantly videotaped from a high angle. Military "experts" then tell us what we need to see --an undisguised success story.

We've now become familiar with the Northern Alliance (not to be confused with the much wealthier Italian Northern League), and its barefooted and poorly equipped and trained militias. Since the Taliban have severely

restricted access to their territories to the small Arabic al-Jazira team (and which the Bush administration has attempted to censor), reporters have been endlessly courting the Shi'i Uzbek Northern Alliance. We're supposed to look for signs whether those fragmented and hopeless militias will ever be able to re-conquer and control Kabul --even though they've realistically leaned towards the more feasible Shi'i stronghold of Mazar-i Sharif in this past week. This time, the images come directly from the ground --face-to-face encounters-- instantaneously transmitted by means of portable parabolas (as the Italians call them), but they've regrettably become all too familiar as the "clips" from the sky. In all their haste to be "informative" about the Northern Alliance, they've become a daily annoyance that pops up on our little screens every night.

Then come, in a moderately third place, the refugees, the immigrants, the exiles, and all the displaced. Again, here, it's all scripted so as to make us indifferent in the comfort of our own bedrooms. Not that there's any conspiracy of any kind, but by taking for granted what "poverty" and "misery" are all about, the media ceases to be inquisitive in order to inquire about its object with questioning eyes (and cameras). Indeed, the displaced look like a "demonstration" --or "evidence"-- of American barbarism to some, or Taliban brutality to others. Who they really are does not matter.

Finally, last but not least, we've got the pro-Taliban fundamentalists of the Pakistani cities whose number seems to be growing by the hour. Cameramen and their reporters seem to be satisfied with the sight of burning cars, desecrated American flags, looted shops, and screaming mullahs. But then what? Again, the line of questioning seems so unilateral --Will there be a movement to destabilize the Pakistani military, and hence break the US-led alliance?-- that the images transmitted from the Pakistani cities fail to captivate us: we're only, in the final analysis, attempting to look for numbers behind those mobs, so that who they really are, their history and networks (including their links to the Pakistani military), do not represent questions of importance.

Those images, which cost billions to produce and transmit, hardly shake us, and they're not even informative. Even the good old BBC has lost its edge, and it's now up to a western-style Arab media like al-Jazira to "make" the war its own way. Yet, in all their indifference to emotion, those images have become for better or for worse an inseparable aspect of our households. In the same way that classroom education only generates indifference to knowledge and life in general, satellite-transmitted images hardly shake our beliefs. Indeed their purpose is to keep us as comfortable as we've always been, as if no war ever took place, and no one is suffering on the ground.

In other words, they fail to elucidate the process of questioning through the image: How did Afghanistan become what it is today? How come is it endlessly divided? And how come does the United States feel so comfortable --for the fourth time in a decade-- to move freely to punish Iraq, then Somalia, then Kosovo, and now Afghanistan, without knowledge, sympathy, or genuine interest in those societies?

interpretations at war
Roma, in the aftermath of 9/11

Now that the venerable and mighty B-52's have finally entered into action to carpet Afghanistan massively with all kinds of destructive weapons, the Americans are launching their war in a style which has become their trademark since Korea and Vietnam. But weary Northern Alliance militiamen were complaining to a BBC reporter that "that was not enough: the Americans have been playing around for four weeks, and, at times, even dropped bombs on our side." When will it be enough, and for what purpose exactly? Will it ever be enough?

Since bin Laden has been reassessed as an implausible target --it remains uncertain whether he is still in the Afghani mountains-- attention has focused on his protectors and hosts --the Taliban-- and the goal has thus shifted, mutatis mutandis, to a complete restructuring of the Afghani political system, if not the socio-economic infrastructures of the Afghanis, thus implying a de facto dismantling of the Taliban. We are thus in the presence of a traditional full-fledged war, one that will eventually require massive ground troops, which will be used to destroy the Taliban, then fill the political vacuum created by the demise of the latter, and thus create a new political system that should in principle become responsible of all the changes that will be needed to beef-up the infrastructure of that country. Specialists at Foggy Bottom have now become familiar with Afghani Islam, and its tribal, ethnic, linguistic, and religious spectrum, hence the sudden renewed interest in the "Loya Jirga," a grand council of tribal, religious and political figures, to decide on Afghanistan's future, possibly involving elections within a one- or two-year period from the demise of the Taliban. The ex-king Muhammad Zahir Shah, in exile in Rome since 1973 after a coup d'état by his brother-in-law (and cousin), would be at the head of the general council, and would therefore with his government of national unity decide how to channel the international funds needed for a rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Needless to say, all this sounds like the good old nineteenth-century French and British colonialisms, but will it work now, in the new millennium? Is colonialism still possible, in particular that there seems to be a major reluctance in deploying massive ground

troops? The novelty in World War I was not only in bringing an end to colonialism, but in democratizing war as such through a massive involvement of the civilian populations, thus bringing an end to the Napoleonic war formula of the previous century. And while the Second World War brought an end to Nazism, the undeclared Third War --better known as the Cold War-- brought communism down. We're probably now, as Jean Baudrillard has very recently suggested (Le Monde, 3 November 2001), into the Fourth World War. My guess is that the stumbling of American decision making, which we've witnessed in the past month, comes from the realization that the US (pace Tony Blair) is fighting this war in a traditional style and with traditional weapons, and that this war has already been "lost" without having even effectively begun.

In the first three weeks or so, the F-16 fighters, thanks to an average 70 sorties a day (far less than the 700-a-day in Kosovo), were managing surgical strikes, thus avoiding excessive civilian casualties. The surgical-strike technology was developed and became the norm in the last two decades, and in particular in the Gulf War, to alleviate memories of Vietnam-style carpet bombing. Not only that the world has become more concerned with civilian casualties (close to a million in Vietnam), but the US has become more concerned with its own military body bags. Surgical strikes are thus supposed to reduce both by destroying the moral and military capabilities of the enemy, without much deployment of ground troops. But this has thus far proved ineffective in Afghanistan, in particular when applied to a group as fragmented as the Taliban, hence the introduction of the old B-52 technology this past week --albeit very cautiously, which is making the predominantly Uzbek Northern Alliance even more nervous. I don't think that it would be that great a surprise if the Shi'i stronghold of Mazar-i-Sharif is captured at some point this month, or even if Kabul falls within the hands of the Alliance, but what will the end be? (Even though it remains highly uncertain whether that wretched Alliance will ever be able to capture any city.) The total restructuring of a country as unstable as Afghanistan could easily turn into a gigantic nightmare, and one could foresee an exiting of the US-led alliance by simply "dropping" the Afghanis altogether --as it previously happened with the anti-Soviet resistance in the 1980s, or the Iraqi Kurds in the mid-1990s.

But notwithstanding all human casualties and the bleak future of Afghanistan, the sources of general malaise vis-à-vis this war are of a different nature. In fact, the terrorists on September 11 have struck a symbolic target located at the "center" of modern capitalism --not only Manhattan, but more specifically the Twin Towers (le torri gemelle). (There is something mythological in Western civilization about doubles, in

particular "twins," like Romulus killing his twin-brother and founding Rome in the eighth century B.C., as a way of perceiving one's exact double before committing a crime in a gesture of self-sacrifice: mimesis at its best --a grandiose gesture of destroying the mirror prior to the act of a radical new becoming.) That was an act of grandiose imagery that was felt around the world, and has created the event of the new century, the mother of all events. In fact, all nineteen suspects have absorbed so well the values of the American Dream that they can hardly be called "outsiders" anymore. In the six- to twelve-month "training" period, they lived normally with their families and friends, mixed with ordinary people in bars and nightclubs, occasionally got drunk and had fights, and had bank accounts and ATM cards. More importantly, however, they absorbed so well the powerful and ambiguous culture of the image, while disdaining "high" culture and élitist discourses and ideas, to the point that it's ridiculous to even advance the claim that they hated the American lifestyle to which they had become so accustomed. Actually, the reverse is true: they must have been fascinated by all those images and their symbols, and must have realized from the Hollywood culture that the most powerful society in history loves apocalyptic rituals of self-sacrifice and destruction. Now that those rituals have been made real thanks to a spectacular event reproduced on video all around the world, Hollywood must have suddenly run out of ideas.

The embarrassment must have therefore been twofold. First, it was an act from the "inside" rather than the "outside." Unlike the young Palestinian kamikaze bombers who remain at the margins of Israeli society as tools of cheap labor and exploitation, all suspects were perfectly integrated as your most ordinary citizens. The alleged leader of the massacre, the Egyptian Muhammad 'Ata, was from a wealthy middle class family, studied urbanism in Hamburg and wrote a Masters dissertation in German on urban renewal in the Syrian city of Aleppo. We're all familiar with bin Laden's excessive wealth, and his half-brothers' donations to American institutions (including one big generous "gift" to Harvard). The point here is that we would all have felt more secure had the culprits been as poor as those displaced Afghanis --we would have at least "understood" something, and made use of classical warfare notions of poor versus spoiled rich societies.

Second, once we accept this "inside" hypothesis, that act of terror could then be perceived in conjunction with other ones perpetrated by radical extremist groups from within the US (e.g. Timothy McVeigh and his benefactors among the militias of the mid-West). With such perspective, all the talk about Islam and the clash of civilizations becomes of a secondary nature --or, at least, it must be totally revisited. Equal exchange, which by definition is a fundamental rule of capitalism, has

been reversed through the symbolic exchange of the perpetrators -- primarily, the taking of their own lives in an irreversible act of self-sacrifice-- a gesture which has rendered all the spectacular imagery even more unequal. Even Timothy McVeigh, whose Oklahoma City murderous act looks very similar to that of the WTC, had to face death confined to the space of a clinical chamber with video cameras patiently transmitting a death-penalty case. But that's far less spectacular than the nineteen hijackers who died hand-in-hand with their victims --and in the case of the United Airlines flight that crashed in rural Pennsylvania, they were probably even murdered by struggling victims.

We are thus far away from the logic and tactics of the European terrorists groups, such as the Italian Brigade Rosse or the German Bader-Meinhoff, which flourished in the aftermath of the students revolts in the 1960s. An outcome of a utopian Marxism-Leninism, or Trotskyism and Maoism, they were for the most part believers of a radical shakeup within European societies through their students and labor movements. They took great risks in making their ideologies known to the public and distributed tracts and pamphlets on their revolutionary actions. Their actions were never wide scale and were not meant to be genocidal, and thus perished by the late 1970s with the embourgeoisement of the students and proletarians which they thought constituted their base.

By contrast today's groups are like those "I Love You" viruses which devastate millions of computers around the world, while triggered with a minimalist technological equipment. In a single act they reverse the equation of the liberal free exchange by endlessly circulating and reproducing themselves around the globe. In hindsight the anti-globalization movements, which began in Seattle and ended in Genoa under Berlusconi, look like a muted and ineffective reproduction of the student movements of the 1960s in that they thought that capitalism could be changed, or at least modified by making it more human (or humanistic). By contrast the terrorist movements of the twenty-first century look for the spectacular and symbolic through self-sacrifice and the image. They have no message to deliver, and are not at home with ideas and discourse, nor in face-to-face exchange. In other words, they are like your most common men and women around the globe, as epitomized by the American way of life, which has become the main model of success after the fall of communism and all socialist utopian systems.

Even if Kabul falls to the Northern Alliance, and as a result the Taliban lose their control of Afghanistan, the war on terrorism has already been lost because it is fought by conventional means. While millions of dollars are poured daily to sustain the war effort, it took no more than $500,000

(based on FBI estimates) to reach "ground zero." Those who are punished as the result of the daily bombings are paradoxically the ones the most remote from any form of liberal capitalism and have been unaffected by globalization (or "mondialisation," in the French vocabulary). They in fact have not even reached yet the level of early capitalism that the Italian city-states had implemented in the sixteenth century, and with no TV sets in most Afghani households, they probably did not share the luxury of watching the twin towers going down. Do they even know what took place on September 11?

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002)
Roma, Friday, January 25, 2002

The French ethnologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (b. 1930) who died from cancer yesterday (Wednesday) at the age of 71 must be placed in the grand French tradition of the post-World War II era dominated by such leading figures as Jean-Paul Sartre, Fernand Braudel, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Gilles Deleuze. Even though such a generation of thinkers would have been inconceivable without the labor of their German counterparts, in particular the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, the forced exile of a large part of the German Jewish intelligentsia to other parts of Europe and the United States has shifted intellectual activity, beginning with the 1940s, to France, thus giving to the latter a cultural prestige which coincided with its declining political and economic role as a world-power. It is as if that political decline, and the emergence of the United States as a superpower with a hegemonic mass-media culture, has triggered an internal critique, or a deconstructive process, among a generation of French intellectuals, all of whom must have realized that the illustrious heritage of the French Revolution and l'époque des lumières must have finally and slowly come to an end. Alternative constructions of the role of the individual and society, not to mention the public sphere, had therefore to be elaborated, a process which is still in its infancy, in particular that, post-colonialism notwithstanding, Europe and the western world are just beginning to feel the weight of those "outside" societies that have barely adapted to the long heritage of laissez-faire capitalism and democracy. Cynics who have long been suspicious of the "frivolous" nature of French intellectual life, have often noted its declining influence since the 1980s, but that's only because it could no more be contained, with the emergence of new power-relations, into the writings of leading patrimonial figures. Indeed, experimenting with "smaller" topoi has become more of a norm, in particular that the decline of the classical values of higher education and its mass appeal has pushed intellectuals and the culturati towards mini-reassessments and alternative critiques of societal values.

It could be easily argued that the grand Germanic sociological tradition of the inter-wars period, that of Werner Sombart, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Norbert Elias, and more recently, Niklas Luhmann and Jürgen Habermas, has no equivalent in the western world. Thus, neither the French sociological tradition of Émile Durkheim and his nephew Marcel Mauss, nor the American urban Chicago school of the 1950s, and the critical sociologies of C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Talcott Parsons, and Daniel Bell in the 1960s, achieved the same status as their Germanic counterparts. Hence the importance of those French "philosophes" who could not be contained within academic "disciplines," to the point that their writings became more celebrated as anti- than inter-disciplinary.

When France was suffering its worst colonialist nightmare in Algeria in the 1950s, at the time of De Gaulle's ascendancy to power, Pierre Bourdieu was then completing his military service. Having grown in the poor northern region of Béarn, the young Bourdieu realized that kinship relations, rituals, and land distribution, among others, all operate within a similar set of "representations" between societies as different as the Kabyles in mountainous Algeria and northern France. Such a realization pushed him towards an ethnographic reformulation of what he later labeled as "le sens pratique," meaning all schemes of objective representations destined to be "interiorized" by individuals in their daily practices, and without which no social life would be possible. Once the objective representations are interiorized, they become an ingredient of our daily habitus, and precisely due to their unconscious nature, individuals living under one scheme of representations are capable of perceiving other societal values critically, while they take their own for granted. Unlike Max Weber, Bourdieu never created a hierarchy among symbolic representations in between societies, cultures, and civilizations, which pushed his sociology, in an era of an increasing movement of globalization (or Europeanization) of western values, towards an international appeal. However, Bourdieu's resistance towards an historical evaluation of cultures and civilizations is, I think, his weakest point. Indeed, the general Weberian assessment of cultures and civilizations in terms of their economic, legal, and political historical underpinnings is absent in the writings of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Derrida, and manifests an unwillingness, for this post-colonial generation of thinkers, to look for signs of "superiority" in western civilization, while on the German side, the likes of Habermas have resisted such a complacency towards non-western societies.

With Bourdieu the "social" achieves an ontological status, and thus replaces the old philosophical notions of a transcendental reality to be grasped through the senses and reason. It is indeed the "rationality" of

the "social" as such that needs to be grasped, and it was Durkheim (pace Karl Marx) who had declared, at the turn of the twentieth century, that "social relations" ought to be comprehended as "things" (les relations sociales comme des choses en soi), and thus are open to investigation for their own sake in that they engender a "collective consciousness" (conscience collective), which acts as a "mediator" for the values of a particular society. Such a "consciousness" does exist even in capitalist societies, which subject their individuals to a harsh division of labor. Thus, in the traditions of both the French and German sociological traditions of the twentieth century, Bourdieu kept his eyes open on the cement that brings a society together, and in his view, societal representations are incorporated in each person's body as habitus. This emphasis on the body and its daily practices turned him away from what was to be labeled as "the linguistic turn," or a Foucauldian type of discursive analysis, or Habermas's notion of "communicative action," all of which, he argued, fell into the traps of the old continental philosophical traditions of language, truth, and reason.

Even though his career began de facto with his military service in Algeria and his numerous publications devoted to Algerian society in the 1950s and 1960s, he became known in France through his sociological critique of the educational system. Thus, it was Les Héritiers ("The Inheritors," 1964) that pushed him to be acknowledged as France's most promising young sociologist. The French educational system was perceived, through the lens of Bourdieu's critical analysis, as one that reproduces all social differences, and the latter are symbolically reproduced at every stage of the process, from the family, the school, up to higher education and the firm. Thus, higher education, for example, reproduces the homo academicus, that academic animal who takes him(her)self seriously enough through his/her intellectual activities, lectures, ranks, and tenured appointments, while ignoring the societal privileges that make such a leisured life possible.

In the 1990s Bourdieu's thought has shifted towards the overtly political, thus strongly criticizing what has become since then, and after the failure of communism, as the one and only economic reality --that of laissez-faire capitalism. In that he joins a long tradition of leftist European intellectuals, a tradition much less known in the United States, in condemning what is commonly perceived as the "virtues" of a purely liberal society, one in which "the public sphere" has been increasingly eaten by the successes of capital and its ego-centric and narcissistic individuals.

vitae

1958 : Sociologie de l'Algérie
1963 : Travail et travailleurs en Algérie
1964 : Le Déracinement and Les Héritiers
1966 : L'Amour de l'art
1968 : Le Métier de sociologue
1972 : Théorie de la pratique
1979 : La Distinction
1982 : Ce que parler veut dire
1984 : Homo Academicus
1988 : L'Ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger
1989 : La Noblesse d'État
1993 : La Misère du monde
1997 : Méditations pascaliennes
1998 : Contre-feux (Raison d'agir éditions) and La Domination masculine
2000 : Les Structures sociales de l'économie

letter to the departmental chair
Roma, Friday, February 1, 2002

Dear Tony,

After going through your comments on my "green-form" for 2001, at the beginning I thought that, having discussed all those matters with you extensively, I need not bother with additional comments and complaints. But as I woke up this morning, and having just completed my Napoli pilgrimage, I felt energized enough to put all this on paper. I love provoking people, and as long as provocation rests on professional ethics, it's worth defending one's attitude in writing. After all, I always felt bad about American higher education turning oral, as if we're suddenly in that high-tech society turning into a pensée sauvage, so that texts, whenever assigned for classroom reading and discussion, are transformed into orally transmitted class-notes. Hence my "going back" to a written mode of communication.

I won't ask you to include this letter --which looks like Kafka's letter to his father-- in my 2001 assessment form, which, I'm sure, you've already submitted to the Dean, but I nonetheless request to include it in my departmental file, so that any future Chair would have a record of my positions, and so that I won't repeat myself indefinitely with pleas and excuses. I will, however, post it on my website, first, because I don't take your criticisms personally, and, second, because I think that both point of views and approaches are symptomatic of what's going on in academia these days, meaning that they go beyond us, and should be therefore addressed to the community at large.

In every course I always felt that I was not only fighting the social representations of students, but also that of faculty like yourself: people who, in the final analysis, love the status quo, because it keeps them with all the social doxa and privileges they need. Simply looking at the so-called portfolios of our history students, I realize that most of the papers that I went through are for all purposes useless for my type of courses. Most of them do not even come with the basics: cover-page, footnotes, bibliography of sources, etc., so that it's even impossible to guess at times what the topic was and where did those ideas come from. They indeed look like home-movies, drafted overnight for the satisfaction of a busy instructor. I'm sure that those professors will be looked upon favorably by their students, and that you will also perceive them very favorably. Let's hope that you rewarded them with an "above expectations" and that they'll receive a 0.1% raise for their high merits and for keeping large classes busy. I won't even discuss here the kind of books that all of you assign, since you're closer at present to the university bookstore than I am: beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. But if you happen to be in Rome anytime before I leave in May, I'll take you on the wild side, so that you see for yourself what assignments we've got in this colonie-de-vacances.

You'll find lengthy comments on your own comments below, if you're patient enough to read them, but the core of the matter boils down to this. In this insupportable laissez-faire mediocrity that we're going through, I'm now penalized for having offered five different topics in a single year --four of them totally new and never offered by the department before. There's always this ridiculous argument about students not being able to follow, etc., upon which I respond below. The important point here is that the department would do people like me a greater service if it offered high-quality texts across the board -- beginning with the core: at least I would have students who would have some familiarity with what the valuable scholarly literature looks like. Please let me know if anyone of the major contributors in the European social sciences and humanities had any of their texts assigned: Braudel, Marc Bloch, Max Weber, Durkheim, Pocock, Skinner, E.P. Thompson, Hayden White, Norbert Elias, etc. Please provide me with the important list of texts that I might have missed from our department. Actually, your argument goes the other way round: I'm doing a disservice to both faculty and students for assigning the kind of texts that I've been working on in my courses for years.

1. teaching
A common criticism has emerged over the years regarding my teaching method and style. I'm not that surprised, therefore, that you look at my performance as "below expectations." I'm not disappointed either: Even a

"meets expectations" assessment would have been in my eyes an indifference towards what I've been attempting to achieve since 1992. I'm, indeed, very happy and flattered that there's finally at least some concern, and that someone like yourself is being challenged, if not offended.

I don't think that the real issue here is the various topics that I've taught over the years, even though many of them were totally new to the department, beginning, of course, with courses related to Islam and the Middle East. Obviously, the real issue is how to address such themes, and not the themes themselves, even though the choice of topoi could be problematic, but I won't address that complicated issue here --even though that could also become a subject of controversy, in particular if someone is addressing topoi "outside" what is perceived as one's legitimate field of specialization, or on issues that might be offensive, controversial, risky, narrow, or simply perceived as irrelevant.

The real issue resides, therefore, in all the texts that I've been assigning in my courses, and how I've been "explicating" them (to use a common Derrida notion) in my class meetings, and how I expect students to handle such texts, in particular when it comes to writing essays (up to five in each course, since I stopped giving exams a long time ago). To begin, I don't look at a course --any course, for that matter, whether undergraduate or graduate, core or non-core, all kinds of distinctions that are epistemologically irrelevant-- as a finished and ready-made material to be fed to the students once and for all. A course centers around a theme, and the purpose of teaching is to present such themes in terms of the best available research, beginning with the Anglo-American publications, then Europe and the rest of the world. Of course, we're all limited by the cost of those publications, and what the students could and should afford, hence my preference goes generally for paperbacks available on the US market.

It's no arrogance from my part if I make the claim that many of my assigned texts are in general (though not always) more difficult and demanding to read and interpret than the other ones assigned by the department, or by the other arts courses for that matter. I know this for a fact from the way the students react to them: to some it's a pleasant surprise discovering texts they never had access to, and which they were even unaware that they did exist, while to others, who love class-notes and all kinds of shortcuts, going through such sophisticated texts could become a real nightmare. (A brief trip to our bookstores would tell you what kind of texts we're all assigning, and in Rome, things are even worse, since our Italiani colleagues have a hard time figuring out what's going on in the Anglo-American world of publishing.) The instructor,

however, is neither an Indian Shaman nor a priest, who could lead the devoted to salvation in one or two semesters. We're not converting students to anything here: we're simply telling them what a sample of the valuable literature is all about --and that's something they'll only discover once they read those texts on their own--no one will read them on their behalf. That's a critical point since it's commonly assumed that it's the instructor's responsibility to "deliver" such texts to the students. In my view, however, the instructor is someone who "proposes" valid interpretations, and the real issue --hardly addressed in our evaluations (faculty and students alike)-- is how valuable or irrelevant those interpretations are.

The choice of texts is here crucial. You ought to address the issue as to why many of the most critical works by pioneering historians are practically never used. Thus, if Braudel's On History has occasionally few chapters assigned in the context of the History 400, his Mediterranean and Civilization & Capitalism remain unknown even to our history majors, including our graduates. (I'm therefore not surprised that, having spend all the year on the complete Braudel, I'm rewarded with a "below-expectations": the department, which functions like a Syrian bureaucracy, is not that interested in longue durée, but only in rehashed fast-food.) The same thing could be said about the works of other historians: Pocock, E.P. Thompson, Skinner, Hayden White, to name only few of the ones that have emerged since World War II. It is as if the department has a paranoiac fear of every historian (not to mention social scientists) who has something called a historical method. All this is, of course, done with a high spirit: by brandishing the all too familiar alibi that our poor students will be massacred by such texts, as if we're sending them to the Tora Bora mountains to detect the al-Qa'ida fighters. Moreover, the works of such eminent historians cannot be fully understood without common references to the likes of Marx, Durkheim, Schumpeter, and Weber, all of which are also hardly assigned in our readings. But maybe we're so much sophisticated that we're already looking for the post-Annales and we won't need all that crap.

Now once we opt for a set of particular texts --and their choice is primordial in letting the students know the best of scholarship-- comes the other crucial issue of how to interpret them and how to encourage the students to come with their own interpretations. Hence the importance of the paper as a tool-for-learning. It is through the medium of the paper that students can learn how to write about a text, film, or image. A student will also have to learn that, even though interpretations are by definition unlimited and personal (in the sense of being created by historic individuals for purposes that suit them and their societies), not all interpretations are equally valid, and many are improbable because

they rely on a poor comprehension of the text, while others are simply invalid or stupid. Students are so much at home with their monolithic assertions dictated through class-notes by instructors not fully at home with their texts, that they are more than surprised by such assertions.

I'm unable to follow the inconsistencies of your remarks. On the one hand, you admit that the texts that I've been assigning (and hence the courses that carry them) are challenging and provocative, and that they're demanding (meaning, I assume, high scholarship). But, on the other hand, I'm not encouraged to give such courses. Why? Because the students cannot "understand" them: they're too demanding. But what are we supposed to do in academia? There are several false assumptions in your argument, all of which based on phony divisions between professors who know their texts all too well, and students who are off the hook; or between texts that could be easily understood and are clear as daylight, and others that are more provocative, hence obscure and shadowy. The truth of the matter is that there are various "levels" for understanding and interpreting ("explicating") a text, which apply to both professor and student. Thus, a text is never either fully understood, or not at all: we're always in between gradations and levels of understanding. There's always something that will attract your eyes and that you'll be able to understand, while other things will take more time to be fully grasped. Unless we want to ruin academia once and for all, we'll have to accept that at every juncture we're in the middle of a process. Let's therefore encourage our students (and ourselves) to read those valuable texts carefully, and we'll all realize that there's always something to be amazed at. It's not a day/night issue as it's often portrayed.

Grades that are solely based on paper assessments necessarily bring the whole grading process to its lower end, which, in turn, does not help in the instructor's popularity game. Did you do anything as chair to limit the ravages of grade inflation?

Which brings me to the evaluations forms, distributed at the end of each semester, and which you've been so keen to note that I refuse distributing. What you've forgotten to note, however, is that for all my courses I have electronic lists which the students can use, among others, to evaluate not simply the course in general, but each book, assignment, discussion session, paper, etc. Students learn to be challenged through the feed-back of others. The lists are kept active even when the semester is over for at least another year. Since as chair you have access to all my syllabi, which describe the login process in detail, you could login at any point and see what goes on in a course. Better still, you could request a "digest" of all the messages that were posted on a particular list. The Loyola forms are obsolete, as is the green-form we've got to fill every

year: that's old outdated technology that only helps in keeping up with the good old cowardly habits. Let me remind you here, en passant, that based on American common law, the university cannot impose on its professors evaluation forms, and if it does, we have every right to agree on the questions that are posed and on the evaluation procedures (distribution of the forms, etc.). That's why the faculty handbook does not make such forms mandatory: doing so would have trapped the university into a legal nightmare.

Accusing me of academic alienation only hides the main problem that the department is now facing: namely, that in spite of the fact that it's unable to meet its core requirements, it still insists on its core courses as if they're its crown jewel. Yet, they're its lowest dominator courses: poorly designed, overstuffed, dogmatic and unchallenging, in addition to giving the students the worst image of history within the domain of the social sciences and humanities. Primo, a lot of research published in the last few decades points to the fact that, as far as modern Europe is concerned, the mutation towards modernity began in the tenth/eleventh century, when the European continent, in its formative period of the high Middle Ages, broke with late antiquity and the early Middle Ages of the Holy Roman Empire. Those ten centuries ought to be therefore considered as a single continuous unit. I don't know who originally designed the History 102, but let's hope that you were not involved in that pathetic process, because it seems that everything the organizers were unable to understand, they trashed it into the 101. So we've got a 101 with over 20 centuries, and a 102 that begins only with the 17th century. An irrelevant and idiotic periodization that only illiterates in history could have performed.

Secondo, both the 101 & 102 give the longue durée a very bad reputation, which it certainly does not deserve. Professionally speaking, the longue durée requires lots of skills, and the ability to handle several centuries in a row is not something that amateurs can step into that easily, hence their need for "textbooks." Indeed, many professional historians leave that kind of synthesis towards the end of their career. We're supposed with the 101 & 102 combo to do at least 25 centuries in a row as if it's a preliminary exercise, as some kind of a hors d'oeuvre to the other "more advanced" courses, and all this with students who cannot even read and write properly.

Tèrza, the "textbooks" used are far below the level of our regular professional books. They serve more the purposes of hapless instructors in organizing their lectures than the needs of the students, who anyhow do not read them and rely instead on lectures and class-notes.

To conclude. You need a philosophy of history, a method, and a theory to be able to teach and write. If you don't have a philosophy and an historical approach to interpret texts and see their relevance, your writing becomes dogmatic and trapped into the infinite weights of details and facts. To be sure, such approaches need time to develop and mature. I attempt to render my method and theory manifest in every course I teach and in every writing. If my students and readers find me at times difficult to comprehend, it's partly due to the difficulties of such an enterprise, but mostly because higher education, lost as it is in its bureaucratic manners and professional divisions, doesn't care that much anymore about the values that made western civilization possible.

2. writing
I very much appreciate your concern for the publication of my just-completed manuscript. However, and in light of your criticisms, I would like to underscore the following banalities:

a. I don't like fragmenting my writing into smaller units simply for the sake of making it more "accessible." You're actually creating a different text once you open it to fragmentation. If my manuscript won't get published, I won't accept that as a defeat. The important thing is that it simply exists. I can feel it sitting on my hard-drive. You're asking me to cut down my manuscript without having even read a single page of it, and without any familiarity in the field of Islamic law. To put things mildly, you're behaving like a bureaucrat who doesn't care much about content and value.
b. It took me over ten years to master the Islamic legal material, and hence fragmenting it indefinitely would have been a big distraction, something to be avoided in an immature field which, at present, looks hopeless.
c. I like presenting my narratives as a totality, as a complete story from beginning to end.
d. As you pointed out, I stopped attending conferences (more precisely, since Vienna in 1998). Is that supposed to be a duty, like having sex with your wife every night? The important point here is that I've always maintained an active research agenda (sometimes with great physical risks), and it's up to me to decide how and when to present it to the broader public, which doesn't have to be limited to a narrow élitist academic audience. It's not true that we get greater scrutiny from professionals: once they accept you and you're part of their inner circle, they become all too complacent. Try, for a change, to publish an article or book-review in The New Yorker or The New Republic and you'll immediately feel all the difference.
f. You seem to think that our minds develop mainly in conferences and through peer-review, etc. Not for me, however: only a contact with the

non-academic world enriches my spirit, beginning with the courses that provide me with the opportunity to provoke and be provoked by regular laymen. Then, the importance of research and writing comes from the fieldwork itself and from being able to connect with individuals from totally different social origins than my own.

g. You'll have to admit that ending my participation in conferences in September 1998 was no coincidence. I received $1,500 from the department for presenting a paper in Vienna, and beginning in 1999/2000 the department stopped funding us properly. Considering that most of the invitations I receive come from Europe and the Middle/Near East, I cannot afford receiving a mere $400 for a conference that would cost me over $2,000. Already my financial losses to transfer to Rome this academic year are enormous.

To conclude. The field of Islamic and Mideast studies needs to construct for itself a modern tradition of reading and interpreting texts, and hence it needs a philosophy of history, a method and a theory, all of which lack in American academia. That's why conferences, workshops, and professional journals are lost in details, Byzantine discussions, and internal wars with no end in sight. If you want to work properly and constructively, you'll have to struggle on your own, with the help of those few who are willing to listen with a critical mind. On the long run, something positive should come from those solitary attempts. A light will emerge from the dark tunnel of solitude.

3. bureaucracy
That's my favorite joke. Do you really believe in all those committees and the useless paperwork they engender? Was there at any time any committee that had the courage to opt for a decisive decision? Why is the university still drowning rapidly in spite of all this committee work?

We need to find a reasonable answer to all those questions. If not, we might be out of work soon. But surely, mon tour sera le premier.

To quote my favorite American hero, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, "If my fellow citizens would like to go to hell, I'm willing to help them."

Viaggio in Italia
Roma, Tuesday, February 12, 2002

In his celebrated Viaggio in Italia (1953), Roberto Rossellini portrays two protagonists, a wealthy mid-aged British couple, Katherine and Alexander Joyce (played by Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders), who rent a luxury villa in the vicinity of Napoli for what seems like a last attempt to save a dwindling marriage game. While in Italy, the couple, either separately or

together, visit the usual tourist sites --Capri, the Naples archeological museum, the lava fields of Vesuvius, Pompeii, the catacombs of Fontanelle-- and their marriage begins to disintegrate. But as soon as, towards the end of the film, Alexander proposes, in a typically haughty Victorian style, divorce to Katherine, as a "solution" to their ongoing struggle, they are "saved" in the last few moments by what looks like a religious ritual in a small town on the Amalfi coast, and to which they've been unwillingly and unenthusiastically drawn to become among its participants. But in what has been described by many critics as a weak film ending, Rossellini seems to be suggesting that Anglo-Saxon-American rigidity --or its blindness to the presence of the Other-- gets another chance once blended with Mediterranean street life, that of southern Italy, and which mixes a warm climate with religious rituals, and psychologically tortured individuals with the presence of a rich archeological and historical past open for investigation --assuming, of course, that you still have the eyes to see it. The film is in fact about this ability to see and comprehend another culture, one that looks at its past as a continuum between archeology, history, architecture, religion, rituals, and street life. Thus, the "poverty" of the south, and its historical alienation from the rich hegemonic north, are given a new twist. Rossellini's camera thus systematically discovers the Napoli region, and rather than simply portraying it as a décor for a decadent and bored English couple, it is there to be discovered, and its discovery transforms the protagonists themselves, but each one differently, so that their relation begins to take a different meaning. Instead of relating solely through their Victorian manners and repressed sexuality, and which the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would have said that they both incorporated as their de facto habitus, the Napoli region becomes the medium through which their hubris takes shape --a medium of self-transcendence and internal meditation. That kind of narrative construction, which for its time --the 1950s-- was considered as a breakthrough, in that it broke with the conventional Hollywood linear narration (and also adopted by the fascist cinema of the 1930s and 1940s), has become since then more of a norm in avant-garde cinema, in particular with the likes of Bergman, Godard, and Antonioni, who have mastered an expertise in depicting isolated characters incapable of loving and being loved, and incapable of communication, and whose attractive natural and urban surroundings become the only medium for self-reflection.

One need not go that far to see how societies and civilizations fail to communicate with one another, that inability to see through the image, and to translate images into thought and vice versa. If in Rossellini's Viaggio the theme of looking is the predominant one it's because, in his view, individuals are absorbed in their daily doxa, which they take for

granted, and which prevents them from looking at the Other, a fortiori the ones that are the closest to them. Thus, the two protagonists discover at their own dismay, and from the early scenes where we see them driving in their luxurious Bentley, that they are like strangers to one another. That strangeness of the other correlates to a strangeness towards Italian civilization, its culture and people.

If it is typical of academic culture to degrade the image to the point of perceiving it as an "illustration" to a text, it is because the image provides us with this uncanny feeling of the strangeness of the other, which always posits itself as something that simply exists and is present to our senses as such. The mass-media, which like academic culture, has no clues on how to represent that other, too often portrays a society as an entity that has just emerged from a freshman's "textbook." Thus, for example, in the short one-hundred day episode of the Afghani war ("operation enduring freedom"), which surprisingly turned as a quasi-success for the Bush administration, CNN, the largest and only international American network, had to rely almost exclusively on foreign --mostly British-- correspondents for its coverage of the war. While on the British side, the BBC had an alert team that was mostly English, where women and minorities under Commonwealth rule played a big and decisive role. One therefore wonders why the wealthiest and best equipped network on earth, and which in turn is a product of the wealthiest and most tech-savvy society in world history, was unable to form an American team throughout the ongoing Afghani war. The English, and in spite of Thatcherism and its ravages on the Oxbridge academia in particular, have been able to maintain a minimal level of consistency in their programs. The classics are studied, and a sense of what the "canon" is --irrespective of discipline-- has been maintained, while the rich colonial heritage of the British has been transformed into a critical inquiry of past and present history. An institution like the BBC maintains a professional ethics that involves training young recruits from colleges, something that the big American networks are unable to provide due to the lack of a serious tradition in covering international affairs.

Profiting from a short break in the last week of January, I headed south to Napoli. In the fast Eurostar, which as usual was an hour late, I shared a "table" with three Italiani: a young couple in the company of a dwarf who could have been kin-related to the other male. The dwarf asked me if I was willing to exchange seats, a proposal that the young woman, all dressed in an attractive black outfit, very quickly rebuffed, saying that it was unnecessary. As the train moved from Termini, her friend pulled a set of recently purchased DVDs from a plastic bag. They all looked proud of what they had just purchased in Rome: a dozen or so of American movies, from Mission Impossible up to The Matrix and Titanic. The

couple then pulled down the thin window curtain, and sat in an awkward position, their backs to the window, in order to watch The Matrix on their DVD-equipped portable. But, regrettably, half an hour before reaching Napoli, their portable ran out of battery, so they were left without conclusion to their high-tech American adventure. Since the early 1980s the auteurist cinema of Rossellini, Antonioni, and Pasolini has run out of steam, and practically ceased to exist. One wonders whether that cinema, which their auteurs had jealously protected, and which saved Italy from its Fascist past, ever had any large following at home. Sure it created many followers and adepts at home and abroad, but was it ever a mass phenomenon? The question would have been irrelevant were it not for the massive infiltration of the Hollywood culture in the Italian imagination, and with the dubbing of all foreign movies --the Italians are probably the only ones in the world who painstakingly dub even Iranian films-- that foreign culture becomes de facto Italianized, as if already part of the local customs. By the 1990s, such ridiculous movies as My Beautiful Life have managed to win several Oscars. The half-paralyzed 90-year old Antonioni, who just completed Eros in the northern region of Tuscany, must be contemplating postmodern Italy as a complete disappointment --or maybe he's all too familiar with pseudo-innovations.

The large Napoli station predominates Piazza Garibaldi, a massive square that acts as a center for communication and exchange. The Garibaldization of space, visible all over Italy, is even more forceful in the south. It is as if the "unification" of Italy, promoted and engineered in the 1860s by the all too powerful but fragmented northern élites and the House of Savoy in particular, needed a constant reminder in the persona of Garibaldi. Hence all those piazzas, monuments, streets, cafés, hospitals, schools, etc., bearing his name as if he would be suddenly forgotten if all were to be dropped. Admittedly, the romantic Garibaldi, whose social representations have nothing to do anymore with the real historical character, is a more attractive phenomenon than the more intellectual Cavour and the reclusive Mazzini. Yet, all three share a portion of an ideologized public space, so that the holy trinity is ever present to our senses ad nauseam.

I check into one of those modern hotels overlooking the Piazza. Modern architecture, in particular when it fails to be imaginative, homogenizes space to the point of making it indistinguishable from one society and civilization to another. I found myself into one of those hotels which are a direct replica of all the ones I used to check in for conferences and workshops, and which for an insecure city like Napoli become a secure heaven, a well protected space, clean and comfortable, complete with a cabled TV and mini-bar.

I was therefore eager to go out for the real world outside, that risky space of a southern city like Napoli, and I began with a lunch on a restaurant right on the Piazza Garibaldi (I avoided a restaurant on the opposite side with the name of Cavour: I thought I would have that for dinner and then Mazzini for breakfast). As I ordered, the client on an adjacent table realized that I must be a tourist, and in a broken English began lecturing me on the unsafe nature of the territory I've just stepped into. Coming himself from Florence, he presented Napoli as a filthy city with lots of crimes and illegal activities. "You'll have to be very careful: always check your pockets, your bags, cash and credit cards." I've heard and read lots of things about Napoli, but I'm already more concerned and on high alert: "Is it that unsafe?," I asked. "Do you mean that I should not go out at night and constrain myself to the few 'safe' neighborhoods only?," I added with anxiety. At that point, my neighbor, as if to make his point even clearer, began a long historical exposé. "Napoli, as you probably know, has been for a long time under lots of foreign occupations: The French, Spanish, Bourbons, etc., so that its people have in their blood a spirit of revenge. They would like to rob you whenever the opportunity is present." Never mind that Florence itself had witnessed a similar pattern of foreign occupations and disunity, which had irritated the likes of Machiavelli, but for the moment I was more concerned with what "theft" concretely meant: "Are you implying that they could kill you for your cash or camera?," I kept asking with that same anxiety. And, in reply to my question, he ventured into another exposé on the mafia and its modus operandi. The mafia, he claimed, is composed of four major groups, all of them in the south, the main one being located in Palermo (Sicily) where all the "movement" had originated, and while he went into great detail through the various groups and factions, he forgot to mention the essential, namely that the historical origins of the mafia go back to the 1860s, at the precise moment of Italy's "unification," a movement coordinated through the north's hegemonic wealth. With that forced and premature unification, the old feudal foundations of the south, and Sicily in particular, had suddenly been dismantled, so that feudal rights and corvée labor could no more be sustained. "Private property" emerged as a new and uncontrollable notion with political implications that were yet to be formulated. What many were unaware of at the time was that private property is indeed costly to protect, or in other words, its transaction costs are much higher than the old feudal relations that protected familial property through kin relations and the like. "Private groups" therefore soon emerged to "protect" those properties that were to fall into private hands. Since their protection could not be promoted by the nascent and weak state institutions --that would have been too costly an alternative in terms of the required political and legal institutions, not to mention the need for a well trained and "clean" police force, judiciary, fencing and guarding techniques, etc.-- the mafia emerged as a de facto

heterogeneous group that acted as the "guardian" of your property. They soon consolidated into various factions, first throughout the south, and then into the immigrant communities of some major American cities (e.g. Chicago), and thus were able to impose their now all too familiar system of intimidation and forced "tax"-collection, a system that covered their expenses as a de facto protective force at the service of "their" own communities. But they soon imposed their services to "other" communities on that thin "borderline" that separates the "legal" from the "illegal" (or what is commonly perceived as such).

The existence of the mafia, however, is commonly perceived, as in the discourse of my "neighbor," as an aberration in the manners of a naturally violent south, which had to protect itself against foreign occupation and subservience. The northern hegemony, however, and the difficulties in implementing a compound of "rational" values that center around free and unlimited exchange, private property, and the modern nation-state and its judiciary, are dissipated in favor of more common sense explanations centering around a primitive "state of nature" that the southerners are unable to transcend, probably due to something innate in their character and climate.

Napoli was for a long time the only city that controlled the economic activity of that multi-layered south. The difficulties of controlling a mountainous territory with much less arable lands than the north, are all too easily forgotten as historical factors that hampered the efforts of the Napoli bourgeoisie which hoped to transform its city into a modern commercial hub, as were Florence, Venice, Milan, and Genoa, at some point, prior to their decline in the seventeenth century. But the difficulties of the terrain were truly insurmountable, thus providing a leeway for various rural groups to impose themselves between the city and its indomitable countryside. It is, indeed, such historical difficulties that give contemporary Napoli, and more generally the south, that feeling of being outside the norms of the nation-state, a feeling that could be shared within various "zones" in the big American cities, while in many Middle Eastern and Asiatic societies that "insecurity" is controlled by a violent and monolithic state, which in itself is one of those abusive groups that promotes itself as the guardian of your property rights.

When my neighbor finished his exposé, I was wondering whether his intention was to tell me to be careful about mafia groups in the city. Well, as usual, I was wrong: he had just provided me with all the good news. "The mafia, he added, will only kill one another, but never people like you or me. For sure, they have other things to do than waste their time on people like us." That's good to know, and as I rejoiced at the precious time of the mafia, I was quick to ask him, "Where does all that

atmosphere of insecurity come from then?" And there he embarked upon another of those long exposés, which was the most informative for my purposes, because that was the bad news. To cut a long story short, the poor of Napoli and various "foreigners" (North Africans, Arabs, East Europeans and Russians) have developed various theft techniques, which all amount into bluffing your victim and place him or her into some unusual situation. Only then you might realize that your wallet or watch has suddenly vanished.

When the food finally came I felt like I already had more than enough. My neighbor said he had to leave, and he came by to my table to thank me for my attention, which he said was "unusual" for a "tourist." I left the restaurant even more insecure and not knowing what to do next. Words and images have for some time provided me with a symbolic medium to control the world around me, and hence to dominate all kind of insecurities, hatred, or fears in my soul. The image, however, brings in each frame a fragment of the world to us, while language symbolically dominates that world through a coercive practice, which does not have to "correspond" to anything out there. The image therefore forces fragments of the world into our perceptions, as reshaped through the medium of the lens. My first instinct was to find something that I could frame, as if I wanted to capture my first insecure moments in Napoli. Right at the entrance of the restaurant was a bus stop which had four glass panels. One of them was apparently smashed overnight, and its fractured glass was still lying on the floor. People were waiting for their respective buses, most of them standing in silence and keeping some distance from one another, their backs to the restaurant's entrance. Framing the bus-stop from behind in wide-angle with a portion of the Piazza as a background was my first image, and that was followed by several shots of the people standing in silence. A couple of young men came to inquire whether I was a journalist: they must have thought that I was interested in the smashed glass panel rather than the passengers. After all the latter were so uninteresting, and that's precisely why I was attracted to them.

As in many Mediterranean cities I've visited in the last few years, the camera turns immediately into a subject of attention and conversation, if not a risky enterprise, and Napoli was no exception. The poorer the society, the more the private dissolves into the public. In effect, a characteristic of modern societies is their bourgeois individualistic nature, to the point that many would consider an unsolicited snapshot as an "intrusion" upon one's freedom, and in Europe, more so than the United States, legal battles could follow. In Napoli, however, various kinds of neighborhoods are juxtaposed to one another, to the point that within only few blocks one could move from an individualistic culture to one that is more openly populist, a phenomenon which Fernand Braudel has

described as one of "dislocation," and which in the phase of pre-capitalism, between the 15th and 18th centuries, implied various types of markets juxtaposed to one another, from the primitive barter to the very specialized money market economy. In the context of modern Europe, however, when a city of the magnitude of Napoli manifests such a dislocation, it's probably because it has been historically unable to "contain" and "integrate" the various elements of its population in such a way to render it more cohesive. People keep pouring in from the south or from neighboring or faraway countries, then opt for a neighborhood that fits them best, and they seem to remain in that state for ever. However, compared to the alarming and racist "zones" of many large American cities, Napoli's poor neighborhoods do not live in isolation from the rest of the city, and that's precisely its charm and power. Thus, the Corso Umberto I, a main artery which connects the Piazza Garibaldi to the seaport, is your regular shopping avenue, where merchants do not parade their commodities on the pavement (or the street for that matter), but keep them in well protected vitrines. However, all the streets that connect the Corso with the sea corniche west, are a different world altogether.

At three in the afternoon, and after swallowing two long exposés, I was happy and surprised to discover some of those popular neighborhoods as soon as I left the Piazza, right on the first street west of the main Corso. It was like suddenly plunging into one of those poor neighborhoods in Damascus or Aleppo. Water drips from the laundries perching all over the small balconies; all kinds of commodities were directly exposed all over the streets, thus practically annihilating the pavements; the streets-pavements (the two categories mix) often serve as an extended living room, complete with TVs, dinner-tables, and kids doing their homework; and graffiti fill what remains of the walls, often with direct political messages, or color drawings of some landscape of an idealized location or country. But above all, it's the sight of all those people who offer themselves directly to the public without any mediation. Thus, rather than feel insecure, one wonders how they can give so much of themselves that easily. When a mid-aged man asked me half-jokingly to photograph his wife, hoping that someone in the US might get attracted to her and thus marry her, he was, I think, only overtly expressing a Freudian wish for his wife's disappearance, which many bourgeois would only keep hidden in their nightly dreams.

Yet, compared to other eastern Mediterranean cities, poverty is here contained, as if this permeability between the private and public, the home and street-life, and the violence in social relations, are mediated by local customs that place a limit to all this effervescence, and in a visible effort not to necessitate unwanted state intervention. The genius of

Italian disorder, assuming that's the right way to describe that ordered chaos, is that it reduces the power of the state without, however, crippling it. It is thus left to a landlord's own discretion to decide how many of her tenants' leases will she officially declare, and thus pay all due taxes accordingly, and how many of her tenants will be declared as "guests." Property buyers routinely adjust their high taxes by only declaring two-thirds of the price, while the remaining one-third is paid cash under the table. In every circumstance, therefore, and with Italy's "illegal" economy close to $60 billion, citizens are considered educated enough on their own to decide what the borderline between the legal and illegal ought to be. It is still amazing that Italy could rank as the sixth industrial nation, right after France and Great Britain.

In this sunny afternoon I therefore began to feel "safe" even though my camera metamorphosed into that obscur objet du désir: an old man summons me to go "home" right away and never come back; kids, thinking (again) that I'm a reporter, were distracted from their football game and wanted to know in which newspaper my photos will be published; African dwellers, selling pirated CDs, had to hide their faces; but then everything must have been "illegal" in some way, and the level of risk had to be decided case-by-case.

I was therefore happy to reach the seaport: Beirut gave me that awkward habit to look for the Mediterranean wherever I can find it. Coming out from those dark neighborhoods to an open area with lots of sunlight so suddenly and unpredictably has disoriented my sense of perspective: I did not know what and how to frame anymore. Once you're in there you think you'll never go out, and there I was right on the Mediterranean, which at four in the afternoon, with all the sun in my eyes, did not look too romantic. I badly needed to sit in a café to write down some notes: having already burned two rolls of films, I now wanted the words. But as in many Italian cities --except perhaps for Florence-- cafés are easy to find but unfit for concentration and contemplation. Space is indeed expensive, and hence the preference given to drinks at the bar, while tables, if they're available, are a very precious and rare entity. If you've ever used a toilet in Italy you would know for certain that space is indeed very precious.

I was neither able to find a café nor a toilet, or at least nothing decent enough to match my taste. As it was getting dark, I came back to those popular neighborhoods from the western sea area. I opted this time for another set of nightly photographs with high-speed film. Is religion the opium of the people, as Marx and Engels arrogantly declared? Maybe we should seek a more subtle Weberian interpretation of all those Madonnas in such popular neighborhoods. To be sure, religion increases

proportionally with poverty, but, on the other hand, poverty makes religion simply more visible. Otherwise, Catholicism is an inherent trait of Italian society at large. Even Pasolini, the same one who concluded the auteurist film genre with Salò, did also Il Vangelo secondo Matteo, an indication that even Marxism only nicely blends with Catholicism in a society like this one. The Madonnas came in so many artful genres, and hence carried so many different meanings, that one could only feel overwhelmed by such a variety. They seem, however, an indication of a socialization of public space, one that remains out of control by the state and its institutions. Again, here, the private blends nicely with the public: a Madonna in memory of a young couple who died in an accident, another one for a just-born child, and a third for an old man of the neighborhood, while the majority simply stood there for no obvious reason. Their design and cost obviously reflects social status and rank: even among the poor individuals are not equals, and the Madonnas are there to testify for those numerous signs of distinction.

Back to the Corso Umberto I, which at seven in the evening was much active than early in the afternoon. As I lost hope for the café (and its corresponding toilet), I began a search for a restaurant. Surprisingly, that turned out to be a problem too. Thus, unlike the other major Italian cities, in which restaurants are on every corner, Napoli had them well hidden. Was it a real estate strategy? A sign on the Corso pointed to a Chinese restaurant in one of the back-streets nearby. As I'm heading to the place, one more time a man cautions me from using the camera too overtly: "They'll simply follow you and seize the occasion to grab your camera." I was therefore more than enthusiastic once I reached the restaurant, in particular that since coming to Italy in August that was the first time that I sought for a Chinese restaurant as a place for calm and meditation. I therefore seized the opportunity to write as soon as I got there. Not for long, however: after barely thirty minutes of quietly heaven, a small group of young men (and women?) came by and from the entrance smashed the bar with eggs. Were they celebrating mardi gras? Or was it racist hatred? Unhappy that they'll have to clean all the bottles one by one, and all the mirrors and napkins, the Chinese servers had a rough night, and they were particularly disturbed that there might be another round waiting for them. They were formal, however, that that was the first time that such an incident ever happened to them.

At ten the Corso Umberto I was now totally empty, and all its shop windows reminded me of post-war Beirut in their heavy metallic protective curtains, while the few ones that sported no such protection were smashed: their thick glass, however, managed to endure all kinds of rough onslaughts to the point that pricey commodities were kept exhibited as if it was a no risk situation. It was like moving in a long dark

metallic tunnel with no end in sight, as if the public sphere of that city was made up of its shops: once they're all closed by eight, it's a dead space. Except perhaps for people like me still hoping to find something, but what exactly? I moved back west to the popular neighborhoods, which even though riskier, did not sport that depressing nightly look. On my way back to the Piazza, and going through the same system of the rugged iron facades (even the interphones in the lobbies were protected by squared metallic plates), a large well lit place quietly stood on the horizon. Hoping that I would finally find the café of my lifetime I headed in its direction, but to my dismay it turned out a porno theater. It had a fairly large entrance and lobby, clean and well lit with excessive neon-lights as if it was an emergency room. In its disturbing cleanness it looked even better than my four-star hotel, while the few other scattered movie-theaters did not look as promising.

At eleven the Piazza Garibaldi was now a place for prostitution (hence the location of the porno theater) and drug trafficking, with few entertainment spots where various "deals" would be concluded. Hence the few cafés that were still open, and I spotted one right next to the restaurant where my journey had began early in the afternoon. Now my neighbors were two east European prostitutes having their cappuccinos on an adjacent table. The blond one proposed a "ride" in her Lexus for 400 euros. Would that include the Golfo di Napoli? "It would be more than that," she whispered. East European prostitution has so much overwhelmed the market that Italian prostitutes must be spending their last days with their grandmothers, to the point that Berlusconi thought of addressing the situation by "legalizing" the oldest métier in the world and "acknowledging" it in few "zones" in each major city. In short, each city, assuming it wants to, would "vote" for its own red-light district, but a "zone" would have to be sacrificed for the task beforehand. Apparently, Venice might be the first to head in that direction by the summer.

In Viaggio Alexander Joyce, having just returned from Capri, goes for a drink in a luxury hotel in downtown Napoli, and on his way out meets that prostitute in a fur coat (at that time they were still mostly Italians). After signs of hesitation, he picks her up in his Bentley and takes her for a "ride." (As prostitutes have become a quasi-élite group, all this now takes place the other way round.) They stop in what looks like a heavily treed park, and there begins a short conversation, which turned out for Alexander the only bit of "intimate" talk he ever had. They leave, however, without consummating their lust.

The blond Romanian prostitute told me that her "rides" provide her with a net income of over $7,500 monthly. In addition to her Lexus, and a two-bedroom, she owns a share for $100,000 in an office compound near

Bucharest. The sole purpose of her intensive labor in Napoli is therefore only to refund her debt, and once she's done with it, she'll leave. She could then peacefully live in Romania with the rent of her office compound. Now the 400 euros look like a plausible investment in a second-world east European economy. Berlusconi must therefore be worried like hell that all that prostitution money is leaving Italy through its porous borders and banking system, hence the urge to "legalize" in spite of the resistance of the Catholic Church and the Vatican --advanced capitalism, if you wish.

By midnight the train station has become like its surrounding Piazza, a refuge for the homeless, and a network for prostitution and drug trafficking. Last year a photography magazine carried an article by a British photographer detailing his arrest for having done fashion photographs inside a station. Apparently, there's a law prohibiting photographs in many public buildings. Should I therefore take the risk? I was unable even to verify whether that law still holds in my situation.

Past midnight, and I'm finally back to my room. Bush was preparing his dogmatic show for The State of the Union address: I turn CNN off and go to bed.

The next morning was cloudy but with no rain in sight. As I longed for this sight of the city as a totality from the Mediterranean, I took the ferry to Capri. Alexander Joyce took that same ferry hoping to escape from the hellish conversations with his wife, and which in their silences and mockery of marital life were the pièce-de-résistance of Viaggio. I was more like those nineteenth-century western travelers, such as Gerard de Nerval, who needed to embrace those difficult Mediterranean cities from the perspective of the sea prior to plunging into their labyrinths.

Capri at this time of the year was a ville-fantôme. As I toured the island by foot it was obvious that Capri is the anti-Napoli Disneyland. It was mostly closed, and preparing itself for the summer: the four-five months of the summer engender so much profit that it could sleep well for the remaining part of the year. At the center, a newly designed Prada shop was completely deserted. Its empty étagères reminded me of a famous photo by the German artist Andreas Gursky: entitled "Prada II," the large-format photograph, which sold for a record-high of $200,000, depicted two long rows of empty étagères, which had to be cleaned even further through computer manipulation. Gursky's minimalism only hopes to point out to the importance of design in selling fashion. I framed the mountains of Capri reflecting through the front glass on the empty and newly designed shelves of the Prada store. While it's waiting empty for its wealthy summer customers, it sits there as a symbol for the new cool

consumerism of the jet-set generations: universal brands that could be identified all over, and which are not limited to a tiny élite. It's this ability to make-believe that everyone can afford something at Prada that has made such brands ubiquitous all over the world. Better still, the new yuppies are designing stores that look like "public spaces": once you're in you wouldn't know anymore whether you're in a clothing store, an art gallery, or a museum, and if it could be any of those three it's because the world of commodities under advanced capitalism needs to blur all such distinctions. It has, indeed, become a nuisance to come to a store only for a pair of socks. You'll have to come for your socks and realize that there are art works all over, so that the two spaces need not be differentiated anymore. In the next decades designers will have to keep in mind that "shopping" has become an art all by itself, and that by blurring categories the shopping space itself will become one where a consumer will feel that he or she is participating into something even more important than a simple act of exchange. We'll therefore not simply be happy with what we bought, but also with the space itself, so that "going to Prada" will become like "belonging" to a club of devotees, complete with a website, artistic agenda, and even political encounters of the third-kind.

While returning to Napoli in the late afternoon, I thought of a popular French song: "Capri, c'est fini, je ne te reverrai plus jamais." I don't know if I'll ever see Capri again --maybe for a faculty meeting-- but for now I had enough. What in fact was waiting for me in the capital of the south was more spectacular. This time I headed east of the Corso Umberto I, and there stood the center of the old city in all its magnificence. Mediterranean cities are known for protecting their domestic homes through internal courtyards, but Napoli has pushed that system even further by creating bourgeois residences that only connect with the street through a large wooden gate, while all the apartments give to an internal courtyard. All kinds of specialized markets, which tend to focus on a particular craft in every street, surround those bourgeois residences. What apparently happened at the turn of the twentieth century was a Haussmanization of Napoli, and the Corso Umberto I was therefore built with that notion of a clearly designed avenue, one that would bypass all the internal divisions between neighborhoods, clans and factions, and would impose that new disciplinary order that would eventually contribute in the plan of a better controllable city. The Corso had therefore cut the old commercial and residential center in two, between a popular western part that connects with the port, and an eastern part that is still residential and commercial. However, its bourgeois buildings seem to have fallen prey to the lower middle classes, if not to the impoverished populations, while the wealthiest went either further east or north. It was as if the original plan of the Corso was to create a cordon sanitaire for

that commercial and residential hub by cutting it from its more delinquent part. It therefore symbolizes an urban project that was planned with a hegemonic state in mind, rather than tailored for the bargains of the traditional patrilineal power-relations.

Thursday was my last day, and my train was scheduled for five in the afternoon. I thought of the Golfo di Napoli, Vesuvio, Pompeii, Amalfi, and all the rest. At the station a driver proposed a "ride" for 100 euros. But I wasn't interested. I felt like doing all Napoli as a totality, crossing all the areas in all their varieties in the five hours or so that I've got left. I felt like the entire history of capitalism was there, all condensed very visibly in a single space. Time and the changes in the logic of capitalism between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, and then the industrial and technological revolutions of the last two centuries, have all juxtaposed their own space, each one on its own rather than having them absorbed by one another, as was the case with Paris, London and Berlin. The logic of each space tends also to be self-contained on its own, as if the neighboring one did not exist. One could therefore imagine a Napoli with a post-industrial high-tech environment that would keep the other spaces without absorbing them. And Napoli would still live happily while absorbing another techno-scientific space of relatively cheap labor.

The so-called Italian neo-realism, whose point of departure was supposedly Rossellini's Roma, città aperta, was neither about "genuine" locations nor non-professional actors as is commonly argued. It's about a landscape achieving the status of a "person": how to describe a city in words and images, and how such a description transforms the characters themselves. Napoli is therefore all about that character-as-landscape.

Hans Georg Gadamer
Roma, Saturday, March 16, 2002

Hans Georg Gadamer (b. 1900) who died Thursday (March 14) in Heidelberg at age 102, was the father of modern hermeneutics. Even though he leaves behind a considerable bibliography (which apparently runs over 300 pages), Gadamer published his first major and most well-known book, Truth and Method (1960), when he was sixty and close to retirement. Prior to that he had submitted his minor thesis in 1922 on the essence of pleasure in Plato, and up to 1931, when he submitted a second dissertation on Plato, he still had no major opus as such. Both were, however, left unpublished, which left Gadamer practically unknown, even in Germany, until Truth and Method finally materialized. Up to the Second World War, Continental European philosophy was by and large under the dominance of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and in the social sciences the phenomenological

current was best represented by Georg Simmel (known mostly for his Philosophy of Money), while the sociology of Max Weber had taken another turn by focusing on "social action" and its meaning as the basis of our knowledge of social entities. It was, indeed, only with the late Pierre Bourdieu that both currents --the phenomenology of symbolic meanings and social practice-- have merged into one coherent theory (as exemplified in Outline of a Theory of Practice).

Husserl's phenomenology, and later Heidegger's, were obviously both rooted in the Kantian Aufklärung. In Kant's terminology, the human mind has only a perception and knowledge of the phenomena of nature, while the things-in-themselves remain inaccessible to us. This division between phenomena and things-in-themselves, which still dominates the bulk of European philosophy, has led Kant to formulate the objective conditions of knowledge. Thus, if our knowledge of man, nature, and society is mostly the outcome of daily experience --meaning it is a posteriori-- what makes such a knowledge possible and objectively acknowledged as such are its a priori modes, or what was there beforehand prior to experience. Thus, to Kant not only experience would not have been possible per se without the categories of understanding, but space and time operate like a priori spectacles that give shape to the flux of perceptions-as-phenomena. Kant's Copernican revolution, which shifted the Cartesian paradigms in another direction, has triggered a liberation from the old Aristotelian and medieval systems of cognition. Thus, the phenomena are not part anymore of some kind of preordained order, be it religious, political, or even metaphysical. Only the human mind is capable of placing some order in the chaotic perception of all those phenomena which are perceived in every fraction of a second. Man suddenly becomes the center of the universe. Two centuries later, the existentialists will only radicalize the Kantian assertions: existence precedes essence, or as Sartre would say, man simply exists, without any prior motive or essence --and that's precisely the existential problem.

To be sure, Kantism has renovated itself throughout the twentieth century, but in different directions. Thus, while Husserl went ahead with a general phenomenological theory, one that also encompasses the foundations of mathematics and geometry, Heidegger was more concerned with what he saw as Kant's metaphysical problem: If metaphysics, pace Kant's phenomena, is no more possible, then what is it then that philosophy can still do? Is it an acknowledgement to the end of philosophy as we've known it since the pre-Socratics? As is well known, Heidegger will work his way out in terms of a philosophy of existence through a notion of being-in-time (Dasein), which in itself can neither be reduced to an object of knowledge nor to a pure phenomenon since it stems from the lebenswelt as such. To the young Gadamer, Heidegger's

Being and Time (1927) acted as a revelation, to the point that it took him a long time to find his own way. Indeed, and in response to the long delays in publishing his magnum opus, Gadamer said that he had always felt that Heidegger "was over his shoulder watching him incessantly." But another reason for that notorious delay could well be Gadamer's own method of work and his desire to formulate his lifetime preoccupations no matter how long it takes. (But did he know that he would live that long, so as to begin publishing once he retired with a vengeance?) He also stressed the communicative nature of his enterprise, and Truth and Method was the outcome of long conversations with students: Gadamer typically preferred ordinary laymen to specialists when discussing philosophy. That worked well for a generation of students who liked to listen and argue rather than be spoon-fed.

Gadamer thought that both Husserl's phenomenology, in its incessant preoccupation with the objective possibilities of knowledge, and Heidegger's existentialism, with its notion of a Dasein rooted in the being-there-and-now and confronted with death, left behind the whole area of understanding based on interpretation, which Gadamer looked upon as a global activity, and which as individuals we routinely undertake in our daily lives, and hence is not limited to particular fields of knowledge. Eventually, what Gadamer was interested in was not a method of interpretation --since there must be several of them, depending on one's preoccupations-- but rather in the general practice of understanding through interpretation. Indeed, our understanding of beings is not to be limited to the objective conditions that make knowledge possible as Kant thought (and later Husserl), but mostly, if not predominantly, in a long process of interpretation, which in itself is neither subjective nor objective since it involves an interaction between both the individual (subject) and the object to be interpreted (text, image, ritual, etc.). The notion of interpretation as a fundamental tool for understanding (verstehen, comprendre) probably originates with Dilthey (1833-1911), but even with Heidegger language becomes central to Dasein's existence: language is the house of being. However, with Gadamer everything becomes open to interpretation, be it the babbles of a newborn, my morning newspaper or a neighbor's phone call, a ritual, Newton's laws of motion, the Bible or The Critique of Pure Reason. In that "game" of interpretation language acquires a central role, but with no set of "rules" that would establish once and for all the objective criteria of understanding. Here Gadamer is probably close to the Wittgenstein of the Philosophical Investigations, which postulated that the language-games achieve their moment of "truth" --or recognition-- through custom and habit. Even the abstract and universal propositions of mathematics carry no meaning as such, but only through their customary acknowledgment. Indeed, Gadamer's hermeneutics, which originally targeted the positivism

that was rampant in the 1960s does not provide the natural sciences with any special epistemological privileges since they, in turn, are not immune from the language games of interpretation.

If everything could be subject to interpretation, and there is no absolute objective truth as such, texts, among others, become the de facto subject of layers upon layers of interpretation with no end in sight --the famous "hermeneutic circle." An interpretation thus becomes "validated" within a certain "community" through "consensus," while remaining open to other possible interpretations. In the long debate that opposed Gadamer to Habermas, the latter looked upon interpretation as dictated by socio-historical normative rules, so that everything becomes relative to a society and period, while Gadamer insisted on a more "universal" perception of the difficulties of understanding through interpretation.

Be that as it may, "the hermeneutic circle" has since then found its way in the social sciences, and the problem has become in being able to describe what that "circle" implies for a particular discipline. Thus, for example, students of the American common law who reject the old notion of "a natural law" (which would provide anything from an absolute right to property and the duty to punish a criminal), or who refuse the primacy of the US Constitution, are necessarily, though by no means always, driven towards Gadamer's "hermeneutic circle," which serves as a leeway to interpret texts, precedents, codes and statutes, and in organizing them within their socio-historical underpinnings (à la Habermas). Hermeneutics, however, has not witnessed much popularity in the fortress of the natural sciences, considering that such an approach would de facto be looked upon as relativistic, hence undermining the universal claims of those sciences.

Despite such successes (or acts of resistance), Gadamer's work remains poorly known in the Anglo-American literature which tends to work for universal criteria of truth, thus ignoring that the alleged objectivity in both the natural and social sciences, and in the arts and humanities as well, is only valid as such within consciously or unconsciously bargained hermeneutical criteria. Without that Gadamerian reminder our teaching and writing would only slump into dogmatic habits which regrettably fit all too well within a bureaucratized academia.

American nomos
Roma, Friday, March 22, 2002

A lingering unease has consolidated regarding the implications of the quasi-success of the American war in Afghanistan, which has yet to be formulated and clearly delineated. To some, and in particular those in the

Arab and Islamic world, that kind of victory is either no-victory at all --as witnessed, they would argue, in an inability to conclude that war successfully: the fates of bin Laden and Mullah 'Umar remain uncertain; the pro-western Afghani government in Kabul has little control over its territory and would not survive if the Anglo-American forces were to pull out; and, more importantly, massive operations are still needed every once and a while against combined Taliban and al-Qa'ida mountainous strongholds. All such factors combined raise the crucial issue of whether genuine nation-building, under western presence and funding, would be feasible in a difficult society like Afghanistan. Usually, those who tend to dislike American power and arrogance would like to perceive the future of Afghanistan on the verge of nervous breakdown, wishing that it might bring a halt to American expansionism altogether. For those people, however, there are no other alternatives for a possible nation-building in case the one attempted by the Anglo-Americans proves to be a failure either on the short or long run. The only solution to them would be to simply leave the Afghanis on their own: that's apparently the only decent solution, one that avoids the pitfalls of imperialism, foreign domination, and American supremacy. The point here is that there is an apparent impossibility for the United States --given its abundant wealth, national and regional interests, its affection for Zionism, and its past unfinished wars in Iraq, Kurdistan and Somalia, not to mention its withdrawal from Afghanistan after the Soviet collapse, or the unwillingness of the Marines to act effectively in the newly pacified Kosovo, all of which point to unsuccessful and immature attempts to commit for a positive idea in international politics-- to even think positively and deeply about nation-building, and understand what kind of commitment that implies. And if the United States is incapable of doing so, the argument goes, it's because, and due to its geographic isolation, it does not possess that genuine colonial experience of the British and French, which led in the past to a massive debacle like Vietnam.

Unsurprisingly, many of those in Europe and the United States situated on the "left" would give similar arguments to the ones above, namely they would tend to side with a broad and diversified current in the Third World, and among Arabs in particular, with whom it nurtures a suspicious relationship with the United States. Yet, those so-called "leftists" have neither sympathy for religion in general nor for religious and/or ethnic nationalisms for that matter, not to mention their open aversion to the political symbols of Islam and their use for non-religious purposes by the masses in the Arab world and elsewhere. That's because the "left" in the United States, and more so in Europe, which still lives an unbalanced hangover from the all too sudden demise of the Cold War, has not bypassed its hatred of colonialism, which in reality is a self-hatred oriented towards the values of laissez-faire capitalism and liberalism.

Moreover, that same left, even though it gave up its critique of capitalism a long time ago, seems unable to accept the political and economic consequences of the successes of the latter as a world-system. We're therefore left with broadband and poorly defined ideas of sympathy towards that colonized Third World, and of self-hatred and guilt for the supremacy of western civilization. Hence this overlap between trends that are secular in the western world, with others that use religion for social action, both of which constitute these days the bulk of resistance towards American hegemony. The skepticism towards the quasi-victory in Afghanistan is therefore deeply rooted, and well widespread in various parts of the world, but what purpose does it serve exactly? In the absence of clearly defined goals from the Bush Administration, and an even more confusing discourse from conservative think-tanks, editorialists and commentators, independent intellectuals and academics, the "left" has also little to formulate and worry about --except wait for the worse to happen, and then react with a "we-told-you" kind of slogan.

This desire to "pacify," without, however, any interest per se in the economic and territorial resources of a country, is what is probably historically new in the emerging relationship between the US (and its European allies) and the non-western societies and civilizations. To be sure, the US did play such a role of "pacification" in the post-World War II era, but it did so for societies whose contribution to modernity had already been significant, but had nonetheless problems adjusting to laissez-faire capitalism, and in particular in the aftermath of the 1929 recession (which the US had managed thanks to the New Deal and a self-sufficient economy). Thus Italy had been liberated in 1943-45 from fascism (a period which was more of an internal civil war than a resistance to fascism as is often portrayed), then witnessed in the 1950s and 1960s the most impressive economic boom since its unification in the 1860s, and which led to its integration in the capitalist world-order as the sixth industrial nation (or the fifth, based on some accounts). The old constitution of the House of the Savoy, Italy's ruling monarchy, had been remodeled to open the way for a modern parliamentary republic. Germany for its part had been de-Nazified, and became the world's third economic power, while Japan had its emperor lose his divine status and was poised to become the second industrial nation right after the US. All that would have been unthinkable without a massive military and economic investment (the Marshall plan) on the part of the US.

In all those cases, however, the US was faced with countries which were already significantly developed, and as witnessed by the Cold War era, they were all poised to become important players on the world scene. The situation is much different now with much of a so-called Third World in deep economic decline, and with states and societies whose abiding to

international norms remains erratic at best. "Pacification," therefore implies the creation of states that would abide by the international norms of the United Nations. Whether such states would be able to pull off their respective "nations" together and have them "integrated" within the new political and economic world-order is the most problematic aspect of this whole enterprise and needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis. It is, indeed, ridiculous, to assess such a longue durée enterprise globally, as if all nations have equal resources or similar socio-historical systems. Its success would also depend on the ability of the US and its European allies to proceed consistently and meaningfully, primarily through an exploration with their own populations of what is really at stake here.

A reformulation of a global political strategy for both the United States and its allies in Continental Europe has therefore to begin from scratch, one that would have to assume responsibilities towards a Third World in deep fragmentation, if not disintegration. To begin, we need to formulate the obvious, and ask ourselves what kind of "victory" did America achieve in Afghanistan? For which specific reasons could "operation enduring freedom" be labeled as a "success," if at all? In this respect, the common arguments that emanate from leftists, anarchists, anti-globalizationists, Islamicists and friends to the Arab world, etc., and which relentlessly point to the massive and unnecessary B-52's carpet-bombings, displacement of the population and collateral damage, fail to assess the positive outcome of the one-hundred day war and its aftermath. Thus, compared to the ravages of the internal Afghani civil wars since the Soviet invasion in the late 1970s, which have wrecked apart cities and their countryside, the damages of "operation enduring freedom" look minimal at best. To my knowledge, and even though it is difficult to assess human casualties with great precision, I have not seen that number exceeding 8,000 civilian casualties in any of the journalistic reports. Moreover, the war as such, which liberated the major cities and regions from the Taliban regime, did not last for more than a hundred days. Its swiftness has minimized damage in civilian lives and properties, to the point that the cities went back to normal life immediately after their liberation. Reporters who rushed to the center of Kandahar after its liberation were surprised at how quickly the population went back to its regular routines, and even the luxurious villa of Mullah 'Umar had received minimal damage, to the point that Hamid Karzai, the chosen head of the interim six-month government, selected it as his temporary residence prior to moving to the capital Kabul. All this does not point to much irresponsible American behavior from the air.

As a matter of fact, a series of circumstances (or "conjunctures," as Fernand Braudel would say) played in favor of the United States. First and foremost was the nature of the Taliban "regime" itself and its presumed

links with the al-Qa'ida network. That ancien régime --assuming that such a qualification would apply to the Taliban-- only dominated the various populations and regions very superficially, hence their fleeing from Kabul without much noticeable resistance, which even in their own Kandahar fiefdom turned out minimal. Indeed, what still survives of the Taliban and al-Qa'ida are now entrenched in desolated mountainous areas. What we see here is a trend common to many Middle/Near Eastern and Asiatic societies, where political integration does not take place on the top of a social and economic integration from the bottom --or what is commonly perceived as a prerequisite for a successful "civil society"-- but politics simply imposes itself as a process of "subservience" from above, and quite often by minority groups who simply manage their way to the top by an amalgam of pure force and external support. Thus, in the case of the Taliban, they became admired for their "moral" behavior in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal --something that even the CIA reports were keen to report at the time-- by providing support to local populations against excessive tribal abuse. Being themselves from the dominant Pashtuns, they managed their way aggressively up to Kabul through a minimalist military organization, help from the neighboring Pakistani intelligence services, and even the approval of the US State Department, which looked at them as a factor of stabilization in the region. The point here, however, is that the Taliban never managed a process of "integration" to society, and they never sought it in the first place. That would have been far beyond their means and the political traditions of the region, and it remains to be seen whether all the post-war governments in Kabul combined will be able to work out any process of "integration" successfully. What the Taliban have instead managed to implement is a rigid and abstract Wahhabi moral code, which prevented women from working and men from shaving their beards; they also prohibited music, television and satellite dishes, the internet, western art, and even the art left by centuries of Buddhism. Not only did such measures not contribute in societal integration in any way, but they remained foreign to the bulk of the Afghani population, whose Islamic practices were very much different from the austerities of Wahhabi Islam. In hindsight therefore, it was no surprise that the Taliban had fled so quickly. I say in hindsight because many at the time predicted a strong resistance, on the basis that a massive air bombardment, without any significant deployment of ground troops would not deter the Taliban. We were incessantly reminded that ruthless as they were, they will not give up unless they suffer massive casualties.

That's to remind us, once more, that in those one hundred days, events took one after another unpredictable turns, beginning, of course, with the rapid defeat of the Taliban. What primarily led to their defeat was obviously the massive B-52's carpet-style bombings, a technology that

was perceived by many commentators as outdated, and useless in the context of a guerilla war, and which even was not enough to deter the Vietnamese. Easy comparisons are always misleading since Afghani society is non-urban by a wide margin of 70%, and its population is very much widespread over a vast and difficult territory. More importantly, however, Afghani groups remain --literally-- poorly connected. All such factors, in addition to the massive US military superiority, "explicate" the American "success," which, I think, has engendered an overt embarrassment in many journalistic, intellectual, and political circles all over the world. Remarkably, it turns out that it's very difficult to give credit to a superpower whose population tops every list in terms of income and wealth, and when the source of that wealth is laissez-faire capitalism and a culture of narcissism, one can only hope that the Americans will be embroiled in another Vietnam rather sooner than later.

What does such a success establish in terms of inter-state relations, and does that point to a new direction in international relations? The urgency of "the war on terrorism" has at the same time narrowed the debate considerably, and prevented it from pondering at the more abstract and less factual implications of what might turn out as a more global politico-military strategy --one that has not fully matured yet, or probably barely exists, and which needs great efforts to materialize.

If the American war in Afghanistan is to be labeled "colonialism" of any sort, it must then be an imperialism of a new kind whose modus operandi badly needs to be formulated. To begin, there was no interest in a territory per se. Neither the Afghani landscape nor its people seem to be of any importance in American strategy, meaning that there was no intention to "conquer" them. The usual arguments of imperialism regarding raw-materials and economic subjugation are not at stake here. Neither the US nor its European allies have much at stake in Afghanistan economically, hence a domination of the territory for economic ends seems superfluous. Moreover, the Bonn agreements of November-December 2001 between various Afghani factions also suggests that political sovereignty is not at stake either. The Americans have thus launched a war from-the-air, with minimal troop deployments, and with practically zero casualties (except those unfortunates hit by friendly fire), only in order to displace the miserable Talibans. What then emerged was a friendly government with some old warlords among its members --and that's precisely the key point: the emergence of a state that would conform to international rules-- and there are no other political and economic interests besides that one. Why should that kind of state be so important to the western powers? What is really at stake here? Has the state (or the concept of nation-state) as such become even more important than the old territorial and economic interests?

The Italian war in Ethiopia in 1935-36, which probably carried the last vestiges of classical colonial war --and its caricature-- was fought with 400,000 Italians deployed on the ground, and had no specific purpose, except perhaps a fear that without that kind of colonialism and empire-building Italy would purely and simply decline eaten by its internal limitations --including, Mussolini thought, demographic ones. The French and the British, who at the time were still hoping that Mussolini would not side with Hitler, left Il Duce proceed with his grand debacle and illusions of an Italian empire. At the time, both the British and the French were suffering from their excessive colonial practices, and all kinds of illusions regarding the subservience of the colonized to their own interests. The point here is that nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism involved the takeover of a territory. Territorial ambitions were, indeed, crucial, first, because it meant the takeover of land and its resources, and the establishment of a legal regime that would manage the land resources of the colonized natives (in terms of confiscation, private property, public domains, sharecropping patterns, and an understanding of the legal and juridical practices of those natives), and, more importantly, second, Europe had to abide by its long-standing practices regarding territory and land, which legally managed the inter-state relations between the various European nations.

This last point is definitely the most crucial because in modern discourses on international rights and inter-state relations there is a general tendency to forget that territorial domination has been, since the early Middle Ages of Latin Christendom, mediated by all kinds of legal and juridical frameworks. By the time that system had matured in the high Middle Ages, and under the seigneuries regime (which had no existence in the territories under Ottoman control in Eastern Europe and the East of the Mediterranean), the legal framework operated between sovereigns, lords, vassals and peasants. It provided them with specific rights of property and its possession, and above all, inheritance and transmission of property from one generation to the next. By the time the feudal system had degraded and the absolutist states had emerged as a political reality, those same rights were administered by the apparatus of the state. Inter-state relations, including diplomatic relations and wars, were also subjugated to a legal framework whose main basis was the control of a territory. The point here is that by the nineteenth century, when colonialism became a common policy, the colonialist powers only applied that legal and juridical framework internally, while all territories "outside" "Europe" (the old Latin Christendom) remained by and large like a no-man's-land without any specific regulations. The prime failure of the Versailles conference in 1919 consisted in leaving that primordial issue unresolved, and by that time --the post World War I era-- the

United States had already consolidated as a major power on the world-scene, and hence was de facto integrated within the juridical norms of the European inter-state nomos.

Those same issues of sovereignty, territory, and nomothetic universal laws that would apply to all nations currently recognized by the UN, remain mostly unresolved. To be sure, the main problem remains that those legal and juridical norms protecting sovereignty over territories are difficult to implement outside Europe and North America. Indeed, they are mostly the outcome of a long European tradition that began to develop in the tenth/eleventh century of Latin Christendom, and based in turn on the development of Roman law up to the Justinian codex. The United States, in its current role as the only superpower and mediator of world-relations, assumes, for better or worse, all the difficulties that the old colonial powers had left behind, and it is indeed impossible to evaluate the problems that the Americans are facing without a proper understanding of what the classical juridical notions of territory and sovereignty imply in a modern context.

In my view, a major positive outcome of the Afghani war --and which has thus far remained underestimated-- is the attempt to override territorial concerns by de facto handling them to the powers on the ground under the supervision of an indigenous government and state, which in turn is maintained thanks to a European and US mediation (the Bonn agreements). Thus, by launching a campaign from-the-air with minimal forces on the ground, the US has attempted to bypass the old colonialist burden of territorial sovereignty and its juridical implications (in particular the juxtaposition of western standards with the indigenous ones). Whether such a policy will effectively work and has any chance of survival is a different matter. That would mostly be determined by the ability of Afghani society, with its meager resources and labyrinths of divisions, to integrate itself on new societal grounds.

Be that as it may, there are several issues at stake here. (1) Should "the war on terrorism" (or the axis-of-evil campaign) be the final aim, or should it be a more comprehensive policy of nation-building? Even though the two policies might overlap, as seems the case in Afghanistan, a subtle difference nonetheless exists. For one, "the war on terrorism" could be limited to a quasi-police overt operations to dismantle "terrorist" networks and their supporters, or even covert actions intended to assassinate or intimidate, while nation-building is much more longue durée, whose aim would be to a comprehensive institutional restructuring, and hence would not be limited to economic aid only. Needless to say, it would be hard to imagine dismantling all kinds of

networks, regimes and para-military groups, without working for an alternative.

(2) Once we opt for an alternative, it is our conceptualization of all those so-called Third World societies in all their subtle variations which is at stake here. For one, we need to go beyond all the clichéd descriptions of "tribalism" and the like. That's a domain where the scholarly literature could help in providing crucial descriptions on the modus operandi of those societies. The Bonn covenant is a good example of a "constitutional" text which combines universal neo-liberal values with the normative rules specific to Afghani society. Obviously, that balance is not that easy to handle, and the success of western intervention will come to nothing unless the roots of integration begin to emerge.

(3) What is slowly emerging as a new American nomos --as an alternative to classical colonialism-- needs to be formulated as clearly as possible. At present, terrorism and the axis-of-evil campaign predominate. But those are shortsighted and could backfire. For one, it is always easier to "win" a war than finish it properly. Finishing a war, assuming there is some end in sight, implies having allies on the ground that would pursue meaningful policies. It also implies handling pockets of resistance, political opponents, and prisoners of war. The less rights those opponents are granted, the riskier the enterprise of peace and reconstruction becomes.

(4) We were repeatedly told that the war on terrorism will be very long, and that terrorist networks and their hosts should be dismantled. Yet, such assertions do not say much, and much is needed before we can fully understand the implications of a modern war against a poorly developed country.

The unbearable lightness of the bi-national state
Roma, Friday, April 12, 2002

Secretary of State Colin Powell said it finally all --and in all clarity-- prior to moving to the Middle East this past week: there should be a "state" for the Palestinians called Palestine, and another state for the Jews called Israel. They should both coexist side by side peacefully and as long as that peace lasts. There should be nothing spectacularly exciting about such statements favoring a bi-national political ethos, except that since ex-President Jimmy Carter's notion of a "Palestinian entity" back in the late 1970s, American diplomacy and foreign policy have excessively swindled around that dubious notion of "entity": it could be either a "state" or a quasi-"state" (federally) associated either with Jordan or Israel, or simply a "territory" where its citizens would benefit from full

"political rights" and above all the right of self-determination. On the Israeli side, however, more options were and are still available since the possibility of fully annexing "Judea and Samaria" and "expelling" the Palestinians to Jordan --their "original homeland," according to this doctrine-- remains a viable alternative, one that would keep the sovereignty of the Jewish state almost intact. The Palestinians, for their part, have recently branded the notion of "the right to return" --at least in principle, we're told, meaning that it should be openly declared as "an individual right" option even if it would not materialize in practice for the majority of Palestinians. In short, with the plethora of options regarding that venerable Palestinian state we're in a similar situation to the 1917 Balfour declaration of a "Jewish homeland" and all the notorious British White Papers of the Mandate attempting one after another to lock that "homeland" notion into an endless "hermeneutic circle." But at least in that case, there was, indeed, a happy ending and the Jewish state finally materialized on May 14, 1948. Not even optimists would dare asserting that the Palestinian state, however defined, remains a viable alternative to all the current bloodshed. In effect, the possibility of a Palestinian nation-state remains as remote as ever. However, the difficulty of such a nation-state to materialize fully and successfully should not be solely linked to present conjunctures in the confused and confusing world of Middle Eastern affairs. It is perfectly true, for example, that the Bush administration is neither genuinely interested in the fate of Palestinians, nor has it any proposals for the current bloodshed. As it remains busy in toppling regimes and replacing them with more viable ones, and as it prepares its campaign against the Iraqi ancien régime, the Bush administration looks at the Palestinian bloodshed as a diplomatic nuisance, one that could be only internally handled by Israelis alone, while for its part it has nothing to propose. Thus, when Colin Powell began his tour this past week in Morocco, he was deliberately insulted by the king Muhammad VI (known as M6 to his entourage), who had let him wait for several hours prior to receiving him, only to let the Secretary of State know that he should have begun his tour in Israel and the occupied territories --and not in Morocco. Colin Powell, who came precisely to "absorb" "Arab anger" --and the so-called "street anger of the masses"-- "absorbed" the king's condescending attitude --as one of his predecessors, Warren Christopher, repeatedly did with the late Syrian president Asad-- and went on with his tour as planned. The impossibility of a viable Palestinian nation-state, however, goes much deeper than the present moribund state of American diplomacy, in particular when looked upon within the context of the political and economic decline that the Near/Middle East is currently going through.

To begin, and in the plethora of fragmentation and over-specialization that academic literature has stepped into since the interwar period, the

notion of the nation-state and its socio-historical and intellectual origins in western civilization have become all too obscured and subject to such a common sense that there is a general failure to even discern the burdensome requirements that the nation-state entails. Hence the repeated association of the nation-state --not to mention "movements" and "regimes" such as fascism and totalitarianism-- with "states," "nations" and "societies" which do not share the same (or similar) becomings as the western countries. It is generally assumed by historians that the roots of the modern western state, in its post-feudal and aristocratic representations, are to be associated with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the resurgence of the Holy Roman Empire in the ninth/tenth century as a protector of Latin Christendom from the Islamic domination of the Mediterranean. By that time, with the "empire" as the sole political and legal framework, the notion of nation-state had not emerged yet --at least not as we cherish it today. In effect, and as Fernand Braudel reminds us in his Civilization and Capitalism, early capitalism began to emerge in the Italian city-states by the eleventh/twelfth century, then matured in the long sixteenth century (1450-1650), and declined by the seventeenth. By that time, the Dutch United Provinces, with Amsterdam as the new center of capitalism, had already taken over. In the eighteenth century that center was soon to become London, which acted as a city that managed the affairs of a colonial empire. The genius of the Italian city-states was therefore to avoid the heavy burdens that a territorial state would have placed on taxation and the transfer of commodities, not to mention all kinds of bureaucratic and military impositions. And while the Dutch managed with a combination of fragmented city-states and a quasi-state in Amsterdam, it was only with the British that the evolution of capitalism had to be anchored within a modern state, complete with a monarchy, parliament, and army. In the fifteenth/sixteenth century only the French had a viable modern state, but their contribution to capitalism remained constrained: they simply learned how to adapt creatively to its growing demands. The point here is that the modern state --and later the nineteenth-century nation-state-- would have probably overburdened the growing capitalist practices, amid the fact that their existence came into being only when various European societies found it beneficial to protect themselves from an excessive competition and moving territories.

The framing of the political, juridical and legal representations of those states had to be worked out accordingly. There is no need to get here into the debates regarding the possible links and infatuations between Roman law, and the Justinian codex in particular, and modern legal systems, but suffice it to say that the concept of the nation-state had to be framed around such notions as the private/public, the individual and society (or the collective), civil and political societies, the rule of law (or

what the French call l'État de droit), and individual rights. In effect, western political philosophy, beginning with the Italian quattrocento and Machiavelli, and then Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, up to Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, would be incomprehensible without the notions that made the nation-state possible. Correlatively, modern political philosophy would have been incomprehensible, pace Karl Marx, without the successes of laissez-faire capitalism and liberalism, and their concomitant periods of crises and various attempts to bypass them. Hence, the fascist, pro-fascist, and the communist totalitarian movements and regimes, all of which flourished in Europe and its eastern borderlines in the interwar period, were looked upon as third-way alternatives --on the margins of capitalism and socialism-- to bypass the "failures" of liberalism. Their connotations cannot be therefore properly grasped without rooting them within that longue durée movement that anchored western civilization --that of feudalism and Latin Christendom-- into capitalism, on the one hand, and the rule of law on the other.

Modern Middle Eastern states and societies are the direct outcome of four centuries of implacable Ottoman rule, on the one hand, and their colonization in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, on the other. The political philosophies of the various Islamic empires and their socio-economic and historical underpinnings need badly to be conceptualized and written. What we know for certain, however, is that they did not parallel the evolution of western political philosophy which centered around the actualization of the nation-state and laissez-faire capitalism. That led French and British colonialists to conceptualize those "fragmented societies," as Hannah Arendt argued, around the notion of "race and bureaucracy." Those "societies" were thus to be seen in terms of their various "race" components, and accordingly, since the État de droit would be inapplicable in their case, to dominate them bureaucratically. (Lord Cromer's bureaucratic machinery in Egypt was probably a quintessential aspect of such an approach.) By contrast, the Ottoman state, which had adopted the Hanafi code as the basis for its legal system, kept quasi-administrative units in its provinces for the collection of taxes (or ground-rent), while leaving its various "subjects" at the mercy of their local familial and neighborhood associations, and their religious courts. The system that has been inherited in the contemporary Middle East is therefore a combination of both practices --the Ottoman and colonial-- while the plethora of states and bureaucracies which have flourished since the colonial period have hardly any resemblance in form and spirit to the western nation-states. Should we therefore call them nation-states at all cost?

To simplify, two types of states have emerged since the end of the colonial period. On the one hand, the bureaucratic and administrative state, which besides enforcing a mandatory conscription for all adult males, and monopolizing free speech, left "society" struggling with its own networks. Those networks, based for the most part on family and neighborhood associations, neither provide individuals with a "national" nor a "nationalistic" outlook nor enables them to transcend for good their kin background. Being essential for the economic and social survival of communities, networks characteristically survive in societies with weak and dysfunctional states, and for that very reason it would be erroneous at best to describe such societies as "totalitarian." As Hannah Arendt has repeatedly argued, totalitarianism is a twentieth-century phenomenon that attempted a total restructuring of societies that "lagged behind" due to a poor class stratification and the presence a massive peasantry and agrarian production. That was the case of the ex-USSR, which with its New Economic Plans (NEP) and uprooting of the peasantry, had created large-scale civil and military bureaucracies for that purpose. In effect, pace Arendt, even Nazism lacked such total resources and hence does not merit the totalitarian label. Needless to say, describing Syria, Iraq or Egypt as totalitarian only confuses the issue, primarily because of the existence of large-scale societal networks with which the bureaucratic state hardly interferes. For the same reasons the fascist label does not help either, considering that Italian fascism, among others, found its roots in an already advanced society which by the 1960s became the world's sixth industrial power. Indeed, Italy's hyphenated fascism of the 1920s and 1930s found its middle class roots within large-scale institutions such as the Church, the military, and the industrial groups, all of which with substantial "national" underpinnings, and to which the umbrella of fascism only served as a mass coordinator.

On the other hand, oil wealth has produced another kind of state, one that distributes its oil-rent to its citizens, and thus gains their subservience to its policies by considerably reducing taxation and allowing free trade, and permitting a quasi-laissez-faire economy. More importantly, however, oil wealth translates into income for all the immigrant workers of the neighboring countries. In effect, the bureaucratic states and societies of the first kind, and which not only lack oil wealth but also substantial industry and technology, can only export labor-as-capital, and the income of their immigrant workers become the major source for capital transfers in the Middle East. Those workers, however, and whatever the length of their stay in the wealthy host country, never integrate there, and never receive the full vestiges of a citizenship for that matter; and in the Arabian Peninsula they would need a local "guarantor" (kafīl) to open a business, thus de facto placing them at the mercy of local contractors and government bureaucrats. Their

allegiance remains to their native country, and more specifically to their kin networks at home. Thus, the oil-producing countries of the Arabian Peninsula, with the notable exception of Yemen, have received since the 1960s millions of workers and professionals from the Middle East and Asia, but those have been subject to considerable political bargaining, in particular in the aftermath of the Gulf war in 1990/1 when over a million Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians and Egyptians had to be repatriated simply because their work permits had not been renewed. They either went back to their home countries (the West Bank and Gaza for the Palestinians), or else sought immigration to Australia, Europe and North America.

Iraq and Libya are examples of states which are both heavily bureaucratic and militarized, and with ruthless regimes, but also with considerable oil wealth, and thus, until recently, have served in transforming oil-rent into salaries for the needy popular and middle classes of neighboring countries. Labor as such constitutes therefore the major economic flow among countries and regions, in particular that none of the Arab societies had its economy restructured around industrial production in such a way that it would have provided it with a competitive edge. For their part, and with the notable exception of Lebanon, the banking sectors remain archaic, thus severely limiting the free flow of capital and its circulation. The whole process of labor exchange remains, however, heavily politicized, and in the aftermath of the Gulf war the Palestinians were the hardest to suffer.

The whole region has therefore lived in an economic decline for at least three decades. Such a "decline" could be measured not simply by a deterioration of living standards, which translate in a lowering in real wages and a high unemployment, but also by the fact that industrial production and technological innovation have never found a solid ground (with the exception of Israel and Turkey). Since it is hard to find viable historical examples of societies that developed democracy and free speech, and the right for individual representation and participation, without having also developed an economy based on free exchange and contractual freedom, it would be very optimistic to expect any changes in the political sphere either. In effect, one could argue that since the decline of the Italian city-states in the seventeenth century, the eastern Mediterranean has been managed through a très longue durée pax turcica, one that permitted a stabilization of production and social relations at the expense of innovation and a true market economy. The various colonial quasi-nation-states that emerged in the interwar period ought therefore to be looked upon as more of a curse than an advantage. Having been artificially created on the top of declining economies and societies, they have only served to block the flow of capitals and goods,

not to mention the damage that they've created to human resources and the like.

Which brings us back, after this long détour, to our original concern: Is it possible, amid the general economic decline and the political deterioration of the nation-state throughout the Middle East, to create, between Jordan and Israel, another nation-state that would serve as a "homeland" for the two million or so Palestinians out of the five million worldwide (the totality of the diaspora)? At present, the Palestinian population maintains one of the highest birth rates in the world, and safe for the orthodox Jews, that rate remains much higher than Israeli society at large. However, even though the Palestinian youth receive more education than their Arab counterparts, they have to opt for meager incomes and a reliance on family networks and the like, and since the Gulf war the wealthier Arab markets have remained closed to them. More importantly, they constitute the bread and butter of all the jihadic movements, whether they share their religious zeal or not. In effect, what the latest wave of suicide-bombers has clearly shown is the ubiquitousness of the whole enterprise, so that even young women had no trouble joining in (the latest was this past Saturday, in celebration to Powell's first-day visit to Israel). Not only is it absurd to request from Yasir Arafat to stop that deadly suicidal wave and limit the responsibility to one person and his entourage, but, more importantly, there is a failure to understand the generational shift that has marked Palestinian society since the 1980s. In fact, Arafat and his men belong to the post-Mandate generation, who for the most part grew outside the West Bank and Gaza, and learned their pan-Arab political language in colleges in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The new generation, which was born and raised in the claustrophobic atmosphere of Israeli occupation, is less prone to the ideological language of pan-Arabism. Needless to say, that new generation would like to keep Arafat as an old patriarch, a padre della patria, one that symbolically assembles together the various factions of Palestinian society without, however, any invested power to control them. One only needs to listen to some of the tapes left by the suicide bombers to realize how much the values of individualism and kinship are concealed in favor of a utopian "Islam," or "homeland," or a never-ending struggle against Zionism and colonialism, not to mention American imperialism. In other words, the suicide-bomber is at last "one" with that utopian body of the "nation" (umma) through his (and increasingly her) final act. Jihadism in its present modus operandi cannot therefore be equated to either fascism or totalitarianism since it only succeeds at projecting a unified representation of the body of the Islamic and/or Palestinian and/or Arab umma, but besides that it has no real socio-economic program --even though it effectively contributes at financing and maintaining societal networks. Hence contrary to either

fascism or totalitarianism, both of which aimed at an internal "integration" of individuals and their groups through a hyper-nationalism, jihadism flourishes through representations of a common external enemy, and keeps shopping around in the long history of Islamic societies for that kind of imagery. Jihadism therefore acts and behaves like an internal civil war machinery, one that constantly blurs the borderlines between political power and civil society, democratic institutions and various para-military groups, and internal conflicts and negotiated settlements (e.g. the latest Camp David negotiations supervised by ex-President Clinton).

Needless to say, the commonly propagated argument that had the Palestinians received their "full rights" in the first place, the current violence and successive waves of suicide-bombers would have been reduced to their bare minimum, is purely tautological. Primo, Palestinian "society" in its present condition --meaning in the absence of a genuinely democratic "civil society"-- would be unable to create a consensus as to what those "full rights" are and what "borders" to accept. Any "agreement" via a third-party (the UN, or the US, or the EU) would de facto trigger an extended civil war. Secondo, Israeli society has structured itself since the failure of the first Aliyah (1882-1904) around different labor practices than the ones that were common in Greater Syria and the Ottoman markets in general. In fact, and by the time the second Aliyah had been completed (1904-1914) and when the British had established themselves as the sole mandatory power, "Jewish labor" had adopted the basic values of laissez-faire capitalism and liberalism. Those values have since then been consolidated since the independence from the Mandate in 1948, and Israeli society, thanks partly to outside capital, has been much more efficient and productive than its neighbors. The imbalance that a dynamic capitalism has created established a major imbalance not only with a struggling Palestinian society, but also with the Syrians and Egyptians and all the Arabs. It is therefore dubious to seek solutions outside the implications of an economic imbalance of such a magnitude.

Why not then a single secular state? That's a tough alternative, considering all the identity problems that it would engender. But I find it more realistic, and if it has any chance of survival it would at least provide some thoughts to the declining neighboring "nation-states."

The new spirit of capitalism
Roma, Sunday, April 28, 2002

In the first round of the French presidential campaign this past Sunday, Jean-Marie Le Pen --best known to the outside world for having stated that the gas chambers and the Holocaust as a whole were only "a detail in

history," no less no more-- made a surprising show up as the candidate that will be confronting Jacques Chirac on May 5. But what's really surprising is not the score itself --barely 17%-- but the fact that he ended up second, and that the president and his prime minister received no more than 35% combined. There has been much speculation since then on the so-called "coming" of the extreme-right and the rise of xenophobia and racism in Europe generally. Part of the European public, we are told, has become more conservative because of the internal strains and the competitiveness imposed by the European Union, which to date, remains by and large an economic forum (and legal to some extent), while leaving the management of politics to the national governments. Indeed, Le Pen very much stands in opposition to the EU efforts, and he reiterated his hostility this past week in a number of interviews (with a major one to the weekly German Der Spiegel): in short, for him, if elected president on May 5 --and he remains very optimistic about such a possibility-- he would immediately request the withdrawal of France from the EU, the euro, and even the Schengen consortium (composed of eight European countries, all of which grant the same type of visa to foreigners). To be sure, such views are not unique to France only, as witnessed by similar --though not identical-- trends across Europe in particular in Austria, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium. In Italy, the Parliament voted in January against granting a court permission to prosecute Reforms Minister Umberto Bossi on charges of defaming the national flag during a 1997 rally of his then secessionist Northern League party (founded in 1984). Bossi had told a woman who was flying a national flag from her balcony during a rally that he considered the "tricolor" toilet paper material. (By comparison Le Pen would have no problem with the French "tricolor" --the only symbol, together with the now defunct Franc, that would give him "pride.") The National Alliance, another one of those "parties" founded in the wake of the collapse of the old-party system with the end of the Cold War, and which is mostly rooted in the south and does not hide its "pro-fascist" doctrines, had its leader Gianfranco Fini become the number two in the actual Berlusconi cabinet. The division of the new-party system between the traditional north-south allegiances, together with the fragmentation of the "left," inevitably led to the success of Berlusconi's own Forza Italia!, which indeed looks more like a modern soccer team run by wealthy businessmen, than a genuine political "party" in the traditional way -- hence its overnight success since the early 1990s from the moment of its inception.

But even though there does seem a lingering malaise in the current European political system --in spite of the EU's much conservative attitudes towards politics, and its de facto numbness even when it comes to crucial political matters such as the wars in the ex-Yugoslavian

confederation-- it would nevertheless be wrong to see such movements either as a "return to fascism," or as mere xenophobic localized nationalisms prompted by globalization and the competition over national markets and the like. To begin, "democracy," as Schumpeter reminded us back in 1942, is a "method," which implies particular rules in selecting and voting for representatives and their parties. Among all the current democratic countries only Israel could claim to have implemented a genuine "proportional" system of representation. It had to do so, it could be easily argued, as a factor of stabilization for a society of recent Jewish immigrants divided along their old regional backgrounds. Moreover, Israel's non-Jewish citizens, mostly Arabs who did not leave Mandate Palestine in the wake of the independence war in 1947/9, would not fit in the larger political formations and thus need parties of their own. All such groups --or the millets as the Ottomans used to call them-- have to be proportionally represented in the Knesset to be "integrated" within society and to feel that they have a "voice" of their own. By contrast, other democracies, whether North American or European, have either avoided such proportional representation or else reduced its impact considerably. In the United States, the emergence of the likes of Ross Perot and Ralph Nader as third-party candidates points to a bi-partisan malaise. Italy, for example, has only recently managed a complex mixture between a proportional and a majority system, while France has kept playing between the two on and off in the last two decades. Thus, Le Pen's Front National has for some time been granted a margin of 15 to 20% in the polls, but the complicated and mostly non-proportional French electoral system would not allow it to use its popular base very effectively due to the isolation of the Front National within the old party system. Since De Gaulle had transformed in 1962, with the coming of the fifth Republic, the election of the president by direct universal suffrage --with no mediation from an Electoral College or the like-- so that the latter would receive the legitimacy of his or her "mission" "directly from all our citizens," the "first rounds" acted de facto as a "proportional" measure of French political life: that was due to the ease with which one could pose him(her)self as a plausible presidential candidate. Yet, in the final analysis, it all amounted to ending with two "solidly"-rooted candidates --on the left and the right-- for the second round. Le Pen has therefore successfully broken that golden rule not because his popularity has substantially increased by any means, but because of the fragmentation of the traditional party system. That could be easily discerned with the number of candidates in the first round: sixteen in total. Interestingly, those who managed a score of above 5% in the first round will have the cost of their campaign covered by tax-payer's money, so that the Communist runner, Robert Hue, who scored only 3.5%, is now covered with a mounting debt, which prompted the

Communist Party to begin a massive funding campaign to cover the several millions of euros that its miserable candidate had to trail behind.

The point here is therefore the fragmentation of the old party system, the one that survived throughout the Cold War, rather than a sudden rise in a quasi-fascist and nationalistic xenophobia and racism. Capitalism restructured itself by and large in the interwar period when its expansion was hampered by the residues left from the industrial revolution and colonialism. In countries doing well economically, such as the United States and the British Empire, the old class stratifications have been helpful in containing extremist movements either from the left or the right. In those societies laissez-faire capitalism and liberalism have succeeded in integrating large populations movements into a bi-polar party system. Socialists and communists alike defended and represented the interests of the working class, while the conservative liberals stood behind the bourgeoisie and its middle class. Far-right movements, such as Vichy under Pétain, were mostly concerned about the secularism of the Republic and its non-concern with the traditional values of the ancien régime. As Eric Hobsbawm has convincingly argued, such movements are not to be confused with fascism and totalitarianism, considering that with values that centered around travail, patrie, famille (all of which adopted by Le Pen's Front National), they were mostly pre-Revolution and failed to attract the mass appeal of the fascists in Italy and Germany. Indeed, their image of France was mostly aristocratic, one that was subservient to the nobility and the church. On the other hand, countries which like Italy and Germany had a long historical problem in unification and the creation of a coherent dominant class that would serve the interests of the newly promulgated territorial state, fell pray either to a hyphenated fascism, as was the case in Italy, or else adopted a hardened totalitarian fascism. The instincts of the masses thus survived, at least temporarily, and the integrity of the territory was conserved, even though a combined Anglo-American rescue operation was needed for the liberation from fascism.

It meant something at the time to consolidate an ideology that centered on "the protection of the workers' interests." It also meant something to claim the interests of the dominant classes either nationally or at a European scale. That was because class stratification mattered and formed the matrix of societies moving from their agrarian and peasant origins to a capitalism that was mostly urban, and in which agricultural production was no more the dominant factor. And while the peasant populations all across Europe rapidly dwindled, the number of students, bohemians, middle classes, and unemployed in the cities grew considerably. It could thus be argued that up to the 1950s class identity was an important factor in social cohesion, which in turn formed the backbone of the party system, the trade unions and the workers'

associations. European societies have thus learned to survive long periods of internally monitored and pacified civil wars through the liberalism of the party system. The Paris commune and the revolutions of 1848, in their sudden shocks and ruptures, thus looked like relics of the past, triggered by massive industrialization and urbanization.

That civil peace and prosperity still survive in all the major industrialized nations today, the kind of peace that the Third World still aspires to. But beginning with the 1970s, however, a new "spirit" of capitalism has begun to emerge, one which, I think, has rendered traditional political affiliations problematic. In fact, with a more prosperous working class, and the growing of a youth culture as a result of mandatory schooling and a long college education, not to mention the incessant broadening of the middle class, all such factors have contributed in blurring the borderlines between blue- and white-collars workers, right and left, conservatives and liberals, and manual versus intellectual labor. As the French sociologist Luc Boltanski has argued in his recently published Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme, the growing importance of information, transmission of knowledge, telecommunications, consumerism, individualism, and an independent and original life-style, have all increasingly led to an overt reliance on informal "networks" over class, family, and regional affiliations. Networks could be of a different nature and serve different purposes, such as specific professional or consumerist needs, and help in connecting individuals, which even though are socially from very different backgrounds, nevertheless share similar interests in their professions, hobbies, and leisure lives. When a plethora of political candidates present themselves as possible candidates for France's highest executive job, as was the case this past weekend, they are not anymore perceived solely in terms of their political affiliations, but mostly in terms of individual life-styles, a personalized ethical ethos, and their commitment to issues that those involved in networks would find primordial. Issues such as the safety of cities, immigration, the ecology, education and family, get more attention than they would normally do in traditional politics.

In that fragmentation of the social and political body, professional politicians like Le Pen with extremist values could be used by voters to cast a vote of dissatisfaction with the political system as-a-whole. But that would be achieved on the basis that it's a no-risk situation since everything would get back to normal by the second round. The most serious problem, however, is not the existence of the likes of Le Pen as much as the difficulties inherent in maintaining the old party system. That was witnessed, among others, in the incessant difficulties that the French socialist party has encountered in creating an ideology that would be all at the same time: open to globalization but protective of French

national interests, impose a 35-hour workload but also court the big capitalist firms, support the American war in Afghanistan while protecting the interests of the Third World, etc. But if fragmentation and excessive experimentation is the way to go, what would then a government that needs a minimal consensus to function look like?

the nervous system
Beirut, Friday, July 26, 2002

"–History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.
From the playfield the boys raised a shout. A whirring whistle: goal. What if that nightmare gave you back a kick?" (James Joyce, Ulysses, p. 40 of the 1971 Penguin edition).

A military commander from the Islamic militant Hamas group was painstakingly explaining to a BBC reporter that, as far as his group is concerned, "everyone" in Israeli "society" was to be hold responsible for what is going on: considering that conscription is mandatory, then practically everyone is related to the military, has extensive training, and men and women are kept for long years in their professionals lives as back-up reservists. Everyone must also be a "colonizer" since the "Zionist state" is a collective experience. And he then concluded with confidence – –as if his interviewer had been aptly following him-- that what we are facing is a full "militarized society," one whose mode of being is the "military" per se. That kind of statement came the day following the killing of the presumed higher military commander of Hamas, who had been targeted by an Israeli F-16 in a crowded Gaza neighborhood, together with his family and unlucky neighbors, many of them had perished under the rubbles.

Individuals tend to project on others the views that they have of their own selves --it would be indeed nice if we could all live with double or triple standards-- and, similarly, societies project on other societies their own "collective consciousness," to use a term coined by Durkheim over a century ago. Thus, it is Palestinian "society" which has become a war-like zombie, fully militarized, where anyone could be called to action for the just "cause" --as a suicide-bomber, for a martyr's funeral, or political propaganda. What in classical Islam was referred to as dār al-ḥarb, the "outside" territory of "war" of the infidels, has become the de facto "inside" territory of the Palestinians. In effect, the nature of Palestinian society prohibits it from keeping "war" on the "outside" --on some kind of real frontier, borderline, or an outside territory where the "enemy" is faced at a distance. Instead, it's "society" as-a-whole that's fully politicized, hence fully militarized by the same token. Consider the

outcome of the "second intifada," as it is now called. Every aspect of "civil life" --or what remains of it-- has been disrupted, family life is in shambles, schools and universities remain closed most of the time, shops and businesses open sporadically, and unemployment is at an all time high. But there are probably even more important sociological outcomes. Consider, for example, age and gender (sexual) barriers, which shape any society albeit in different forms. When kids are "struggling" everyday in the streets --and international and regional reporters have been tirelessly covering their activities-- it's all kinds of moral and disciplinary barriers that begin to shift, but not necessarily for the better. Kids are not expected to behave in the same way at home after having spent their last days and weeks out of school throwing stones, as part of a daily ritual facing well-equipped Israeli soldiers, nor are they expected to do much at school either, and hence all kinds of "duties" towards parents, teachers and elders begin to collapse. If in a war society age barriers tend to shift endlessly, so do gender barriers and sexual norms. Not only women have proved useful in self-sacrifice as suicide-bombers, but the role of the mother has become similar to the one in Afro-American ghettos. As fathers are lurking in their backyards and become invisible figures, the mother is the epicenter of the family. The suicide-bombers, known as "martyrs" among Arabs, got into the habit of taping a final self-congratulatory and apologetic message, only to be made public once "success" has been secured. Always drafted in a non-individualistic tone --even though it is always an individual screaming for help on those video pictures-- they claim the superiority of the "cause," the "people" one is fighting for, and the forthcoming victory of Arabism and Islam. (Suicidal characters in western societies, in particular those who empty their automatic machineguns in public, do exactly the reverse: they tend to emphasize the individualistic nature of their act, their isolation from all the rest, including family and friends, underscore their hatred for society, and the fact that their act is against their own society.) Then, very gradually, and in the last few tapes, some have begun paying tribute to the mother they had "left behind," and even more recently, the mother herself has begun to show up in her son's video, side-by-side to the future martyr, holding hands like lovers. And even more recently, the mother would come with her own statement, following that of her son. In one such instance, the Palestinian mother addressed all Israeli mothers that in case your son had been (accidentally, of course) targeted by a suicide-bomber, it's because your "occupation" of "our territories" is your "collective responsibility." In short, no one is targeted as an "individual," but only part of a "collective will" (or "collective consciousness").

What is most intriguing in all those videos of all those future martyrs and their mothers (and invisible fathers) is the visibility of the mask only, while the "face" remains hidden. What bothers the most is that big

masquerade in the framing itself: too much "background" in those video clips --in particular when the future-martyr began openly receiving the benediction of his mother. But with or without the mother, the frame contains too much background and not much close-up on the face/mask. I would have liked more of a close-up to see how much of that mask reciting (or reading) one of those repetitive memos would still be visible: Would the "face" finally come into being? We tend to think that in those societies there's too much emphasis on kin, the clan, the group and family --and that's undeniable-- but what all such actions point to is precisely that individualist angst: the desire to be "your own," to show up as an "individual" "self" through something extraordinary. All that is performed while looking at your own society, and that of your opponent/enemy, as a monolithic collectivity. We tend to underscore the importance of the "religious" in those societies, but, again, with all kind of barriers collapsing, suicide-bombings have been generally claimed by Muslim extremist groups, even though the "martyrs" themselves are not that overtly zealous when it comes to deeply motivated religious beliefs. Those youngsters, having already been uprooted from their kin and class formations (hence the importance accorded to the figure of the "mother" as a last resort), find their final salvation in a deadly individualistic act.

The Israelis circulated a couple of weeks ago the picture --whom they claimed they found in a home during one of those numerous military searches-- of a one-year old baby whose parents had apparently dressed with explosives. The picture, which became known as the diaper-suicide-bomber in the Israeli press, and which whether genuine or not, translates nevertheless all too well all those collapsing borderlines, beginning with the fantasy of the ubiquitousness of the process of the suicide-bomber: anyone can do it, hence everyone is a potential candidate. In early May, a young girl in her early twenties who was going to detonate herself in one of those crowded bus-stops, suddenly decided to defect only minutes before it was all supposed to happen. Why she first decided to go for it and then defected will remain a mystery, but what is probably less mysterious, however, is the process of selecting and training those would be martyrs. Initially, and only a couple of years ago, it used to be a four-six-month process, while that has been now reduced to less than a week, from the moment the volunteer makes his or her contact, to the "training" and up to the final act of martyrdom, which reminds me of a Taiwanese factory producing laptops: gradually, you figure out where time is wasted on the assembly lines, which parts turn the most vulnerable, and which ones have a high cost, until you learn how to make the most out of your assembly line.

But if the diaper-suicide-bomber photograph had made such a fuss (see, for example, an editorial posted on The New Republic website), the

routinized funerals, which have now become a daily scene, are part of the general ritualization that blurs all borderlines between the private (the individual and family) and the public (politics), and between the individual, the state and society. Again, a recently (allegedly) discovered memo by the Israeli military (and published in Time magazine in early April), which was typed in Arabic on a word processor, details all the costs of martyrdom, beginning with the recruitment and training, wall posters carrying the photos of those martyrs, his or her "public" funeral, the bullets to be emptied in great sorrow up in the air, and, last but not least, the cash compensations to the families. Martyrdom is therefore a complete economy–the only economy over there. But if it's accorded that much importance it's probably because it serves all purposes of a collective "mob" ritual, since, amid the filtering of class, kin and communal identities, only "mobs" filling those delaminated streets are left in action.

The ex-prime minister Ehud Barak and the historian Benny Morris (who has a significant contribution on the Palestinian refugee problem) have co-signed an article in the all too serious The New York Review of Books. They make the point that Palestinians (and probably also imply the Arabs in general) do not have an "honest" notion of "truth"--at least not the one common to the Judeo-Christian tradition. (Barak must have felt vamped at Camp David by a professional liar.) In other words, there's no "principle of reality" with those Palestinians, and with one "lie" after another, our two authors conclude, there must be a serious cultural problem. What they forgot to say, however, is that in practically all pre-modern discourses, that "reality principle," so important to Judeo-Christianity and to psychoanalysis in particular, does not work anymore. Not that people systematically lie in pre-modern societies, but the relationship between statement and factual evidence does not pose itself that bluntly. Discourses fall within hermeneutic traditions whose approval by a community of scholars is a question of normative values being consecrated rather than being tested on a true/false basis.

Which does not justify, of course, the "lies" that the Palestinian leadership might have committed towards its own constituency or the international community at large. It rather points to the pre-modern nature of Palestinian society as-a-whole. And that's the big problem. At a time when modern Europe (and then North America) went ahead first with the nation-state and then the welfare-state, most of the world was --and is-- still lagging behind. But then the welfare-state has been (almost) abandoned altogether while slowly giving birth to a post-modern market-state. What gave the likes of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton that all going juvenile charm --after the aura of Thatcherism and Reaganomics-- was their realization that the "left" must shift gears towards market

values. Thus, the idea promoted by the welfare-state that society in its totality must consolidate values of class cohesiveness, shared norms and well-being for all, through a redistribution of society's wealth, has practically died since the end of the cold war, if not before. Now the prosperous citizens of the G-7 group (it should be G-8, but I'm deliberately omitting Russia) are promised well-being through market action, open trade, multinationals, research and development, stock options, and an aggressive private sector. Such an ideology has reached such a point that it seems irreversible even in the wake of falling stock values this summer.

The point here is that societies never evolve at the same wavelength, so that today the pre-modern, modern and post-modern states all co-exist side-by-side, and that's why it's impossible to forge an international set of values. But there's nothing radically new, however, in that kind of situation. Looking at Fernand Braudel's "long" sixteenth century, one could still see the Ottomans sharing the Mediterranean with the Habsburgs and the Italian city-states, which at times was peaceful and at others bloody. But with empires disintegrating into much smaller nation-states, and some of which behaving naughtily, the options could range from anything like threats and bribes, direct coercion, war, or a full-fledged imperialism.

An outcome of centuries of Mamluk and Ottoman rule, the Palestinians are a quintessential aspect of a pre-modern society. With the entire Fertile Crescent conserving its "feudal" character until the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire, the general characteristics of oriental "feudalism" have remained stamped into those societies: propertyless peasants surviving under corvées, and which for the most part were disconnected from the urban nobility and city life in general, and left with no political or legal protection of any kind; the urban centers never crystallized into anything coherent, either in terms of political or judicial instances, or a homogenization of the circulating currencies, conscription, and city planning and public services; and despite an active merchant class, the combination of merchants, landowners, and literati did not evolve into a coherent class providing a bourgeois public culture. What thus emerges after the short but decisive colonialist experience was a multitude of quasi-nations, and pre-modern states and societies whose methods of "integration" are rough at best. In hindsight, and in light of Benny Morris's research, it was not that difficult to uproot the mass of Palestinian populations from both countryside and cities: the societal formations were so loose that even centuries of disciplinary machineries would not be enough to hold them back together.

State formations of a radically different nature could live peacefully side-by-side, if they want to. But when pre-modern societies have no other option but to modernize and open their markets, they might become, vulnerable as they are, only a source of cheap labor. Death, however, is an even cheaper alternative.

bailouts
Beirut, Friday, August 9, 2002

There was a time in the 1950s and 1960s when the Second- and Third-World countries lived in some kind of euphoria prompted for the most part by the end of colonialism and the general sentiment that, with the indigenous people having taken control of their own destiny, social, economic and political progress were all on their way. Various schemes of development competed among one another. Thus, while some were highly protectionist favoring high tariffs in order to protect the nascent industries promoted by some kind of state "socialism" the east European way, others favored more liberal models with open borders, lower taxes, and competitive industrial and banking sectors.

By the 1980s, if not before, most of this euphoria had already vanished and given way to a total pessimism among the African, Middle Eastern, Asiatic élites, not to mention what Latin America had to go through in the 1970s in terms of civil wars, military dictatorships, drug cartels and the various militias of rural origins whose financing came from the surpluses of the drug trade. But with the end of most of the dictatorships, the big Latin American nations like Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela and Chili (not to mention Mexico, a de facto protégé of the US) shared an optimistic outlook, and, indeed, they started doing quite well. With the end of the cold war, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and more recently, the World Trade Organization, began, under the general supervision of the US --the largest shareholder of such institutions-- to be more aggressive in their monetary policies towards the developing nations. Some, like Russia, which are perceived to be totally lacking of modern taxation and banking systems, and full of corruption at all levels, had to be coached from scratch. It was nation-building from top-to-bottom. By contrast, many of the Latin American countries were seen as quite feasible experiments of gradual liberalization of the productive forces. A set of principles became predominant among World Bank and IMF bureaucrats: the opening of borders for the free circulation of persons and goods, low tariffs on imports, low inflation and unemployment rates, and a stabilization (or pegging) of the local currency vis-à-vis the dollar as a way to stabilize inflation and make the markets more predictable to investors (whether foreign or local). Curiously though, and considering that one would expect full

liberalization recommendations form US institutions, the IMF did not generally recommend the lowering of interest rates to levels similar to those in the US. It was thus thought that the national currency would be damped if the interest rates were not high enough to attract local and international depositors. Why would someone deposit in the peso if the same rate is given for the dollar?

Eventually, the contradictions of such policies were belittled in light of what was perceived as the successful progressive liberalization of the big Latin American economies. A first warning came late last year with the Argentinean monetary collapse, and the refusal of the IMF to provide emergency loans because the government at the time had defaulted on its national debt, but what is now even more troubling is the Brazilian bailout, which took place this past Wednesday, and which will eventually cost the IMF $30 billion --the largest ever in its history. Moreover, and considering that Uruguay received $1.2 billion this past week, and that more is yet to come (the domino effect), the Latin American continent might be heading towards a crisis similar to the Asian one in 1998. In light of such global financial disasters one has the right to ask --in particular American taxpayers who will be paying all those bills-- What exactly went wrong? Why do Second- and Third-World countries encounter enormous difficulties in improving their infrastructures? Where do those financial debacles fit in light of the newly ascribed hegemonic US role in nation-building?

To begin, a $30 billion bailout means that the failure of the Brazilian system is paid by American taxpayers, even if that implies protecting the lending activities of American banks and corporations (which are much larger for Brazil than Argentina or the rest of the continent), hence indirectly the American consumer. If Brazil has a global debt worth at least $250 billion it simply means that it is unable to generate enough capital from the inside to finance public projects. Moreover, in periods of uncertainty --created in this case by the Argentinean fallout and the presidential election due next October-- more indigenous capital leaves to the outside --"to Swiss accounts," as treasury secretary O'Neill remarked only 48 hours prior to the bailout-- thus leaving the local currency under enormous strains. But under the strict IMF orthodoxy of pegging local currencies to the dollar, billions have to be spent only to keep up with an artificial parity. In the meantime, other countries having their currencies freely floating, albeit with enormous inflations (e.g. Turkey), will nevertheless sell their products at more competitive prices to the international markets. In short, a country like Brazil finds itself hurt twice: its local capitals have fled to "Swiss accounts," and its products have become uncompetitive because highly priced relative to freely floating currencies.

But besides the financial equations and the losses that most of these societies have incurred as a combination of local incompetence and corruption, and the turbulent international financial scene, figures of per capita income and GDPs show that Latin American societies barely improved since the 1980s. In effect, and considering that large segments of their urban and rural populations have become poorer in the last two decades, it is safe to assume that there has been a general decline in their standards of living. The sight of talented young men and women from Chili or Argentina serving cappuccinos at the big megastores in US cities has become all too familiar: such rudimentary tasks would give higher revenues than a "nice" job in Santiago or Buenos Aires. Moreover, financial pitfalls are only an abstraction of what is lurking in the backyard of each one of those economies. Is the financial stress an indication that the economic infrastructures are in poor shape also? Is it possible to imagine a country with a healthy economic infrastructure but whose finances have been mismanaged? In effect, and even though the link is not necessarily causal, the infrastructures of Latin American societies are not modern enough to make them competitive on the world market without the all too common financial pitfalls. For example, both Argentina and Brazil have developed since World War II sophisticated rural and industrial sectors, but they remain poorly integrated amid divided élite groups who prefer to exclude rather than integrate.

But if many Latin American countries have been under the protection of the World Bank and the IMF, it is because such societies are generally perceived on the verge of creating more dynamic economies. For most of the world, the IMF would not know what to say and would not dare propose anything. To take one example, the sub–Saharan region is probably now among the worst in the world in terms of standard of living, production, health and mortality, and has seen all its economic indicators decline since the 1980s by 15%. It is plagued by dozens of civil wars which no one even bothers to mention in the media. Looking further north, the twenty–four Arab states are only slightly better, and most of them have seen a decline in per–capita income and an annihilation of their middle classes. In such societies, the élite entrepreneurial groups are notorious for their low–risk and short–term investments and their "Swiss accounts."

Such sporadic remarks only point to a general truth long known in the social sciences for the likes of Max Weber: namely, that every social phenomenon is total and cannot be dissociated from all the rest, so that an economic restructuring cannot take independently from the religious, political and anthropological. For example, a contract is not simply a tool for exchange, but points to a total social phenomenon that encompasses

the religious, legal, moral and anthropological dimensions in society. It is therefore difficult to see how a society is restructuring simply from a set of economic indicators: interest rates, per capita income, global debt, etc. Those might be helpful for decision making at the institutional level but are hardly enough to understand what is going on in a society.

The United States is today exercising a full-fledge imperialism at several levels --and I'm not using that term pejoratively in any way-- which worries a lot of Americans and others around the world. In any case, one must be totally naïve to believe that societies could or should progress on their own and autonomously from one another, and in accordance with the beliefs of their own cultural norms; or that the subordination to an imperial power must come with the consensus of those who are dominated --the colonized. If we take out of the picture such scholastic matters, the imperial power of the US becomes undeniable, and it is regrettable that it has to be represented in so many euphemisms. Thus, the US presence in Afghanistan is an experience of nation-building from scratch for one of the most impoverished societies in the world, and implies anything from training a national army and police force to restructuring the economy. Similarly, the Brazilian bailout is another imperial experience but much softer --and much costlier. In effect, if the Tokyo promises would hold for a while, it would mean that the Afghanis should receive by next year $1.8 billion from a combination of Japanese, European and American funds. Then, whatever we add of the American war effort, it would never top the $30 billion promised to Brazil in a single day. The same imperial power is acting differently towards differently structured societies, and hence not only the bills are of different proportions, but more importantly, the nature of the involvement varies greatly. Thus, to be sure, Iraq will be very different from Afghanistan.

It is therefore ironic that an administration and a president (and vice-president) who came on the basis of smaller government, lower taxes and more power to the states and the people, should find themselves in exactly the reverse position. In effect, either Bush II is fully incompetent not to realize that a full-fledged imperialism requires big state budgets, hence higher taxes, coordinated decisions at the top, and a large high-tech military, or else he is betting on the ignorance of the average layman. Europe went through a different imperialism, one whose tasks were shared mostly between British and French, and with a much more impressive presence on the ground. Such policies have, for better or worse, shaped the world for a couple of centuries. But to day, and among all Europeans, only the British have a quasi-viable army --together with the Israelis on the other side of the Mediterranean-- but which cannot act

on its own. As to the other Europeans, they are left with charity work in Kabul.

If therefore the Americans are left for the most part on their own --and even England seems to be much more cautious on Iraq this time-- it's probably because they've got a view of the world that is their own. In effect, and in the wake of 9/11 the general feeling in Europe was one of total sympathy, but it then gradually gave way to something else, in particular from the old "left" that is trying to revamp itself. Part of the problem lies in the perception that with globalization even the larger and old colonialist European powers (England, France and Germany) have now become secondary regional powers (no better than Italy and Spain) whose role is one of ideological support to the big brother. More importantly, however, are different notions of democracy and perceptions of the so-called non-democratic nations and societies. Thus far, and since the end of the Second World War, the US has been following British advice on how to handle the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, India and Pakistan. The British view is that such societies have political systems based on a "sharing" of complex power-relations between various groups, some of which have ultimately dominated the state apparatus for long enough and do not manifest signs of relinquishing power. As a result of the non-existence of "civil society," what stands for the "state" is a conglomeration of various social groups who cannot stand at a distance from social conflicts and interests. Europe, amid the failures of colonialism, has therefore nurtured a pessimistic view towards such societies, one that has been lately reinforced by the stalemate that the end of the cold war has created in Middle Eastern countries. In short, such societies --and no society worthy of that name-- could be revamped from scratch.

For reasons already fully expanded by Tocqueville the American democratic experience cannot accept those "decadent" European views. No society cannot have a "fresh beginning": a view contrary to that one must by its very nature be "aristocratic," meaning that it would like to endlessly propound the ancien régime. We tend to forget that the American experience of "liberating" the world goes back to World War II when Italy, Germany and France, and Japan were liberated from fascism and totalitarianism. The de-Nazification of Germany and the "secularization" of Japan's constitution transformed them into world economic powers, while the Marshall Plan rejuvenated Europe and made Italy the sixth industrial nation. In the 1950s the division of Korea liberated the south from the north and transformed it into an aggressive economy. The Vietnam fiasco had frozen the US for two decades, and then in the 1990s foreign interventionism was back in Iraq (and Kuwait), Somalia, Kosovo, and more recently, Afghanistan. In the meantime, a number of countries have been receiving World Bank and IMF loans (or

submitting to the authority of the WTO) --a parallel system of economic expansionism and imperialism-- such as Turkey (which, with $30 billion to date, has neither been able to curb inflation and stabilize its currency, nor to provide for a viable banking sector), Russia (a complete failure thus far), Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. Since that pattern of combined military might and financial aid packages has only been inaugurated since the Second War, it is still of courte durée, which makes it even harder to assess. However, it is worth noting --and that's my main point-- that the early successes of that combined development in Europe has expanded in the last couple of decades far beyond its limits to include many countries whose modus operandi and infrastructures are far remote from both Europe and the US. Needless to say, the latest such development in Afghanistan is a quintessential aspect of the subordination of a society with no substantial capitalist infrastructures: What do the Americans hope to achieve under such circumstances?

If we consider politics and economics as total social phenomena, it is then inconceivable that reforms --in their imperialist flair or otherwise-- be reduced to few variables: privatization, low budget deficits, low interest rates and unemployment, not to mention the traditional suspicion towards the public sector. That presupposes that democracy and laissez-faire capitalism must be universal experiences. To begin, nothing is more remote from the truth than representing liberal democracies (in their European and North American variants) as autonomous "human-rights" experiences for the sake of the free circulation of ideas and as a personal expression of freedom. In effect, we know historically that liberal democracy and laissez-faire capitalism go hand-in-hand. Secondo, the term "laissez-faire" is only very relative since capitalism assumes a large public sector regulated by the state. That's pretty much obvious in Europe, but it's becoming even more visible in the US. It would be hard to foresee how an aggressive imperialism might be pursued without much state intervention. Moreover, the US has tied its future --meaning its political and economic well being-- to a form of imperialism. Looked upon in a longue durée perspective, there's nothing radically new in a dominant super-power exercising a regional and/or world hegemony. However, each period came up with its own specific imperial centers, and at present the US is the imperial center. That is, for better or for worse, imperium dominium is its historical fate.

the element of crime
Chicago, Friday, November 1, 2002

It had to be spectacular, like a grandiose spectacle that no one else had staged before in world history, and that not even the quintessential totalitarian states could have dreamed of. It was, of course, all macabre

symbolism, one that might give some thought as to where the Middle East is heading in that 21st century.

On Tuesday, October 15, the 11.4 million Iraqi eligible voters (out of a population of 20 to 22 million) had voted "unanimously" for their one and only one leader who was the only available candidate. Many had voted with their own blood at the sight of the numerous video cameras of foreign and local reporters, all of which dispatched from all over the world to witness "live" that highly expected American surgical operation. In the meantime those reporters and photographers are having a glimpse as to what life looks like in that part of the world. They did not realize that once the "election" was over the best was yet to come. To begin, the Iraqis voted unanimously for their leader, meaning that this time the old taboo of 99.99%—a norm in Arab politics—has finally been transcended. We're now—thanks God—right into the 100%, a record high. (By comparison, in neighboring Syria Asad-the-son received only 97% of the votes back on July 2000: he should be ashamed of himself.) That not a single person said "no" is, by all standards, remarkable—not even the mentally retarded, the handicapped, the illiterates, and all those who, because of their madness, would have perceived the whole episode as a pure Freudian phantasm. Even Orwell would not have dared to imagine a situation without a single dissenter.

But there was more to come. On Saturday evening, October 19, a presidential decree emanating from that only one ruler who just got 100% of the votes a couple of days ago, provided an amnesty for the 100,000 to 150,000 prisoners incarcerated in the Iraqi jails. All should be out at once, including the so-called political prisoners, but at the exclusion of individuals who had debts to pay to their lenders (including blood money payments). In the final analysis, it does seem that they were all released.

It happened all of a sudden, without any apologies, preparations, or even the minimal organization that would have ensured that such a large number of inmates would not kill one another while attempting to go through their prison doors. Indeed, those doors had to be smashed, and even the walls had to be torn apart—by the inmates themselves. The following day after the amnesty decree, on Sunday, October 20, reporters were brought 20 miles west of Baghdad to Abu Ghraib, Iraq's most notorious prison, to witness, as they were told, an extraordinary event. But what they saw was surreal. Tens of thousands of prisoners, helped by relatives who had gathered around the prison since early morning, stormed out of their cells to freedom. The gates were forced open and the mob stormed the cellblocks, liberating as many as 10,000 captives. Soon, stampedes at the major gates blocked the flow of inmates, and in the confusion, there was no way to count the dozens of dead and injured.

Some relatives rushed to the cellblocks only to find that their beloved had suffocated while attempting to get out.

The Iraqi dictator must have realized that keeping such a large inmate population lost its purpose. The original decree specified that committees of judges would have 48 hours to rule on individual releases, excepting only "Zionist and American spies," murderers who have not settled the "blood money" owed to victims' families under Islamic law, and debtors who have not satisfied their creditors. But that's a system notorious for its impatience with "due process," and hence in the big rush everyone seems to have been released amid a general loss of control by the guards and authorities: spies, murderers and rapists, thieves, debtors, and, last but not least, political prisoners, were all out. It must be that there was no point in keeping anyone in anymore, but why exactly? What if the "internal" world of the prison cell stopped looking that different from the "outside"? The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard once noted that Disneyland is needed to differentiate between what is "real" and its faked reproduction. Similarly, the logic of incarceration establishes a divide between the artificial world of the prison cell and the real world out there. But for that distinction to endure, those on the "inside" must be perceived as "outlaws," or as having transgressed the "bounds of reason," to use an old Kantian metaphor.

The Iraqi inmates had lost their "individuality" a long time ago. Not only "due process" is for all purposes absent, but the brutality of the prison cell transforms individuals into mobs. Those mobs that stormed out of their cellblocks were in effect no different from those relatives waiting for them. Some of them described the event like "storming the Bastille." The analogy would hold were it not for the fact that the Bastille was empty when stormed and then destroyed by the "revolutionary citizens." The decision to storm Abu Ghraib looks as if decided by Saddam Husayn himself. Not that there was any conspiracy from his part, but it was his decision to blur the lines and let all inmates go. Thus, the "storming of the Bastille" in this case did not entail any new notion of state and society, of due process and individual rights. Dictators at times have a macabre sense of humor, and Saddam Husayn has in effect thrown a provocation to the rest of the Arab world: Why don't we all free our inmates, considering that the distinction between inside and outside doesn't make much sense anymore?

The norm of "Arabism," which has regulated pan Arab affairs since the demise of the Ottomans, has been already violated twice last month. First, the 99.99% norm has been superseded by the 100% rule of confidence: if it took that long to close that thin 0.01% margin it's because it was thought that people have, in the final analysis, some right

to simply say no. By trespassing that rule Saddam Husayn plays on the absurdity of the 99.99%. Second, the prisoners amnesty revealed that there was no need to keep an inmate population locked anymore: the entire Arab world is ruled by mobs rather than by citizens with an agency. The rulers themselves behave like mobs waiting to be executed.

Even so-called political prisoners, for which Amnesty International has scrupulously kept a large database, have lost their appeal. At the Special Judgment Block, home to political prisoners, inmates slowly filed out one by one. A Kurd who had fled military service, now spared six years of his seven years sentence; a Baghdadi businessman sentenced to life for counterfeiting Iraqi dinars; and a meek cartoonist, who had fled to Jordan to seek refugee status, only to find himself handed back to Iraq. His first request was for a pen. He had shared his cell block with 15 other journalists, together with rebel army officers and former agents of the exiled opposition. Pencils and books were not allowed.

Even when we listen to such stories, we cannot but feel that the era of political prisoners is over and that they've ceased to create the impact that they once did. Not that their acts are not heroic anymore, but the sheer indifference to politics has made such prisoners of conscience redundant. Hence the Machiavellian intelligence of a Saddam Husayn: let's release them!

Tariq Aziz, a Christian and deputy prime minister, and a long survivor of the regime, likened the Iraqi leader's capacity for forgiveness to Jesus. But what if the Iraqi leader is not forgiving anyone and simply playing on symbols and norms?

On Tuesday, October 22, a group of distraught relatives of prisoners staged an unprecedented demonstration outside the ministry of information, demanding to know where their family members were. Such a hostile demonstration would have been unthinkable even a year ago, but now that all lines are blurred dissidents are at home with the rest of the population and the regime itself.

On Monday, October 21, cleaners were at work sweeping up at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, where human rights groups say hundreds of prisoners were killed in a "prison cleansing" in 1998. Now that there are no more inmates the cleaners joked at the possibility of losing their job. Iraq without prisons! The perfect utopia.

Death row was deserted, as were the quarters housing political prisoners.

Thanks for the 100% support. Be my guest.

federalism-in-installments
Beirut, Wednesday, December 18, 2002

Various Iraqi opposition groups met for four days and nights in a luxurious downtown London hotel to draft plans on the future of a post-Saddam Iraq. Sponsored by the United States—and with a personal emissary from president Bush—the conference hosted 300-plus delegates representing about 50 Iraqi factions, many in exile, including 150 independent personalities. That half of the delegates were "independent" only points to a category of exiled liberal businessmen, lawyers, journalists and intellectuals, all of which unable to fit in the traditional confessional and ethnic makeup of Iraq.

The conference concluded with two documents outlining the future of a two-year post-Saddam transitional period, and elected a committee composed of 65 members whose religious and ethnic affiliations followed an identical pattern to a 1992 conference (codenamed Saladin): 66% for the Shi'i and Sunni Arabs, 25% Kurds, 6% Turcomans, and 3% Assyrians. The participants also drafted a prime document that outlines questions for a referendum to be completed during a two-year transitional period: Should the state be a constitutional monarchy or a republic? It also posits an infrastructure for a two-year transitional government headed by a committee of three "with a clean and honorable past."

The conference itself and the two drafted documents parallel those that the Afghani warlords and factions completed a year ago in Bonn. But if in the Afghani case the existence of a loya jirga (assembly of notables) eased the drafting of the "constitutional document," the Iraqis, by contrast, do not have such a formal assembly, even though the existence of an Iraqi loya jirga will have to be assumed. The problem, however, is to see how those groups will redefine themselves in an Iraq under American military rule. In effect, the second document stumbles on the very norms of Arabism and Islam in that it avoids at all costs—in the context of a so-called "federal" solution—to separate among Shi'i and Sunni Arabs, while naming other "minorities" each one individually, as if the Sunni Arabs are not themselves a "minority" among others. Iraqi "federalism" is thus portrayed as a device for the protection of non-Arab "minorities" rather than a political constitution that fosters the autonomy of all groups and their relations to one another.

The second document is composed of a short introduction and 25 articles outlining a vision of the Iraq to come, and presumably of what it already is. The introduction is mostly devoted to the March 1991 uprising (intifada) "of millions of Iraqis whether civilians or military, Arabs, Kurds,

Turcomans, Assyrians, Sunnis and Shi'is, which almost took away the state (niẓām) to the historical place that it deserves." The document then adduces the "failure" of the uprising in uprooting the "fascist" regime to "circumstances outside the will of our people." For that reason, the introduction concludes, a change is necessary, one that would benefit the Iraqi people itself, the Arab and Islamic world, and the international community at large.

The above introductory statements already stumble on major problems, all of which will remain either unformulated or vague at best. The 1991 uprising came in the wake of the 1989–90 Gulf War and the covert CIA operations that supported the Kurds in the North and the Shi'is in the South. Having stopped short of taking Baghdad and the rest of Iraq, the U.S. Administration of Bush Sr. opted for covert operations that would ultimately overthrow the regime "from the inside," while letting the Iraqis decide their own fate. But the 1991 uprising only led to a general massacre and a political debacle that were more caused by the internal dynamics of those groups that participated and less by "outside circumstances," as the document labels them. In effect, internal divisions among Kurds as well as strives among Shi'is loyal to Iran with other pro–"nationalist" figures, led to great confusions and the withdrawal of CIA financing and intelligence. To be sure, outside elements such as Turkish fears of a Kurdish state and Saudi reservations of a pro–Iranian regime in Baghdad did play a role, but it should be clear by now that the problems of Iraq are mostly internal.

The "political project" (al–bayān al–siyāsī) of the Iraqi exiles stumbles from its very beginnings on three major shortcomings. First, the nature of Iraqi society itself. "The Arabs, Kurds, Turcomans, Assyrians, Sunnis and Shi'is" as enumerated in the introductory statement will be reduced to two de facto "nationalities" (qawmiyya–tan), one Arab and the other Kurdish, throughout the 25 articles of the "project." Anthropologically, the Arabs, Kurds, Turcomans and Assyrians are all ethnic groups identified to their ethnicities and languages, while the broad division between Sunnis and Shi'is is a religious one. However, all such groups might anthropologically manifest similar, if not identical, structures in terms of kinship, exchange, and legal and political institutions. But the desire to differ is probably not without good reasons in spite of all the infrastructural affiliations that might be detected. Such differences are the outcome of "cultural" differences of various "imagined communities."

Logically then, if one were to identify Iraq in terms of its linguistic cultures it should give weight to more than the two predominant ones, the Arabs and Kurds, so as to include Turcomans, Assyrians, and many others, which, as we shall see, the document does recognize but only in a

tortured manner. But then the Shi'is, who are mostly Arabs and mixed with a Persian brand, and who form 60% out of the 22 million Iraqis, would be confused with the other Sunni Arabs, a calculation that might hinder possible "federalist" projects (more on this later). Wouldn't it be more logical to identify for the purposes of "federalism" three components of Iraqi society—the Kurds, the Sunni Arabs, and the Shi'i Arabs—while opening the possibility for more groups to come forth and claim a desire for "autonomy"?

Second, all outside forces—Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi—are never identified in any of the articles of the "political project" as if Iraq is set in a political and regional vacuum. More importantly, the American role—considering that Iraq might be subject to a massive American military operation—is not mentioned—not even once. It is only in the last section (#25) that the conference "looked favorably at the political and practical roles of both the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran to foster change in Iraq." That the U.S. and Iran are placed on an identical plane only shows the widely diverse and incompatible views of the participants, and the need to compromise. Indeed, even "federalism" looks less a political constitution than a big compromise to accommodate incongruent views and ideologies.

Finally, third, the so-called "federalist" project seems like a miraculous solution that will come to terms with Iraq's "two identities (or nationalities?)," the Arab and Kurdish. But, beyond that, we are not informed anything as to what that "federalism" implies and to its links with other original models, such as the Swiss, German, and American forms of federalism. After all, considering that federalism per se, as conceived in its western and north American connotations, will be, if implemented in Iraq, new to the historic heritage of the Fertile Crescent and the Arab world as a whole, it would definitely be worth pondering on its nature and modalities, in particular that it will be interpreted as one of those imperialist schemes of division and partition of the region into weak ethnic groups. Will each region have its own parliament, judiciary, and system of representation? Will the federal state in Baghdad only play the role of coordinator?

The Iraqi federalism, as projected in the document, will thus operate in a state of vacuum: the implicitly welcomed but explicitly denied U.S. military occupation, the assumed role left to the Sunni and Shi'i Arabs (both of which are never named), and, above all, to the economic regime that will hold Iraq together: it is as if the document assumes that it must be "liberal" of some sort but fails to identify it as such.

Those three shortcomings, to name only the most striking in the "political project," undeniably led to the political disaster that Iraq is into today, and adumbrate the problems that structured Arab politics as we've become accustomed to since the end of the Ottomans and colonialism. That they've been completely left out and only alluded to in the political project of the Iraqi exiles is surely not an encouraging sign. We're already witnessing a disintegration of Afghanistan, which even a redeployment of 10,000-plus American troops might not be enough to stop, and which will eventually raise the spectrum of the uselessness of military actions whose mission is to civilize, or to build nation-states.

Article one of the "political project" identifies the current crisis as an outcome of a "dictatorial regime" that abused all human rights in the last three decades, and which led to ethnic and genocidal cleansing among Iraqis and their neighbors, and the development of weapons of mass destruction. The end of such brutalities is therefore both a national and humanistic endeavors.

The second article explicitly rejects in the context of a "liberated" Iraq any possible military occupation or political guardianship (wiṣāya) from a foreign power. Besides the fact that the U.S. is not even mentioned by name, one wonders how is it possible for the Americans to "liberate" Iraq without a de facto occupation for at least a year or two—at least until all weapons of mass destruction are clearly identified and located. Some have even postulated that two decades of American rule is not that far fetched, and as the Afghani precedent clearly shows, tribal and ethnic divisions will resurface almost immediately. Will the Americans therefore only "liberate" and then run away? The document of the Iraqi exiles gives the impression that Iraq is to be liberated by some kind of an "international" "neutral" force whose presence on the ground will not even be of any need. That's strange considering that even the conference itself would not have been possible without a massive U.S. sponsoring: many of those 300-plus delegates and individuals would not have been present and talk to one another, were it not for the fact that the final list had to be carefully assembled and studied in the State Department and Pentagon. Moreover, the U.S. is probably to date the only superpower in world history to conduct wars thousands of miles outside its borders without much internal mobilization and a zero-casualty policy. It is therefore emerging as some kind of "neutral" force that only cleans up a political mess without, however, much support at home, while to the "liberated" the process would be of a "technical" nature.

More important for our purposes, however, is that inherent difficulty that Iraqi exiles in a convention fully made possible by the U.S., to even recognize the American role. It is hard, after all, to see any benefits to

colonialism or imperialism, and hence a U.S. military presence will have to be made invisible—at least on paper.

Article three discusses the period of transition (al–fitra al–intiqāliyya). However, beyond the fact that such a transition is "temporary" and should be helpful in structuring the future of Iraq, we know next to nothing about the modus operandi of the postulated transition. The first document promises a referendum and a three–person committee.

It is in the fourth article that "federalism" is mentioned for the first time and perceived as the political solution to accommodate Iraq's diversity. Because of the inexistence of such political traditions in the Arab and Islamic cultures, both democracy and federalism are kept in their Latin origins. Their meanings and implications, however, are only implied but left obscured by the fact that "they will provide for a peaceful transition in political power." The text reiterates the well known and scholastic separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. In short, federalism, in conjunction with democracy, will provide for a just judiciary, a respect for human rights irrespective of religion, ethnicity and language. Strange as it may seem, federalism is supposed to operate irrespective of religion, ethnicity and language, even though, as will become evident later, the federal units will have to take into account all such factors to determine jurisdictions and rights, and above all, the regional divisions in a liberated and free Iraq.

Even though article five is fully devoted to federalism (al–fidirāliyyah), it fails to point to the implications of such a terminology in a region without such a cultural and political heritage. Instead, and surprisingly, the article digresses on the present status of the Kurds as if they're the only ones implicated. More precisely, it sounds as if the participants have learned federalism from the "successful" Kurdish experience in the north, proposing it to the rest of Iraq. Even though in article two the participants claim to have benefited from various post–World War II experiences (probably implying the replacement of fascist and neo–fascist regimes in Italy, Germany, and Japan with full–fledged democracies), the singling out of the "success" of the Kurds can only be explained by the presence of their various factions at the convention, and the fact that as the major non–Arab element among Iraqis, they're the ones pushing for federalism. But such an approach only confuses the issue on the true nature of federalism. It would have been more convenient to simply accept federalism as a solution to a multi–ethnic society like Iraq. In effect, and even though the Shi'is are Arabs and constitute the only absolute majority (60%), they will benefit from federalism in a similar vein and hence need to "protect" the autonomy of their culture like all others.

Article six is an unnecessary addendum to the previous one, and all what it does is to reiterate on the success of the Kurdish "federal" experience. We are told that through federalism the Kurdish parliament has opted for a viable solution to absorb all kinds of factionalisms. And, in spite of some negative aspects (which are not detailed), the Kurdish experience is thought of as a political laboratory that could encompass the entire Iraqi territory.

That faith in the Kurdish experience is indeed strange, considering its novelty and the fact that no cohesive picture has yet been provided of Iraqi society as a totality. It is only in article seven that other "minorities" are explicitly named: "the rights of Turcomans, Assyrians, and other religious minorities." The body of the text further identifies such religious minorities: the Jews, Sabi'at (Minda'is), and Zayidis (known as the "lovers of the devil" and whose beliefs are Zoroastrian), all three with a national, administrative, and cultural rights that ought to be protected. The text thus falls short of naming the two most important minorities, namely the Arab Christians (Assyrians are Christians but whose language is Assyrian) and the Arab Sunnis. To wit, since only the Shi'is do form a comfortable majority of around 60%, all the others must fall within the category of a religious and/or ethnic (linguistic) minority. In a strange way, the document names the perceived "threatened" minorities in installments. We were first introduced to the "successful" Kurds who opted for a self-imposed federalism and thus witnessed an economic boom in the last couple of years as a result of their political stability. Then came other minorities such as the Turcomans, Assyrians, and Jews. And if the Arab Sunnis and Christians have not been named as other minorities in need of cultural and political protection, it's probably because the Arab Sunnis (in conjunction with Arab Christians serving as "conseillers du prince") have been holding central political power ever since the British mandate in the 1920s, hence presumably they need no "protection."

Gradually, that "federalism" left undefined in article five, receives an implicit meaning. In effect, Iraqi "federalism" aims at protecting all kinds of "minorities." But, considering that even the overwhelming Shi'i majority was left at the margins of political power since the Ottomans, from whom should the "minorities" be protected? Everyone looks and feels as a minority in that society. It would have been much simpler to declare federalism as a universal phenomenon whose aim in a multi-ethnic society is to guarantee the rights of various groups irrespective of their size, region, belief, or origin. But if what we get instead is a federalism-in-installments it's because the document as a whole constitutes an invisible balance-of-power between the three most predominant groups, the Kurds, Arab Sunnis, and Shi'is, which respectively map the geographical division of Iraq between north, center, and south. Only the

Kurds, however, are explicitly named, while the two others are assumed but unnamed. The problem will precisely emerge with those unnamed elements.

That's particularly evident in article eight which all of a sudden declares Islam as the religion of the state and one of the main sources of legislation. Such statements have become commonplace ever since Egyptian president Sadat compromised with the Muslims Brothers a year prior to his assassination and accepted a revision in the constitution that made the sharî'a as a main source of legislation. But what sense does that make in a federal Iraq? To be sure, that would be the only federal state in the world with a religious coloring. If under the banner of Islam, Sunnis and Shi'is combined become the dominant majority, even though it remains uncertain which of the two will have more political power, will "federalism" protect the other non-Muslim minorities from religious abuse? Why should such minorities opt for a brand of "federalism" only to realize that the "federal" state itself comes under a religious coloring? Thus, paradoxically, the Iraqi congress in exile preaches "federalism" for the protection of various minority rights while at the same time arguing that Islam is the religion of the state and the source of all legislation. It is difficult to see how "civil peace" (article 14) and "the state of law" (article 15) would materialize under such conditions.

Islamicate histories
Roma, early 2002

Western bourgeois life has become so comfortable in its laziness and daily routine that one gets a glimpse at how other societies and civilizations are performing only in moments of "crisis," or, more accurately, when events suddenly emerge that make those other societies "out there" entertaining through the torrential lens of the media. But then all will be forgotten simply because it all came at once, like a watershed of confused and confusing events, notions, arguments, and lies and counter-lies. To be sure, the niceties of bourgeois life have become a universal phenomenon, which has extended far beyond its initial implementation in western civilization, so that even in a devastated city like Kabul one manages to find his or her own "corner" (son petit coin, as the French would like to say) between what remains of the luxurious hotels, restaurants, and neighborhoods that have survived decades of civil wars, and now the American armada. But such a universalization of manners notwithstanding, it remains beyond doubt that the bourgeois around the world do not unite --nor do the proletarians for that matter-- and that social, religious, and national differences still regulate by and large international affairs. That does not mean, however, that we are witnessing permanent "clashes of civilizations," as it has become

customary to ascertain. On the contrary, those values hardly clash, if at all, simply because they remain indifferent to one another, and even in a modern context, they manage to live while ignoring and mocking their respective value systems. As Carl Schorske (who became obsessed with the bourgeois culture in fin-de-siècle Vienna) noted, the emergence of cultural modernism was followed with its break from the historical consciousness. Once such a break occurred with the modernism of the nineteenth century, history has lost its power as a source for meaning and action. (Marxism was the last desperate attempt to create meaning.) And with the ideology of postmodernism now rampant --in particular in a weary and worn-out American academia-- cultural products are perceived as a pastiche of things, indefinitely recycled to please world-audiences irrespective of their national histories and cultures.

It should therefore come as no surprise that "Islam" has been perceived --in the wake of the September massacre-- as the ideological umbrella that provides an explanation for all kinds of disparate events: the state-of-mind of the alleged culprits; the backwardness of Islamic societies; the failures of Somalia and Iraq back in the early 1990s; Islamic fundamentalism; the rigidity of the Palestinian national movement; and, last but not least, bin Laden's obscurantism, to name only a few of the topoi that had haphazardly emerged in the last month. However, the gesture to perceive "Islam" in essentialist terms only follows from a non-historical perception of western societies themselves, so that such a lumping together is even forgetful of how western civilization emerged as "victorious" in the High Middle Ages after several centuries of struggle. Hence with the lack of the prerequisite historical consciousness, "Islam" is identified with its scriptural texts --namely the Koran (which, we're now assured, Tony Blair reads every weekend) and the hadith (sayings and doings of the prophet)-- an approach, it should be emphasized, is no different in its postmodernist kitsch from the equally ahistorical readings of some of the alleged hijackers who in their haste to blow up the twin towers have forgotten some of their dogmatic handwritten manuscripts in suitcases at Logan airport while transiting through Boston. (A facsimile of all those documents in their original Arabic is available for contemplation at the FBI website.)

What difference does it then make if we are to remind our audiences --those who can still listen-- that "Islam" as such does not exist (in the same way that Jacques Lacan once famously noted in a controversial tone that "a sexual relationship does not exist"), and that what we ought to focus upon are the fragments of Islamic histories that have populated the Mediterranean and the rest of the world since the seventh century; or that the discourses often claimed to "Islam" are only valid within the hermeneutical networks through which they had emerged, and which

could provide them with the historical contexts that give them meaning and coherence? To be sure, the unease about any valid historical enterprise, pace the likes of Carl Schorske and J.G.A. Pocock, is reflected in the most basic of all history "text-books," those that populate American campuses these days, and which manage to offer freshman students only the yellow pages of history in a nihilistic spirit that only helps relieving modern bourgeois like us from any responsibility. (It keeps, however, the so-called "core" courses busy.)

In effect, the fragmentation of scholarship and of academic culture makes it even harder to construct a comprehensive view of the rise of Islam as a religious and ideological system, and its subsequent successes and failures as a socio-economic and political matrix. Besides Marshall Hodgson's prematurely unfinished attempt to reconstruct the fifteen centuries of Islamic history as a coherent and manageable unit, one is left with Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean for a more comprehensive view that looks at the Mediterranean as a totality:

"The economic and cultural differences between the two zones [of the Mediterranean, the east and the west] became increasingly marked in the sixteenth century, while their respective positions were being reversed. Since the thirteenth century the East had gradually lost one by one her supremacy in various fields: the refinements of material civilization, technical advance, large industry, banking, and the supply of gold and silver. The sixteenth century saw her final defeat, in the course of an unprecedented economic upheaval when the opening up of the Atlantic destroyed the age-old privilege of the Levant, which for a time had been the sole repository of the riches of the 'Indies.'"

And Braudel then adds in what now looks in hindsight like a prophetic call:

"From that point on, every day saw a widening of the gap between the standard living of the West, which was going through a revolution in technical and industrial progress, and the eastern world of low-cost living, where money coming from the West would automatically rise in value and acquire higher purchasing power." (The Mediterranean, 1:137)

In the third chapter of The Mediterranean (1:187ff), Braudel introduces "Islam" not as "a system of values," as is common these days in the impoverished worn-out politically-correct academic jargon, but as a "Mediterranean civilization" that imposed itself by the seventh-eighth century after the demise of the western part of the Roman Empire. Like the Roman Empire, that new civilization attempted to create a new "order" (as Machiavelli would say) all over the Mediterranean by bringing together

geographic and geopolitical "elements" that the Romans were unable to sustain: the Muslim conquerors had brought the "desert" of the Arabian Peninsula and the North African Sahara in connection with the fertile zones of the Mediterranean. A new civilization was thus born where "Islam" as a religious and theological system was only the "ideological" matrix (in the same way that Max Weber looked upon Protestantism as the "ideological" matrix of the capitalism that began evolving in the sixteenth-seventeenth century), but whose "material civilization" consisted of the newly opened trade routes between the shores of the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea. One could add, in that respect, as Henri Pirenne did (another historian who no one reads anymore), that without Muhammad Charlemagne would not have existed.

The Islamicate Mediterranean civilization was the dominant one until the tenth-eleventh century. By that time, Europe had become "Europeanized," meaning that it had revamped itself out of the Holy Roman Empire as a geographic and cultural unit --or as an "idea." (Our glorious History 102 should begin with that period: the seventeenth century is an absurd beginning for "modern" Europe.) That was the time when central and western Europe (including the Iberian Peninsula) had been feudalized -- meaning the crucial process of "enfeoffment," or the creation of "fiefs" through the new aristocratic and clerical élites. (That's why the term "feudalism" only fits for that part of Europe, and such things as "Ottoman" or "Japanese feudalism" are erroneous at best.) Despite all the attempts of the Germanic aristocracy of the High Middle Ages, the creation of "seigneuries" and "fiefs" in eastern Europe failed, and by the fifteenth century that part of Europe went back to the old system of the early Holy Roman Empire: large domains granted by monarchs to a subdued nobility with peasants working under corvée conditions, which was also the system adopted by the Byzantines and later the Ottomans.

By the sixteenth century, when the domination of Europe became obvious at all levels, the Ottomans had reestablished full control of the eastern Mediterranean, and managed to take control of the eastern parts of Europe that were for the most part under the Greek Orthodox faith, and that were under the old system of "big landlords" and corvées. Thus, the success of the Ottomans constitutes a second coming of "Islam," but this time that of horse nomadism, and of warrior groups from central Asia. More importantly, however, the "success" of the Ottomans --even at its highest, under Suleiman the Magnificent-- did not constitute a "civilizational breakthrough," as was the case with the early Bedouin Arabs and Muslims. Indeed, the Ottoman presence in the Mediterranean, until remarkably World War I, constituted only a "buffer zone" for all those

societies that "lagged behind," and which lived under various intense political and economic fragmentation for several centuries.

It doesn't make much sense to speak of "Islam" as a "civilization" anymore. There are over a billion Muslims today, out of which only 200 million (20%) are Arabs. Islamicate societies like Indonesia and Malaysia are a world of their own, and should be looked upon as part of those "Asian tigers," which have aggressively attempted to become part of world-capitalism, and which all Arab states and societies have yet proved unsuccessful to adapt to. In other words, once we work out for every societal formation, as Braudel did, all its "material" components and contextualize them geographically, the patterns that emerge will become meaningful.

The so-called "clashes" between "civilizational patterns" are therefore always there, in particular once looked upon in a longue durée perspective, and, needless to say, they do not suddenly emerge because of a military action here and there. It is laughable to think that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were the work of "isolated" terrorists that do not convey "the spirit and precepts of Islam," which is precisely the kind of self-denial that the Arabs are now propagating. To begin, all nineteen suspected terrorists, whose names and photographs have been recently released by the FBI, were Arabs, and over half were Saudis. One need not have the genius of Braudel to figure out that there must be some kind of deep problem in the way the Arab societal formations have been structured and restructured since the Ottomans had left the Mediterranean. That event seems to have triggered a long hang-over which is still there, and, needless to say, the Arabs have become the sick people of the Mediterranean --and of the Atlantic too. (It is ironic that an impoverished society like Afghanistan should pay the price for such a debacle.)

It doesn't make much sense either to speak of "Islam" in general as if it's a centralized religious system like Catholicism. Thus, claims of the kind "it's not in the spirit of Islam to do so-and-so" are meaningless because anyone can become an "imam" and impose a line of interpretation, which in turn would be an outcome of complex material, geographic, and historical underpinnings. The point here is that all the Islamicate societies of the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific, are now nation-states on their own (mostly the outcome of colonial and post-colonial policies), and hence are not supported anymore by the larger empire frameworks of the previous centuries. They obviously have for the most part --even though, I should add once more, that their differences are overwhelming-- failed to modernize and create societal units that could compete internationally. But whether such an effective modernization will

ever take place is a question of many centuries, and many failures are still down the long road.

lonely tribes
Beirut, Sunday, August 4, 2002

This past Wednesday, the last day of July, and in a hot and humid morning, a mid-aged man came regularly to his work as clerk in an office and thus walked into --by 9.30am-- the Beirut offices of the Private School Teachers Mutual Fund. The only unusual thing in an otherwise routine and dull morning, was that same clerk, Ahmad Mansour, 45, pulling out two submachine guns concealed in his bag, and spraying his colleagues with bullets, thus killing eight of them immediately and wounding four others. Newspapers printed on their front pages colored photographs of two of the victims with their corpses lying on a balcony. In one such photograph, taken from a next door balcony or window in a cruel voyeuristic style, a mid-aged man is seen sitting on the edge of a balcony, his back to the wall and his face down and arms covered with blood. A women is lying on her back right in front of him, who must have received a fatal shot right on her neck. The two must have sought refuge on the balcony, hoping that the gunman --their "colleague"-- would not catch up. The photograph, printed in dark colors, is reminiscent of the tableaux of Edward Hopper: the loneliness of the place (the edge of a balcony), hence the loneliness of the persons themselves usually caught in a "gesture" that translates their self-absorption and profound boredom (even in the final moment of death), then all that voyeuristic look from the outside, which Hopper managed by means of invisible incognito eyes looking darkly through a glass, which in turn serves as a protective shell.

The killings took place the same day that a bomb exploded in a cafeteria at the Hebrew university in Jerusalem, thus killing and wounding over a hundred victims, including five Americans, an event that was quickly surpassed by a series of suicide-bombings, culminating with "bloody Sunday" (August 4). Having reported the Beirut killings and the cafeteria massacre on its front pages, the local Lebanese press did not even bother to ask --and only ask-- whether there were any "connections" between such forms of criminal behavior. To begin, Arabs in general have been reluctant to describe suicide-bombings as "criminal," while many perceive them as "heroic." Second, this past week carried several court rulings in Egypt and Syria in which a number of "dissidents" --to use that old Soviet term of the cold war era-- were sentenced from five to ten years in prison. Those "dissidents," whose political affiliations were either on the side of the Muslim Brothers, or else purely and simply "secular" and "liberal," with no association to a political party or organization, committed no other crime besides reminding the state of its duties as a

protector of freedom and human rights. When the state --that cold monster, as Nietzsche described it-- becomes part of the conflicts and power-relations in "civil society" and is thus unable to distance itself from all internal "civil wars," the Palestinian suicide-bombings ought then to be perceived as a quintessential aspect of state-"politics" with nothing to offer but collective destruction.

Serial killers and random shooters are not that well known in Middle Eastern societies. Indeed, besides that the two categories are very different from one another, they do not point to much affiliations in terms of planning, motif and purpose. A serial killer is someone who pursues a longue durée task, with careful planning and the inner pleasure of having done so much without being caught. More importantly, the whole idea of acting "serially," and having encountered all victims on a one-by-one basis, is what finally matters. That "encounter" achieves the status of a sexual liaison, only to end up in a sacrifice through a ritualized death. (As Jacques Lacan once noted with his sense of humor, that since phallic penetration can only proceed one-by-one, the Don Giovanni and Casanova western mythologies of manly prowess can only be "serial" in scope and planning --drowning by numbers.)

By contrast, random shooters are of a different nature altogether. The emphasis here is both on randomness and the instantaneous nature of the act, or, if you wish, its gratuitous nature. The killer usually selects his (or her --even though my memory fails to recapture a woman in that role) victims in the most banal of all public (and seldom, private) places, only to proceed at a random shooting by killing as many as possible. The random and anonymous nature of such acts has by and large associated them with modern or post-modern societies, in particular those of Europe, and even more so, North America, and the United States in particular. The fact that in such societies individuals live and produce as individuals, dissociated from religion, family and regional backgrounds, creates what the late sociologist David Riesman has aptly labeled, back in the 1950s, as "the lonely crowd." The fact of being part of a crowd, and yet "alone" has become the best clichéd description of modernism. Yet, not all random shooters target anonymous victims. Indeed, there has been many cases in the US, and more recently Germany, where kids at school targeted fellow students, faculty and staff, and others coming to work specifically to begin a random shooting of colleagues and administrators. Two particular events point, in my view, to the essence of such acts despite all their varieties and motives. The first goes back to the spring of this year, during the French presidential campaign, where voters --in a typical post-modern gesture-- had to shift in the span of a couple of weeks from sixteen possible candidates with Le Pen in the top second, to a massive re-election of Chirac in the second round. It was

during that campaign that a lonely gunman shot at one in the morning in a cold breezy night members of the municipal council of the suburb of Nanterre outside Paris. He then committed suicide 48 hours later by throwing himself out of a window while being interrogated in the palace of justice in Paris. The police later found his journal in which his alienation from all the rest, and the permanent feeling of belittlement and of being "no one" predominated, hence that explicit wish of his to become "someone." The second episode goes back to Quebec, May 8, 1984. That day Denis Lortie rushed to Quebec's national assembly and gunned down everyone he could meet on his way, and then while relaxing at the sight of all those dead bodies, he said: "Le gouvernement du Québec avait le visage de mon père" ("the government of Quebec had the face of my father").

I brought those two episodes to underscore the fact that crimes are "invented" at two levels. First, that of "filiation" and "genealogy": the criminal, like any other person, "belongs" somewhere and his or her primary "belonging" is that of the family and kin --the figure of the father and/or mother. The crime itself therefore only attempts to transgress that order of filiation --an order which the individual tends to transpose outside the family --in the professional milieu, among friends and colleagues, and in politics, government and all state symbols. A society without filiation would be on the verge of anarchy --and that's precisely what fascinates a criminal mind. The second level is that of belittlement and empowerment as remedy through the criminal act itself. The former is a morbid feeling that inhabits many souls in modern societies, and to which the criminal act brings a challenge to that social order of things. In short, the criminal act could be looked upon as a transgression on both counts.

Wherever serial crimes or mass shootings take place, a public opinion questions the large availability of guns among the civil population, in particular among kids and students, the non-vigilance of the police and security forces, the deteriorating economic conditions within large segments of the urban population, the failure of incarceration in general and the rehabilitative model in particular, the sick minds of many of those people out there who cannot but seize the opportunity and shoot at anyone passing by. Every society has its own share of publicly kept secrets, and those tend to be the most valuable form of reproduction of knowledge. If for each crime a plethora of explanatory reasons are associated with the act, it is because the crime profoundly challenges the social order, and that's precisely what needs to be masked from public discourse.

To my knowledge, both serial killings and anonymous random shootings are radically new creatures for the Middle East at large and for the Arabs in particular. There were only two serial killings reported in recent years. One was in Yemen a couple of years ago in what became known as "the butcher of Ṣanʿāʾ" and in which the alleged culprit, a Sudanese man who was employed at the morgue of the faculty of medicine of Ṣanʿāʾ, used to seduce his young female victims at the morgue itself, then rape them and kill them. As it turned out, the morgue's equipment was more than enough to conceal those bodies all around. The Sudanese man was eventually brought to trial, found guilty, and publicly hanged in the presence of many Yemeni officials. The closed nature of Yemeni society made it even easier for the serial killer to keep up with close to two dozens victims in a row prior to being caught.

In Iran a couple of years ago a number of prostitutes and young girls were found dead "serially" (if I recall correctly it was in the city of Mashhad), and, again, someone was caught, a "regular" head of a family, a young man who used to go back home after each murder and kiss his kids goodnight before going to bed. Again, here, the closed nature of Iranian society, and the status of prostitution in particular gave the culprit an easy time.

Random shooting, however, has thus far remained practically inexistent --if not politically incorrect. During the fifteen-year Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), mass murders did take place, but those were mostly political, or else, when the casualties were regular civilians, they were targeted precisely for their confessional identity. Even one the last major ones --that of the massacre of Palestinian civilians in 1982 in the camps of Sabra and Shatila-- looks in hindsight romantic compared to the systematic ethnic cleansing practiced by Bosnians and Serbs in the 1990s. The recent attempt to reopen the Sabra and Shatila case in a courtroom in Brussels by holding the current Israeli prime minister responsible of the massacre --hence throwing the crime on "outside" and "alien" forces-- only points, once more, to the unwillingness to perceive private and political crimes as an essential aspect of the modus operandi of each society, an event which, as Durkheim was the first to perceive, poses a challenge to the "collective consciousness" of society.

To go back to our original case, and regarding the clerk Ahmad Mansour, the press had reported much of what needs to be known. He was 45 years old, and a Shi'i from a village south of the city of Sidon, and associated with the Amal militia (also a parliamentary block since the end of the civil war). He has been working for some 25 years at the Private School Teachers Mutual Fund where he shot eight of his coworkers that Wednesday morning. He was apparently engaged in a financial dispute

with the fund's administration. He thus applied for a loan worth $12,000 from his compensation fund, which he was supposed to receive after his retirement. Even though the fund's administration granted him the loan, he nevertheless secretly asked for his compensation from the National Social Security Fund and bought a car. Therefore, the administration of the teacher's fund asked him to return the loan it had given him. But he came back and killed them all. In the southern village of Loubieh, Mansour's son 'Ali, 18, said his father had been taking tranquilizers and other medication, while sources close to the family said Mansour had indeed sold a Mercedes several days ago, an indication that perhaps the thought of returning the loan must have seriously crossed his mind.

Having killed some of his coworkers, Ahmad Mansour left quietly the building, smoked a cigarette, and gave himself up to the police without any resistance. It was also reported that he had told the police that he "regrets" not having killed all those whom he had in mind: a couple more were apparently on his short-list, but were either not present that day, or he simply missed them. The man who was therefore on tranquilizers the weeks and days before suddenly looked quiet and calm, and in total control of himself, with an advertised sense of self-satisfaction.

That was as far as the local press could go. But while attempting to avoid all kinds of incendiarisms, it managed to miss what the people of the street thought was the pièce-de-résistance of the whole episode, namely that all eight victims were Christians. Even though that was common knowledge, the few in the media that dared making it public got punished. So how revealing is that fact? Does it make sense to say --a refrain from the civil war-- that it's all "confessional politics"? Since the civil war was over by the early 1990s (thanks to the pax syriana), the general prevailing perception is that the root of the problem lies within the so-called "confessional political system" --that division of political and institutional power "equitably" between the various confessional groups. Such a division had even been consecrated back in the 1940s through a gentlemen's "oral pact." (There's a lot to say about the "oral" nature of that pact, which would be too long to explain here.) There has therefore always been this naïve perception amongst intellectuals in particular that "the abolition of confessionalism in politics" is a necessary pre-requisite for a modern democratic society.

Such an "abolition," however, assuming it means anything, is pure nonsense. Confessionalism is a form of life, as Wittgenstein would say, which affects everything we do on a daily basis. To abolish "political confessionalism" means therefore --assuming such statements make sense-- implies abolishing society and all its normative values. It would be like asking the Swiss and Italians to forgo their linguistic and/or

regional differences. Now that privately-motivated random shooting has entered into the annals of the Lebanese criminal system, it will, like everything else, be colored with confessionalism, which means, for all practical purposes, that the killer will not shoot "randomly" --the American way-- but will target his victims more carefully, probably by selecting them based on kin and religion --or what anthropologically is referred to as the nisba. So a killing of that kind is neither motivated nor "caused" by confessional life --it simply receives a confessional coloring.

In effect, if we accept that the essence of crime lies deeply into a perverse desire to abolish the order of filiation, and which the individual receives from his or her family, kin and clan, our killer here saw in his Christian co-workers a representation of the "authority" he had internalized, and being on average middle-class and wealthier and more educated than the common lot, Christians tend to be represented as the promoters of individualistic capitalism, a decadent morality, and an abusive political system, in which they historically had more than their fair share. It is therefore neither that surprising, nor immoral, that a killer like Ahmad Mansour left his killing field comfortably well, at home with himself, with an urgent desire to smoke, and strongly regretting the couple co-workers that he missed. Americans were appalled at the sight of Timothy McVeigh in total control of himself and not feeling sorry for any of his victims or their families. That authority figure inside them, and which had tortured them for so long, has been symbolically abolished through their criminal act. Even a lethal injection will not make them suffer.

generative grammar
Chicago, Friday, February 7, 2003

In Power and terror: Noam Chomsky in our times, the Japanese video documentary (2002, 74 min.) that has just been released in movie-theaters in the U.S., the viewer might wonder at what makes Chomsky (now 74) so upbeat about a seemingly hopeless topic. The salvation, which will only partially satisfy the viewer's curiosity, came when very accidentally Chomsky was asked on the relationship between his work in linguistics and as a pacifist. The question was first posed by members of an audience at Berkeley where Chomsky has been frequently lecturing in the wake of 9/11. Chomsky immediately replied that "that's the easiest question I got for the evening: there's absolutely no relationship between my linguistics and pacifism." Later, in the quietness of his MIT office, Chomsky looks at the same question from a different angle. He still reiterated the no-relation theory, but there might be, however, a non-deductive relationship. In effect, Chomsky's linguistics looks at language in terms of its innate and natural characteristics. Thus, unlike those who have argued that language is primarily acquired through custom and

habit (Wittgenstein), or through a subjective interactionism that varies historically and geographically (Habermas), Chomsky has an "inside-the-brain" theory of language, one where an innate "generative grammar" structures speech and teaches us the meaning of words even without being aware of that process of nature. Similarly, notices Chomsky in his office interview, the ability to come with a moral choice is also inherently rooted in some innate desire to produce the "good." There is thus, so to speak, a generative morality out there. Chomsky would argue that even if people use language in various ways, write differently, and for the most part are unable to grasp the grammatical rules correctly, we're still all able to distinguish between "red" and "green" from natural innate capabilities. But on what basis do people agree on a moral principle? And should our actions be rooted in a moral system?

Chomsky's crusade against evil is certainly rooted in a moral system of his own making, whether it's an outcome of some innate behavior or social praxis. For that reason, Chomsky's political views, which he rehearses ad nauseam for every public, are, indeed, very Christian. For one thing, even a casual glance at Chomsky's numerous political books, pamphlets, videos, speeches and media interventions, only points to a meticulous database of the horrors of humanity (albeit mostly limited to modern times), but without any attempt to contextualize any event in a meaningful way in its historical unfolding. Take for instance Chomsky's take at Churchill whom he condescendingly only mentions once in the 74-minute video: instead of the great Churchill that everyone admires, we're reminded of a Churchill working for the foreign office in the 1915–16 period and begging his supervisors to bomb the Kurds and nomads (whom he dubbed as "Arabs") with poisonous gas, whose technology the British had just mastered, because they've become such a nuisance to the progress of the British army in Mesopotamia. Such a reminder, however, comes along a fairly long laundry list of 20th-century horrors: the million or so Vietnamese casualties, Nicaragua, Panama, the 1982 Israeli war in Lebanon, etc. Chomsky might be right that American imperialism has picked up from where British colonialism had left half a century ago, but by avoiding to explain the modus operandi of colonialism, looks at colonialism and imperialism as inherently bad and damaging all by themselves. Moreover, it does seem that with Chomsky colonialism begins with the British and French somewhere in the 18th–19th century, as if the Romans, Arabs, Mongols and Ottomans (not to mention Venice and Genoa) never existed and never extended their reach to other societies far different from their own.

If we were to take Chomsky for granted, the problem then becomes one of understanding the rationale behind all those atrocities, which he naively limits to the past century. Indeed, human history would altogether

look absurd and mindless, if not inherently evil, if we were to confine it to a laundry list of massacres without the events that led to the latter. Moreover, individuals, groups and armies do not simply massacre for the sheer pleasure of killing, in particular that they'll have to deal with their enemies whether the latter have been defeated or not. A meaningful world history would therefore have to account for that incessant need to dominate and colonize that was predominant to various societies and civilizations since the Greeks and Romans, if not before. Empire formations became the norm as a way to subdue scattered societal formations based on Nomadism and tribalism, even though imperial bureaucracies never managed to fully control them. Moreover, empires only survived by opening vast geographic areas to one another and subjecting them to an imperial center and various taxes, rents, and surtaxes. Empires thus persevered through various trade and manufacturing networks—the prerequisites to modern world–system economies. There is therefore a logic behind conquests, subjugation and colonialism, one that brings the Romans close to the Mongols and Ottomans, even though each imperial bureaucracy survived through its own modus operandi.

British and French colonialisms of the 18th and 19th centuries were therefore no different from their predecessors and probably even shared a close affiliation with the system of "colonies" established by Venice and Genoa between 1450 and 1650 (Braudel's prosperous long sixteenth century). What was, however, unique to the British and French was an awareness, in a period of consolidation of capitalism, of a world–market with privileged centers of production and exchange, and where the nation–state has become the normative political model. It is no accident that modern European colonialism begins in the eighteenth century and comes to an end in 1914–18. Europe was on the defensive ever since the Muslim conquests controlled the Mediterranean in the seventh and eighth centuries, and only the defeat of the Ottomans in Vienna in 1683 (September 11—a date that Bin Laden must have remembered) brought that process to a halt.

Chomsky is therefore right in assuming that American imperialism is in continuum with its British and French predecessors. But does that make it illegitimate? Can the U.S. survive without such an overtly imperialistic role?

federalism in Iraq?
Chicago, February 28, 2003

This past week (February 21) The Washington Post published leaked information on postwar Iraq regarding plans of reconstruction,

humanitarian aid, and the de–Baathification of the new regime. The importance of the document stems from the few scattered details that were provided by the Bush administration officials on how the new political regime would look like, in addition to related details on the interim American administration in Baghdad, i.e. the appointment of a nonmilitary civil administrator as soon as law and order are established after Iraq's liberation. Apparently, the original plan for an interim military administration for a year or two under Gen. Tommy Franks has been dismissed to avoid the image of another pipe–smoking MacArthur blowing his orders to obedient (or disobedient) Iraqis. Slate.com (February 28) came up with potential names of candidates, with Lt. Gen. John Abizaid (Abu–Zayd) as the forerunner. An American of Lebanese descent (and from a Christian family), Abizaid is fluent in Arabic, which means he has the rare ability to communicate directly with the Iraqi people. In the meantime, some 20 to 25 Iraqis would assist U.S. authorities in a U.S.–appointed "consultative council," with no governing responsibility. In addition, an Iraqi commission would be formed to reestablish a judicial system. An additional commission would write a new constitution, although officials emphasized that they would not expect to "democratize" Iraq along the lines of the U.S. governing system. Instead, the likelihood is for a "representative Iraqi government."

So far so good. What the leaked information avoids, however, is the notion of "federalism" as proposed in the meeting of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) in London in mid–December. Only once, one official was quoted that "We don't want a weak federal government that plays into the hands of regional powers," allowing Iraq to be divided into de facto spheres of influence. Another article posted on the website of The New Republic (February 27) claims that the "(Bush) administration has suddenly soured on federalism." Apparently, the deal sealed with the Turks this past week, and which included a financial aid amounting to 26 billion, promised the newly appointed Ankara government that federalism will be shelved off. Such an attitude is understandable amid fears that a federal Iraq implies considerable autonomy for the Kurds in the north, a prospect that frightens the Turks who have been reckless with their Kurds since the foundation of the "secular" Turkish Republic back in the 1920s.

If the information on the dismissal of federalism proves correct, the whole U.S. takeover of Iraq (possibly by the end of March) might be jeopardized and an irreversible damage created for the pacification of Iraq. In fact, the U.S. might suddenly find itself in the British colonial shoes of the interwar period, which means another missed opportunity for the Fertile Crescent, and one more colonial failure.

As Hannah Arendt has argued in a brilliant chapter of The Origins of Totalitarianism, the colonial powers, mainly the British and French, when faced with societies that were unable to melt into modern nation-states, mapped them into rival "races" to be "bureaucratically" administered. "Race and bureaucracy" thus became the motto of the colonial administrators, beginning with Lord Cromer in Egypt. It was therefore no coincidence that the framers of the original text of the Balfour declaration in 1917 had referred to "the Jewish race" but made no fuss about changing that to "the Jewish people" once pressured by the Zionists under the tutelage of Chaim Weizmann. When all was done and said, and the British were awarded their Mandate by the League of Nations in 1922, the League recognized The Zionist Organization "as a public body" representing the Jews of Palestine (both the indigenous Jews and the new immigrants). For their part, the Arab Palestinians had a "Supreme Council" elected by the Muslim community of Palestine acting on their behalf (in spite of a 20% margin of Christians among the Arab Palestinians). Moreover, the elected Supreme Council took control of the Muslim endowments (known as waqfs) and the religious sharî'a courts. The British administration thus assumed right from the beginning that the new entity labeled "Palestine," and whose definitive borders were negotiated with the French in 1923, would not fit within one coherent "nation-state" and would thus be "shared"—if not "divided"— among Jews and Arabs. For that very reason there was never at any moment any British proposal for a common political and judicial framework that would contain both Arab and Jewish aspirations: the two "categories" were looked upon as separate "races" that would not fit together. Moreover, it did not matter that there were rival factions with different aspirations on both camps, and that such rivalries could create havoc within the group itself.

The British administrative tools and methods of government were thus clear from the beginning of the Mandate and their modus operandi concretized during the so-called Arab revolt in 1916-18. With the demise of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires the British and French were scrambling for solutions to contain the "societies" previously integrated within those empires. Regarding the Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire, the British thought first of an "Arab empire" with a Hashemite caliph on top (Sharif Husayn of Mecca), then a year later began shifting towards an "Arab state" whose initial "borders" were negotiated in what became known as the Husayn-McMahon correspondence. All that turned pure nonsense, and the initial blueprint for a preliminary arrangement between French and British came in the form of the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. What this brief history shows is that the British and French were much more concerned with "borders"—understood as what contains the territorial integrity of a modern nation-state—than with

forms of government and the political and judicial institutions that need to be implemented to contain the various ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups within the Fertile Crescent. Having assumed that all such groups were "races," the next step was to go ahead and acknowledge all kinds of institutions and practices they had inherited from the Ottomans. Property titles, waqfs, religious laws and courts, noble families, tribal chiefs, etc., were all duly recognized as forming the modus vivendi of those societies. In other words, all kinds of institutions and practices, of which the late Ottomans of the Tanzimat became weary, and which Atatürk was happy to abolish in 1926, received a privileged status under colonialism. If one was to accuse the colonialists of any fault, it would definitely be for a lack of imagination in handling multi-ethnic societies. Coming from the long heritage of a centralized nation-state, the British lacked the imagination when dealing with multi-ethnic cultures whose institutions have been lagging behind for centuries.

When those ethnically diversified societies felt trapped in the 1920s in their newly designed Sykes-Picot borders, the rule of the game was the survival of the fittest. The Zionists and the Yishuv end up controlling Palestine by 1947–48, creating a stateless Palestinian society. The Kurds, even though were promised a "state" of their own, end up empty handed because they did not fit within any of the "racial" divisions of Greater Syria. In Iraq, the Sunni Arab minority, which controlled since Ottoman times the main administrative posts and land titles, monopolized the nascent Hashemite state apparatus instituted by the British. By the 1950s and 1960s most Arab states were already trapped in minority sectarian regimes, which Nasserism and Baathism attempted to bypass through "holistic" pan-Arab ideologies.

If the above press reports claiming that the Bush administration has dismissed plans for a federal Iraq come to be true, then we're back to British colonialism, and the newly appointed American military or civil administrator will undoubtedly spend much of his (or her) time reading Lord Cromer. In effect, and in spite of the administration's willingness to work out from day one a new Iraqi constitution and a new judiciary, that won't be enough because the emerging Iraqi political body will be centralized rather than federalized. That will create problems within a poorly integrated multi-ethnic and religious society.

The other alternative would be to go for a full-fledged federalism. Early attempts by the INC in its December meeting have willy-nilly demarcated three "federal zones" in the Kurdish north, the Arab Sunni central areas, and the Shi'i south. But that won't be enough: all those ethnic-religious groups are not homogeneous entities and their internal disputes and violent dissensions could easily overburden the nascent federal state. A

better alternative would be smaller but more competitive "zones"—or Swiss "cantons"—with ethnic or non-ethnic regional affiliations. While the federal state in Baghdad would maintain its own secular constitution and laws, the regional states would have their own religious or secular codes. On the long run, the federal state would work out for a better homogenization of all those regional codes and institutions. The point here is to avoid a situation of a centralized state with brutal manners, and with all kinds of equally brutal divisions in the peripheries within and among ethnic and regional groups.

If Iraqi federalism works well, Baghdad could then host the Olympics in 2024, and declare the postwar reconstruction an unmitigated triumph.

lonely crowds
Chicago, February 25, 2003

At the beginning that CNN poll a couple of weeks ago seemed like a nice gag. European viewers of the most famous news network in the world were asked which persons are the most dangerous to peace, and which ones pose an imminent threat to humanity. George W. Bush came first, followed (in close competition) by Tony Blair, while Saddam Hussein and Bin Laden came in a remote third and fourth categories. The creators of the "axis-of-evil" are now the evil per se. When those numbers popped on my screen that mid-February in a freezing Chicago weekend, I thought that the original question was which of the four is the most popular. But even when the results were duly commented, and in spite of the anti-Americanism in what Rumsfeld calls "the old Europe," I still could not understand all that concern with U.S. power and hegemony—at least not to the point of making Hussein and Bin Laden more "popular" than Bush and Blair combined.

Such polls came in the wake of the "large" manifestations in the U.S. and Europe in the weekend of February 15. At "home," the New York manifestation was the largest and claimed close to half a million participants, while both London and Rome topped that number with one-million or so in each (at least according to the organizers). In all cases the events were perceived as indications of the unpopularity of those leaders who have opted for war, and how isolated those are from their own constituencies: anti-Americanism has reached such a degree that even the Brits cannot stand their prime minister anymore. But, European anti-Americanism notwithstanding, what probably brought all those people together was a common cause, which the participants very vaguely describe as "a love for peace, and a hatred towards war." Others have argued that we live in an age where war could be avoided by peaceful

means, meaning diplomatic negotiations and political pressure. War should thus be the last resort, the argument goes.

But those are no arguments at all. They're so general and devoid of any historical and political analysis linked to specific conjunctures, that they would fit anywhere and any place. Moreover, such generalities serve so well the purposes of the depoliticized European and north American masses, out of touch with current events and world history, and whose narcissistic behavior isolates them from meaningful political praxis. Every once in a while such apolitical individuals—David Riesman's "lonely crowd"—swallowed within their own narrow lives, and divided on the basis of class, education, income, gender and race, but unable to come together in some meaningful concrete action, find a common cause in the name of the environment or world peace. Hence the platitude of their arguments, assuming any argument at all. Even the academic literature, which is supposed to carry all the treasures of world history and civilizations combined, has shifted since World War II and the 1960s to a mode of thought that privileges broad topoi and "models" devoid of any experimentation with historical situations that would point to the diversities of societies and civilizations. A particular reading of Conrad, Kipling, and Orwell, would thus unapologetically lead to a "theory" of colonialism and culture. Such essentialist theories, drawn from an eclectic reading of juxtaposed texts, make it impossible to experiment with the various colonialist and imperialist experiences in world histories. We would thus have to perceive colonialism as essentially damaging— because it implies the domination of one society over another—no matter what.

In a similar vein, war must be evil, while peace is the normal condition for all mankind, something that we should all aspire to. War and peace, colonialism and imperialism, socialism and capitalism, thus become like Kantian noumena, whose existence we can only postulate, but whose reach is beyond the field of human experience. Moreover, the pacifists' attitude of a perpetual peace is also Kantian, which reflects that of the core European nations. In that Tocquevillian/Kantian civil peace, individuals and societies come democratically together through their own individual wills and a long process of learning and adaptation. Iraq cannot therefore be pushed towards democracy, and an American military operation cannot make it democratic. We have been incessantly lectured that the Fertile Crescent and the Middle East as a whole never had a democratic experience, that those societies, prior to colonialism and post–colonialism, were part of empire formations, and that war cannot therefore implement any form of democracy, whether federal or otherwise. Such a pessimistic and condescending attitude extends grosso modo towards the east European countries, which for the most part have

already joined NATO, and which will be by next year part of the political and economic European Union. "Childish," was how Jacques Chirac described the European Union's Eastern European applicants last Monday, after several of them signed a letter of solidarity with the United States over Iraq. (What Chirac really meant—and no one can blame him on that—"l'Europe, c'est moi.") Surely, however, those childish Eastern European applicants do have more experience with totalitarianism than France—and even more so than Germany. Having went through a prolonged "feudalism," then subjected to Habsburg and Ottoman rule, east European societies paid dearly for their weaknesses in the interwar period by falling under the yoke of Soviet communism. Such states and societies might have fatal inherent weaknesses, but they're not childish, and they might be in a better position to appreciate what a "liberation" of Iraq might entail.

In that same weekend of February 15, Beirut hosted a manifestation of 10,000, while Damascus had a state-sponsored demonstration twice that of Beirut. Baghdad has them on a weekly basis, while Cairo is getting more and more nervous at the prospects of large crowds. Not much has been reported within the Arabian peninsula or north Africa for that matter. What Anthony Giddens has labeled as "the violence of the nation-state" translates in a Middle Eastern milieu into a focal violence against "society," sending back individuals to their groups and networks. In other words, individuals are neither "citizens" nor the "lonely crowds" of western societies, and the "Arab street" is nothing but a worn out entity without real existence. The pacifists who have that luxury of "coming together" for the sake of "protecting" Iraq have such a broad sweeping language that the Iraqis look nothing but human like "us." Maybe all they want for a change is upgrade from that status of "human" to that of "citoyen."

The American re-Baathification of Iraq
Chicago, March 13, 2003

Now that we're into a semi-declared war, it does look more and more certain that by the end of this month (or by mid-April at the latest) we'll be replacing one fascist Iraqi regime with another one of the same type and caliber. This time, however, besides that the new regime will be disinfected from weapons of mass destruction, the much improved fascism of the masses will directly operate under an American panoptical supervision.

Various reports in the last two weeks have pointed to a schism within the Bush administration, more precisely, between the state department and the Pentagon. In the Near Eastern unit of the state department, mostly

composed of yuppies from the élite colleges, the predominating view has been that such things as "democracy" and "liberalism" cannot be introduced through a forced cesarean action from the outside, but rather through a historical process that grows only internally. Since the Middle East and the Arab-Islamic world never had a full-fledged democracy (expect for Turkey and Israel), the forced implementation of democracy would certainly be a gross failure. The U.S., once it establishes its military rule in Iraq, must therefore opt for a more cautious alternative to the de-Baathification of the country. Such a step would empty the Iraqi bureaucracy from its main cadres, leaving the country in a state of paralysis, and opening the way to more instability. Moreover, an attempt towards "federalism," as initially proposed by few in the Pentagon, would not moderate that instability—it would simply make it worse.

Simply put, we're back to square one, with a centralized minority Sunni Arab regime that would control the army, bureaucracy, capital, and landownership. To confuse things even more, there might be a solution the Lebanese way: A Sunni president, a Shi'i prime minister, and a Kurdish house speaker. The entire country would then be under American military supervision, and every ministry, department, and army unit controlled by U.S. intelligence. Such a pseudo-solution would be a rerun to the Gulf war of 1990/1, whose cost was estimated at 60 billion dollars (entirely financed by the Saudis and Kuwaitis), and which brought back the Kuwaiti monarchy intact (even the right of women to vote has never been respected), while neighboring authoritarian regimes were given one more chance to survive for the twenty first century. This time things won't be much different. The same authoritarian regimes will be given another chance, while a promising Iraqi federalism has already been declared dead in favor of a more autocratic rule at the center. The U.S. has become since the end of the cold war the only superpower in the world indeed, but it lacks the boldness and imagination to go for political and juridical alternatives in the so-called Third World, promoting at the international scene an aura of mediocrity and moral bankruptcy.

An academic, journalistic, and artistic literature has consolidated since the 1970s in which the right of societies to maintain their indigenous cultures and customs has become sacrosanct. We've thus been ad nauseam preached by politically correct pacifists that multi-ethnic and religious societies cannot be forced to change. Such a literature might fit well within the current academic climate that promotes a general laissez-faire laziness, but its main weakness is that it misrepresents the nature of change in many societies throughout the past century. In effect, international relations prove to be as important a factor in forcing change as internal and regional ones. Examples from World War II abound in that direction. Italy, France, Germany, Japan, Greece, the Philippines, and

South Korea, would not have democratized had the Anglo-Americans not controlled Europe and parts of Asia. More recently, the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans would not have been brought to an end were it not for the massive U.S. involvement in the Kosovo war and its forcing its hand over NATO. Afghanistan is an example of a very partial success precisely because there's no commitment yet to go beyond the central authority in Kabul.

To be sure, the Iraqi experience will be much different because the U.S. will not be relying on proxy groups on the ground (meaning no Northern Alliance the Afghani way). The importance of Iraq is not for its oil production, but for its strategic location in a region with lots of potentials. The success of a preliminary wave of democratization will therefore be an outcome of the potentials that are already present in the region as a whole: the Turkish and Israeli democracies, the autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds, Iran's lively culture, the liberal Lebanese economic system, Qatar's constitutional monarchy, and above all, all the professional middle classes in the Middle East. A well designed federalism in Iraq might therefore introduce a precedent for a cohesive political-judicial-economic model for multi-ethnic and religious societies that for once would effectively work.

The secret behind the successes (and failures) of colonialism (or imperialism) is its inherently diffuse (and hence unfocused) character. Those who argue that the U.S. is after Iraqi (or Saudi) oil miss the point. Liberals and Marxists alike are often caught in Lenin's bold thesis of "imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism," and their imagination does not seem to have evolved beyond that point. Since modern imperialism has always implied a re-ordering of the world from the colonialist's perspective, such arrogance has caused problems for the peaceful and pious souls and created a mass literature centering on the evils of imperialism. Such utopian and essentialist souls, however, have no time playing with historical concepts and looking at things in terms of their political, judicial, and economic components.

The pope has therefore no problem meeting with Tariq Aziz, who for decades has been the only Christian (Chaldean Catholic) face in the Baath and Saddam Hussein's (English) spokesman to the outside world: "We want to say to America: Is it worth it to you? Won't you have, afterwards, decades of hostility in the Islamic world?" This meeting of the souls between the Vatican and the Baath vanguards—and the above statement comes directly from the mouth of the secretary of state to the Vatican (but it could have been Aziz's as well)—is as scandalous as the Vatican's silence over the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust (beautifully chronicled in Costa-Gavras's Amen). Did Tariq Aziz confess to the pope?

anger management
Chicago, April 18, 2003

Assuming that the war per se is already over, and that we've just begun week one of postwar Iraq, a lingering mystery needs to be solved which can be formulated as follows: Why did the south, which was assumed in the coalition plan to fall easily because it's mostly Shi'i, take more than two weeks to be controlled, while Baghdad was done with as soon the U.S. Marines got hold of the city's airport (renamed Baghdad's International Airport)? Understanding the modus operandi of the dividing lines between south and central Iraq—not to mention the mostly Kurdish north—can bring some light as to what the coalition forces (and possibly the U.N.) might have to endure in the future. In consequence, every new Iraqi government will also have to understand the dynamisms that separate north from south.

The first few days of the war brought something hitherto unsuspected into the picture—what has been hastily labeled as "the Iraqi resistance"—and which in effect was thought to have hampered the progress of the coalition forces. What was then perceived as "resistance" to an occupier has drawn angry remarks from journalists (particularly in The New Yorker and The New York Times) by the second week of Operation Iraqi Freedom, regarding Rumsfeld's hastily prepared war plans, which allegedly forced the military to minimize troop deployments in Kuwait, by pushing their march towards Baghdad without much protection and backup, thinking that the southern cities will receive the coalition forces with flowers, while the 300-mile military line between the Kuwaiti border and Baghdad was left mostly unprotected and at the mercy of the newly discovered Iraqi "resistance." By the third week, however, when Baghdad's airport was quickly controlled, the Rumsfeldian doctrine of a rapid and thin deployment of troops from the Kuwaiti border up to Baghdad, has begun to show all its merits. The rapid fall of Baghdad, pace Iraq's (mis-)information and postmodern minister, has then brought Rumsfeld back to all his glory, to the point that the Syrians have begun to wonder whether they're "next" on the secretary of defense's "short list." (As it turned out, the Syrians are not worth Rumsfeld's esteem, and he will thus leave them out for the moment, but that's another story.) As in Afghanistan, the rapid success of the war was at a minimal cost in terms of British and U.S. lives, and also Iraqi civilian casualties (1,500 in most estimates), boosting the military's morale while giving the Bush administration more credibility in its imperial wars.

The main question then remains as to why the southern (and mostly Shi'i) city of Basra was "controlled" by the British only by the third week—at the

same time that Baghdad fell under Marine control. Even the tiny city of Umm al-Qasr ("the mother of the castle"), which is crucial as the only port city, had "resisted" for a full week. The other major southern Shi'i cities—Nasiriya, Najaf and Karbala—also showed some stiff resistance. The other unexpected element was the excessive amount of looting and civil disorder in the capital, which left no hospital, supermarket, school, museum, and public building safe, while the looting that took place in the south was minimal—not to mention the north where mobs fell under the control of the Kurdish militias. In short, Rumsfeld and his advisors did win the war, but in a reverse order: they had initially planned for a protracted and bloody siege of Baghdad, which should have in principle followed an easy recapitulation of the south, only to find out that the capital was indeed the easy part.

Iraq's population falls into three ethnicities: a 60% Shi'i majority in the south, a 20% Kurdish (mostly Sunni) minority in the north, and a ruling Arab Sunni minority in central Iraq. When the British occupied Iraq in 1917–18, and suffered close to 100,000 casualties, they instinctively thought that the new rulers of that country should be exclusively among the Arab Sunni minority. Thus, even though the Kurds were promised a "state" of their own at the Sèvres conference, such plans for "autonomy" were rapidly shelved off by the early 1920s when the mandate powers effectively took control under the auspices of the League of Nations. Moreover, the Shi'is were perceived as even more problematic than the Kurds since they had no experience of "government" in Arab lands. When the British realized that the leading Sunni families were too much internally divided as a result of four centuries of sporadic Ottoman rule, they opted for a prestigious Hashemite monarch who had just been ousted by the French from neighboring Syria. By opting for Sunni Islam as their ruling partner in the Fertile Crescent, the colonial powers thought that they would keep up with the "stability" of their Ottoman predecessors. Postcolonialism kept that Sunni heritage alive and radicalized it through Baathism and Nasserism. That moribund political infrastructure survived thanks to the cold war era and the incessant militarization of politics and the state institutions.

In the case of Iraq, the militarized Baathist state has managed to keep most Shi'is outside the institutions of the state, leaving the various populations of the south at the mercy of party officials, paramilitary groups, and a dysfunctional state. The Shi'is thus gradually learned to "protect" themselves through their own internal institutions, which for the most part are organized along rival lines of clergymen and mullahs, all of which became favorite targets of the central regime in Baghdad. Yet, despite all the assassinations that Saddam Hussein had successfully ordered, those rival religious networks have grosso modo managed to

survive either through an internal process of protection, or else through exile and the Iranian link. The assassination of two leading clergymen by a highly motivated mob in the shrine of imam 'Ali in the wake of the liberation of Najaf, only shows the solid divisions of the "societies" of the south: one mullah had just come back from exile from London, while the other was a protégé of the ancien régime, and the two, we are told, were supposed to have been in a reconciliatory mission, with no other place than the Shi'is's holiest shrine.

The coalition forces, which were expecting a "subservient" south, unexpectedly found themselves in a nightmarish situation. At first, they thought of a pure and simple "resistance" against a foreign occupier. That "resistance," however, turned so chaotic and sporadic that the Americans and British had a hard time figuring out who was fighting against whom, and for what specific reasons. We were then told that those populations were driven by fear and that the symbols of the ancien régime still pervaded them. But by the third week, when all the major cities were finally under control—except for the hard labor of looters—another reality begun to emerge. The south, which in decades of brutal rule, persevered only through its own self-regulated institutions, suddenly found itself in a situation of an internal civil war. In other words, the harshness of the Baathist regime did not manage to break most of the societal bonds that were kept through the religious networks or otherwise: it actually only succeeded in infiltrating to the "inside" by recruiting its own mullahs and placing them in key positions. When in the first week the regime fell apart, the internal divisions quickly resurfaced and the coalition forces were trapped right in the middle.

Such was not the case in Baghdad. In the capital city the regime successfully managed a full control of society by rendering it dysfunctional and symbolically controlling all aspects of social and political life. The excessive looting, which went beyond all notions of civility and honor, is an indication of the excessive fragmentation of the center. It is as if every individual, family, and neighborhood survives on its own, with only the various state symbols to "connect" them into a cohesive whole. If the population took such a pleasure in defacing public statutes, it is precisely because that is their general function: once they are there under normal circumstances, no one notices their austere presence; the state keeps multiplying their number ad infinitum, but they still go unnoticed; but once the regime is gone, they're fun to desecrate—especially with an American flag.

Needless to say, the coalition forces have inherited a "society" that is so fragmented and did not go through the "disciplinary" techniques of the west, that it is no "civil society" at all. The big challenge will therefore be

its transformation into such a cohesive unit—an unprecedented challenge for the Arab world.

sectarianism or ahliyya?
Makdisi, Ussama. The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. ISBN 0-520-21846-9.

In his Culture of Sectarianism, Ussama Makdisi conceives sectarianism as a modern phenomenon, one that emerged with the Ottoman Tanzimat in the 1840s, and concurrently with the European interventions in the internal affairs of "the sick man of Europe" that followed. It is this cut between the old and the new, or the pre-reforms and the Tanzimat, that structures not only the major thesis of the book itself, but many of the narratives that the author uses in support of his thesis. Makdisi would thus like to present an historical and dynamic view of sectarianism, at least one that does not lock the various Lebanese confessional communities into permanent ahistorical and religious conflicts whose essence would be in some presupposed "tribalism" of those Arab milal. Thus, besides being an outcome of the reform policies, sectarianism "is a discourse that is scripted as the Other to various competing Ottoman, European, and Lebanese narratives of modernization" (p. 6). The assumption here is that the Ottoman imperial bureaucracy, European governments, their protégés and consuls (in particular the British and French), and the Lebanese élite muqāṭaʿjī families (in particular the Maronites), all created discourses of modernity, and even though different, they still overlapped with one another in that they all construed Mount Lebanon as a region of archaic and sanguine conflicts, described in terms of "tribes" and "religions" with never ending conflicts. They were thus all oblivious to the fact that a couple of regional and international factors have contributed in a shift of power relations, first between the central imperial bureaucracy and the various Lebanese communities, and then, within those same communities, and, finally, between the notable families and their base, in particular the peasantry (but also possibly the Maronite clergy from which originated for the most part the popular and laborious classes of society). To be sure, the Egyptian occupation of Greater Syria (1831-40) was what initiated the watershed, followed by the demise of the Shihabs in 1841, who had been ruling Mount Lebanon since late in the eighteenth century, but who were granted so much protective privileges under the Egyptians that the withdrawal of the latter meant their own final demise. Since then, and a fortiori after the peasant revolts in 1858, the massacres of 1860, and the mutaṣarrifiyya rule that followed, Mount Lebanon had a difficult time.

How was then this sectarian discourse of the Other construed? To begin, Makdisi does not look at the Ottoman discourse–the one at least that emanated from the central imperial bureaucracy–as one from the "inside," meaning that it was one, among several competing others, that the local ahālī–or raʿiyya in Ottoman usage, or the ʿāmmiyya, as the peasants and commoners in the 1858 uprising called their "movement," or the juhhal ("ignorants"), as their clueless masters labeled them–had to confront; hence the sectarian discourse of the Other was a "protective" shell that would eventually lead those communities in the modern era. In fact, Makdisi insists that "Mount Lebanon was communally reinvented [since the 1830s] in the sense that a public and political sectarian identity replaced a nonsectarian politics of notability that had been the hallmark of prereform society" (p. 68). The assumption, therefore, is one of "break" (coupure) between communities constructed on religious identities–prior, say, to the Egyptian rule in the 1830s–and those same communities who had to struggle with modernity by constructing sectarian identities. Thus, Makdisi perceives the sectarian project as so different from its religious predecessor that even the attempt to conceive the reforms and their aftermath in terms of "the reemergence of a coherent, primordial religious identity" (ibid.) as an historical fallacy to which many historians have succumbed, since "They have not examined the anxiety inherent in this new elite sectarian project; nor have they sufficiently noted its obvious contradictions, its tentativeness, and its underlying fragility" (ibid.). But since the book is mostly rooted in the early and later Tanzimat, with only a sketchy account of the Egyptian experience in the 1830s, and with even sketchier accounts of the traditional–or pre-modern–communities of the early nineteenth century, it is difficult, at least from my standpoint, to get any convincing view of where the difference lies between the "religious"–or should we say the "confessional"?–and the newly emerging "sectarianism," and more importantly, why wouldn't a revival of the old confessionalism be possible?

The problem lies, I think, in Makdisi's characterizations of the Lebanese ancien régime as one of "elite violence deployed to reaffirm a rigid, status-based social order defined as the rule of knowledge over ignorance. Local communities did not identify themselves tribally or nationally, and they subsumed their religious identities within a political and public space that accommodated differences of faith" (p. 29). Such an order, we are told, cut Lebanese society in two: at the top, stood the notable muqāṭaʿjī families, with the commoners, ahālī, at the bottom of that hierarchy, and rank rather than religion was what brought those communities together through a minimal cohesion of their élites: "Family alliances occurred across religious lines, creating alternate kinships that transcended differences of faith" (p. 35). But while Makdisi proceeds to

draw that picture of cohesion "from the top," one that brought a de facto stability to the "old régime," we remain uncertain as to how the peasants and commoners managed the abusive fiscal conditions instituted by their notables. Was it enough, one might rightly ask, that the social flirtations at the top--which did not even include religious intermarriages, but only formal "tolerance"--be enough to establish a status quo within the "limits of Ottoman influence"? Considering that a rich historiography of the social and economic conditions of Ottoman Mount Lebanon exists, inaugurated in the late 1960s with the work of Iliya Harik and Irena Smilianskaya, and then revisited only few years later by Dominique Chevallier, and more recently by Richard van Leeuwen (the long and protracted civil war has apparently discouraged many historians for more archival work), I find it erroneous that Makdisi fails to integrate their findings within the framework of his own research. That would have definitely complicated his limited picture to the point perhaps that the "narratives of violence" might have taken another dimension, or at least we might have perceived them under another light. Instead, contributions to the socio-economic history of Lebanon are listed in the lavish bibliography, and sporadically commented in the long and equally lavish footnote section (pp. 175–229). In one such footnote, Makdisi laments that "Materialist historians such as Irena Smilianskaya and sociologists like Samir Khalaf have argued that the violence in 1860 was in essence a corruption and a 'diversion' of class struggle into sectarian life" (p. 212). Such an attitude, one might add, was common throughout the recent civil war (1975–90) when pro-Marxist intellectuals, among others, also construed the war as a "hidden" class struggle with a religious (sectarian) ideology at the surface. But there is no need, however, and no point in simply reversing that formula: it is not really a question of materialist versus spiritual, or socio-economic versus sectarian for that matter. In the same way that, to use Makdisi's own concept, there is an historical discourse of sectarianism, one that evolves in space and time, and which brings politics together with geography, violence, and religion, there are "economic" discourses of property, contract, tort and crime, and kinship, which may overlap at times with other discursive practices. The point here is that if we manage to draw, based on the available historiography and documentation, a broader picture than the one imposed by Makdisi, under what light will the history of modern Lebanon appear?

To begin, there is no need to postulate religion-whether in the old régime or the new one–as some kind of social epiphenomenon that accompanies much deeper social and economic transformations. Nor is it helpful to conceive of sectarianism, as Makdisi does, as that problematic evil spirit that the Lebanese had to go through, and still go through, in order to survive the modern times. And finally, the conception of sectarianism as the discourse against the colonial Other (or should we say

one that mirrors that Other?)–whether Ottoman or European–is not helpful either. For one thing, religion is a total phenomenon, one that absorbs daily life, politics, the economy and law. Religion does not structure the lifeworld causally, but it provides a system of values that provide opportunities for a group of people to structure their daily experiences with meaningful norms. In a society like Mount Lebanon, where the economic does not dissociate itself as an autonomous level from the religious and political, landowning patterns and fiscal policies were thought from within the politico-religious hierarchy. Thus, the Maronites, because of their special religious status as dhimma, had legally protected themselves with what Ibrahim Aouad had termed a "droit privé," a mixture of customary practices and canon law, and a system where women did not inherit much property, and where arbitration was directly under the tutelage of the clergy. Moreover, when Maronites opted for the Beirut Sunni courts rather their own clergymen, it was precisely because women, under Hanafi practice, could be kept outside the system of waqf beneficiaries. The conversion of some factions of the Shihabs from Sunni Islam to the Maronite faith (even though Bashir II kept his faith play like a riddle to his own entourage), was, to be sure, a unique case in Ottoman Syria, but also an example that proves the rule; namely, when a notable family decided to expand its domination beyond its own districts, it had to had the "right" religious coloring. There were things that the Shihabs could do as Maronites––for example, special ties to the Church; or landholding and inheritance patterns not subject to shari'a law––that would have been costly to maintain as Sunnis. They also kept their relations for the most part endogamic, intermarrying among cousins––a practice that the Catholic Church in Rome considered as incestuous, but which they nevertheless maintained because they thought of it as economically advantageous (in the same way as the Druze did)–– and when they married from the outside, they gave preference to Circassian slave girls.

The point here is that if we consider religion as a total phenomenon, which historically manifests itself in different forms, then any disruption at any level, in particular if it triggers a crisis within the values of the community, could provoke a massive restructuring over a long period of time, and, to be sure, the Tanzimat period as a whole did represent such a challenge. But conceptualizing the transformations for that period and its aftermath as sectarianism-in-practice does not add any explicative value to the nature and scope of the societal changes that Mount Lebanon went through. For one thing, it unnecessarily fragments Lebanese history into a pre-modern and modern typology, without, however, even bothering as to the historical consequences of such a division. Makdisi describes such entities of the "old régime" as the family, village, and rank as "secular identities," while a public and political culture existed that

"functioned through an unspoken recognition of the temporality of loyalty," and with the nobility knowing and accepting its limits (p. 36). But what was it that made the old-régime family "secular," and how did it then get sectarianized--together with identity, landscape, and the politics of the nobility--with modernization? I find it hard to conceive an institution like the family outside the realm of the religious. For one thing, anything from marriage, divorce, inheritance and death, all fall within the domain of religious law, and all share a direct economic value. Moreover, those are typically the kinds of institutions whose change, under an historical period of intense restructuring, is extremely slow, almost imperceptible, and always to be accounted on a longue durée basis. We therefore need to follow their evolution over very long durations--longer, say, than economic cycles of prosperity, crisis, and decline--to determine when, how, and under what circumstances they were subject to change.

A more compelling analysis would not dissociate family, identity, and rank from the religious in the first place, and they definitely did not get sectarianized during the early or late reforms, nor did the politics of the nobility for that matter. Makdisi has a hard time describing those historical changes, thus reducing them all to a newly-born sectarian politics, simply because he did not invest enough effort to track them down to their complex institutional roots. He traps himself into simplified images of the "old régime," thus secularizing institutions that had nothing secular in them, then sectarizes what was already religious and always functioned as such. In short, instead of eliciting how the religious assumes different historical roles, he proceeds by sudden cuts, first from one period to another, and then within the institutional frameworks of each period.

Despite such shortcomings, I would agree with Makdisi that the period under scrutiny had something very different from the early part of the century, but what exactly? Speaking of the beginnings of confessional troubles in the 1840s, right after the demise of the Shihabs, Makdisi notes that "the local elites knew that in the post-Tanzimat world this power was to be had only along sectarian lines" (p. 76). And those same élites "sought to transform their religious communities into political communities and to harness invented traditions into their respective causes" (p. 77). Then, regarding the 1860 massacres and their aftermath, Makdisi notes that "At stake in Kisruwan was more than a physical struggle over control of land. There was a contest to redefine the term ahālī, a well-embedded trope in old-regime chronicles. A single, undifferentiated category of the ahālī was, after all, a construction of old-regime chronicles; it was a source of legitimacy for those rulers who guaranteed the tranquility of the common people and who maintained a

stable social order" (p. 104). Several things were at stake in this transitional period, outpaced perhaps by the notion of the destabilization of the existing social order. To begin, we need to work the first half of the nineteenth century thoroughly to check whether the "disruption" claimed by Makdisi was not already at work even prior to the Egyptian invasion. To be sure, the extensive silk cultivation and manufacturing in Mount Lebanon has linked a primitive economy to European capitalism, a process that must have affected landholding patterns, fiscal policies, and hierarchies within the nobility, either within the confessions or across confessional lines. Pro-Marxists, or those who look upon the "material conditions" as having their last word, might perceive such transformations as crucial in undermining the old feudal order and placing Lebanon under the yardstick of world-capitalism, meaning that classes will not only inevitably replace the old social categories, but more importantly, they will constitute the new paradigmatic existence of the various Lebanese communities. In short, modernization implies a new class-struggle paradigm within that of the newly formed nation-state. But, as Makdisi rightly argues, sectarianism has prevailed, beginning with the Tanzimat and up to the modern period.

The disruption of the old order–whether historicized on a longue durée basis, or perceived as an inevitable outcome of the reforms–implies that the old hierarchy of knowledge has been disrupted as it is no more exclusively produced and circulated by élite groups, whether secular or religious. The ahālī were no longer a single coherent group, whether in the eyes of their own nobility or in their perception of one another. The tools and forms for the transmission of knowledge have been enormously complicated by the ubiquity of what Benedict Anderson has labeled "print capitalism." Division of labor in society has in turn become more complex, opening the way to new professions and markets. But excessive professionalization, and the ubiquity of the printed materials that eventually led to a new form of knowledge circulation, only helped in the isolation and alienation of individuals from their social milieu, hence from their religious groups. In other words, both professionalization and the proliferation of knowledge from various sources, by dismantling the old hierarchies, contributed in the loosening of individuals from their communities; but, paradoxically, it was that kind of individualization that disrupted the old communities and that was to create a new revamped role to religion–call it sectarianism, if you wish. An essential aspect of modernization implies the demise of the old empire systems, which will effectively only take place by the end of the First World War, and their replacement by a combination of colonial nation-states. But the culture of the nation-state assumes individuals accepting the common political language of that state, a proposition that turns out to be problematic in multi-sectarian societies like Lebanon. In effect, with the dismantlement

of the old political hierarchies, which in themselves were centers for the production of knowledge, a new common political language sets itself gradually within the (mostly religious) community, but this time that language does not emanate from visibly established centers of powers. Instead, it is a common and confusing pool of contributions and power-distribution, and within such a milieu the religious gains new grounds simply by virtue of being the most common language within the community. In short, religious language achieves an unprecedented source of notoriety.

The Tanzimat are often referred to in modern Ottoman historiography as "centralizing" attempts from the imperial bureaucracy. Indeed, centralization, and its corollary decentralization, have been widely demarcated as concepts that denote either hegemonic policies, or in periods of weakness, the relaxation of such policies. Centralization, however, is a western concept that fits well with the coming of the nation-state, but is unsuitable to describe the imperial policies of an empire. In fact, centralization is too radical a concept as it presupposes the application of a set of norms over a national territory, while decentralization implies the bureaucratic delegation of such tasks to various authorities. But such concepts do not work well in the context of an empire simply because empires do not attempt to impose unified norms over their multi-ethnic territories. They rather proceed by implementing various plans of rationalization primarily with fiscal purposes in mind. Thus, the iltizam system had such a scope: it was considered more efficient and rational than its predecessor, the timar; and so were the Tanzimat, which unsuccessfully attempted to abolish the iltizam, and only managed to revamp the judiciary by drastically limiting the role of the shari'a courts. Makdisi associates the birth of sectarianism with the evolution of the Tanzimat on the basis that the ahālī found themselves into an alien discourse of modernization. There was thus, following this view, an internal process of Ottoman colonization that preceded the French one and prepared for it. I tend to see a slow implementation of the Tanzimat in Greater Syria, one that probably grew stronger in Mount Lebanon because of the uprisings and massacres. Moreover, there was a unique dynamism in the Lebanese socio-economic relations that led to bypass, since early Ottoman rule, the timar system, which in turn led to an early adoption of the iltizam; and by the nineteenth century, the evolution of silk manufacturing, and the disproportionate expansion of Beirut, all led to an autonomy of the Lebanese system that was not much related to the Ottoman reforms. Moreover, the various Lebanese communities did not grow along similar lines-a further indication of religion as a "cosmos" that absorbs the lifeworld-but diverged greatly, and more so under the impetus of a proto-capitalism in the region, which contributed in their internal

tensions. Thus, the Maronites and the other Christians, who embraced more forcefully than others the economic expansion, had their nobility lose for the most part control of politics, and gradually a "middle class" came into being, one already anticipated in the dissolution of the ahālī, while both Druze and Shi'is managed to maintain their old feudal families. Thus, while the Druze "won" a military victory in 1860, their political hierarchy was so well conserved that it represented all by itself a political defeat. That pattern could in fact be observed throughout the twentieth century, and to date, the Druze are still represented by the Junblats and Arslans.

To conclude, unless we look at religion as a total historical phenomenon that shapes the societal relations within a community in their totality, we then face the danger of misrepresenting transitional periods by attributing to them historical missions that they certainly would not have shared.

the myth of the state
Atlanta, Friday, June 6, 2003

That the Iraqis have looted and defaced all state institutions and symbols is understandable. But that the looting was widespread to other humanitarian institutions such as hospitals, schools, universities and museums, is less so. If, as Durkheim once famously proclaimed, that "The State [with a big S] is above all, supremely the organ of moral discipline," could it be then that the Iraqis—in all their ethnic, confessional and geographic divisions—are mimicking their own corrupt state? Did the moral corruption of the Iraqi state cause the immoral orgy in the wake of the regime's sudden collapse? Or is it, following the common Marxist dictum, that such institutions are as repressive as the police and army— due to their so-called bourgeois underpinnings—and hence are worth the wrath of the undisciplined mobs? In that case, the U.S. troops, criticized for their passivity, must be congratulated—together with the undisciplined Iraqi mobs—for their "revolutionary" zeal: they both deconstructed the symbols of a ruling order. But is it possible to undermine with such a zeal the foundations of a corrupt state without undermining society too? In other words, can society be "moral" when the state is not?

To begin, we need to ask how does the State—with a big S—become a "moral agent"? In the Durkheimian tradition the process is not simply a "mental" one, but one where both society and state act like a "thing" (res) in the eyes of their beholders. In other words, state and society which are not a thing per se, become fetishized and hence act like a thing. They become fetishized through their identification with totemic objects:

Founding Fathers, flags, borders, national emblems, monuments, highways, constitutions, courthouses, etc. In the long history of medieval civilization, which we've become accustomed to link to the Greeks and Romans, a "revolution" occurred by the tenth/eleventh century, and which irreversibly separated the classical world of antiquity from its medieval counterpart. Rulers became concerned with "connecting" to individuals, groups, regions, and mobs, and hence institutions whose modus operandi was originally purely coercive—such as the Monarch's divine right to punish—were gradually transformed in the process of Europe's democratization. The Foucauldian discipline and punish motto was supposed to normalize individuals by subjecting them to objectivized disciplinary norms. But by doing so, the discursive thought process—which the Marxists insist is purely ideological, and hence an "inverted consciousness," but upon which Foucault was adamant that it was "real"—becomes ingrained within the body. Herein lies the difference between the western states and all those that did not evolve along generalized disciplinary norms.

One can perhaps perceive such a difference in the mass graves that the Iraqis are discovering weekly. When state and society do not behave along strictly disciplinary norms, their relationship is brutalized by individualized acts of killings, whilst their personification into the persona of the leader. The opening of the mass graves has become all by itself an act of publicizing crimes and incorporating them within the public sphere. In effect, the state did not as much "hide" its crimes as much as privatize them by leaving them in the private memories of the victims' families. Now that the regime is gone, and the mass graves are discovered one after another, the crimes of the ancien régime are finally mourned and receive their publicity through the public sphere. In other words, the Saddamist state, unable to afford the luxury of Foucauldian disciplinary norms, acted by denying the benefits of a Habermasian public sphere while leaving the memories of terror vivid into the victims' families bodies. It therefore ironic that the war was launched with the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in mind, while only mass graves have been discovered thus far. But while the WMD preoccupied the international community, the Iraqis for their part internalized the horrors of mass killings. Thousands of bodies have been exhumed, haphazardly identified through the errands of memory, and then properly buried. When was the last time we saw him/her? What was he/she wearing? As memories resurface, they move from the private to the public, and the public sphere becomes populated with the stories of the dead.

The mystery here is indeed the thingness of society—and that of the state. By postulating that society acts like a thing—la société comme chose en soi—Durkheim realized that society does not merely persevere

through its institutional networks, which tend to remain invisible, but through the visibility of its emblems—totems, rituals, ceremonies, signs, all of which act as signifiers that freely float above the bodies of the signified. Now that the Iraqi state and its institutions are in shambles, the coalitions forces thought that the regime is finally over. They did not realize, however, that such states survive less through their institutions and more through their emblems. Even the apparatus of terror did not survive from terror per se, but from the emblematic force of terror: the trauma of being all the time under (a fictional) surveillance, even by neighbors, friends, and family members; of living terror individually and privately; and by being denied even that fundamental ability to alleviate the trauma through (public) narration and mourning.

To be sure, the coalition forces are now trapped with the memory of Saddam. Like the fetish commodity, which for Marx constitutes the essence of capitalism, Saddam's body turns into a quintessential fetish object—an emblem of state—even more valuable and effective than the body per se of the ex-head of state. Having finally realized that a vanished body creates even more authority and more havoc than an actively visible one, the U.S. forces in Baghdad have just sealed this past week the area in the Mansur district where the remains of Saddam and his two sons had been allegedly buried under the rubbles for the past six weeks. But even an optimistic view would imply at best a successful DNA test, one that would at least confirm Saddam's death (if not that of his two sons). My guess is that, in the absence of the real body as evidence of death, such a "test" would render Saddam's body even more of an emblem. On the long run, it is not a "discovery"—DNA or otherwise—that would "seal" the issue once and for all, but the healing of the trauma through a discursively constituted public sphere.

Like the twelfth Shiʻi imam, Saddam is now in a state of occultation (ghayba). It is therefore ironic that the Shiʻis have publicly reinitiated their rituals of the martyrdom of Husayn (the third imam) once Saddam has vanished himself. In effect, the Shiʻi rituals represent the most visible example in Islam of political authority being fetishized, hence transformed into a thing through the emblems that carry it.

patrimonial economies
van Leeuwen, Richard. Waqfs and Urban Structures: The Case of Ottoman Damascus. Leiden: Brill, 1999. ISBN 90-04-11299-5.

In his Waqfs and Urban Structures, Richard van Leeuwen gives a clear and coherent thesis regarding the evolution of Damascene waqfs throughout the Ottoman period. Since the takeover in 1516 of Greater Syria by the Ottomans, "waqfs were an integral part of imperial policy and were used

as a mechanism to foster the cohesion between the centre of authority and the conquered provinces" (p. 148). A number of phenomena point in that direction, all of which seem to confirm the thesis of the strengthening of ties between Damascus and Istanbul. Thus, a number of sultans, beginning with Selim, who entered Damascus in 1516, erected their own waqfs within the city; ties were strengthened with local families either through iqṭāʿ grants or prestigious appointments to religious positions; while positions of judges, muftis, and administrators to major public waqfs, were all intermittently infused with elements from outside the city (or at least with elements known for their loyalty to the "center," meaning not exclusively from within the hierarchy of both a'yan and 'ulama', so that the internal be mixed with loyal elements form other provinces). And, above all, the local governors were for the most part–with the notable exception of the 'Azms–Turkish, or at least from non–Arab provinces. Van Leeuwen argues–and that's his main thesis–that such phenomena constituted a clear indication of "centralizing tendencies" (p. 114) whose aim was for the imperial state to interfere in and control some of the major local institutions, among them, of course, the waqfs. Even though van Leeuwen makes it plain clear that such practices of "interference" did not imply that "waqfs were appropriated by the central government" (p. 87), there was nevertheless a deliberate urban policy of spatial control (the way waqfs were distributed) either through resource management (how rents and leases were granted), or appointments to major religious and judicial positions; or through a re–framing of the law so as to buttress the imperial grip over the city. Van Leeuwen's main thesis is indeed far broader than urban waqfs: it actually uses the example of waqfs to show that, contrary to many theses of "decentralization" where the "center" is portrayed as losing its grip over the provinces (the so–called "peripheries"), the state did its best not to relinquish control over major urban institutional frameworks. In short, the "centralizing efforts" (p. 115) of the imperial state is the motto of this study.

Since the process of centralization was vast and complex enough so as not to be limited to a single domain, van Leeuwen's arguments could prove convincing, or less so, depending on the area under scrutiny (appointments to offices, the law, shari'a courts, urban infrastructure, etc.). But the main drawback of the book, however, remains its main thesis––centralization. In fact, van Leeuwen borrows an already confusing theme from the Ottoman historiography of the last few decades without subjecting it to much scrutiny. The corollary to centralization, namely decentralization, is what usually fuels the debate, considering its political undertone. In fact, since the provinces of the Empire had all become since the First World War, if not earlier, autonomous nation–states, attempts to prove their quasi–"autonomy" prior to colonial or post–colonial rule have

thus become quite popular in particular when stemming from contemporary concerns over the nation-state: if Ottoman control proves minimal, then those "societies" achieved their independence not through colonial rule, but they did it on their own since "it was all there" in the first place. In his centralization thesis, van Leeuwen does not seem to have any political motives, and his enterprise aims no more than towards historical objectivity and the search for reliable criteria. The problem, however, does not reside in his sources (even though not always systematically scrutinized), but in the concept of centralization itself. To begin, such a concept emerged first in the western literature to describe a process of central control over regional institutions by creating a unified set of norms. The purpose was to show that historically the western nation-states were able to survive only by controlling and homogenizing all kinds of societal institutions–a process that Max Weber described as a systematic and formal rationalization of the life-world (lebenswelt). Thus, and to pick up on the example of the birth of the English common law, a concerted effort was deployed throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the sole aim of establishing one national feudal law–not Roman or canon law–that would pose itself over all the local and regional customs; and there was one corps of itinerant royal justices–the "eyres"–to administer and develop it; moreover, procedure would be by writ, which meant that a complaint had to fit within a well defined formula. To be sure, and in hindsight, that was a model of centralization and rationalization of the legal and political resources at its best, one that would ensure the dominance of England until the early twentieth century.

When we come to the strategies of centralization that van Leeuwen describes in his book, they indeed turn out to be of a totally different nature. For one thing, appointments of "loyal" persons to fill the positions of judges, muftis, administrators, preachers and teachers, only manifest attempts to ensure "loyalty," and do not point in any way to structural modifications of such positions, however crucial and visible they might have been. Moreover, even though shari'a law, in its Hanafi version, might have been permeated by opinions that point to the state's interference, it remains to be seen how all this had affected judicial decision making in the courts or other institutions. Hanafi practice shared a heavy tradition of taqlīd, and even if we scrutinize the shurūḥ and fatāwā texts, it is hard to discern any radical change in doctrine, at least one that would point to the fingers of the state and its desire to centralize. In fact, unless indication to the contrary, there was no desire to homogenize (or centralize) Hanafi practice, and appointing a loyal judge or mufti, or re-framing fatwas so as to make them congruent with some of Ebu's-su'ud's opinions (p. 115), were definitely not exercises in state control. In fact, Ebu's-su'ud's fatwas look in hindsight much more radical in their

perspective than anything Greater Syria had ever produced (an indication at how much the bureaucratization of the 'ulama' corps was successful at the imperial center), and a careful examination of the fiqh literature only shows that the fuqaha' manifested no concern for integrating the Istanbul mufti's opinions within their own work. As the English example shows, state control and homogenization need much more drastic efforts to be fully operative and meaningful than the sporadic labors described by van Leeuwen. Such a concerted will would only begin late in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the Ottomans had to learn the merits of rationalization the hard way.

It would be more appropriate to describe the Ottoman measures as partial attempts towards rationalization with the primary aim of controlling the fiscal revenues of the conquered territories. Obviously, in the meantime, such measures did have symbolic returns, as all economic performances do, but their main purpose–besides granting the loyalty of élites and their subjects–was to impose a new system of rent control. In effect, with the measures deployed by the state to enforce the propagation of some public waqfs, the waqf system became the main competitor to the miri (both the early timar, and the iltizam) in managing taxes and rents, assuming, of course, that a distinction between the two fiscal categories proves relevant. If we posit the "rent" as the amount (in kind and/or cash) that the tenant–farmer or peasant paid to the landlord, then the miri system, whether in its early militaristic form, or in its later more competitive formula, had definitely contributed in an overall decline of the value of rents. In fact, considering the large sums that timar–holders and multazims had to pay for the state, in addition to the surplus they extracted from the peasantry, the whole miri system became an abusive corvée labor where rents as such were minimal, and taxation a meaningless category. As a result, waqf rents declined for the simple reason that they became uncompetitive vis–à–vis the miri, and up to the nineteenth century, jurists have been complaining of the harshness of the miri and its lowering of the rents. Thus, Ibn 'Abidin, whose work constituted a closure to Hanafi practice, had to accept willy–nilly that the "tax" on the waqf's rent be paid by the tenant rather than the administrator, simply because rents had rested on such low levels that no taxes could be afforded on them anymore–a perfect example of custom imposing itself on the norms of the fiqh.

Considering then that the primary aim of the state was to ensure the implementation of its miri system, which at its core was a hegemonic rent control formula, what was behind its "interference" in the waqf system? Even though jurists tend to date the origins of waqfs since the time of the Prophet, the system that the Ottomans had inherited from the Mamluks probably goes back to what Marshall Hodgson had labeled as the "Shi'i

century" (945–1118), when in the Seljuk period the custom of putting landholdings into waqfs so as not to subject them to government seizure, became common. In other words, it was under the rule of the small militarized bureaucracies, and the a'yan–amirs system, that waqfs had flourished. In fact, waqfs, together with shari'a law and sufi orders had become the sole domain of the a'yan and 'ulama' as a protective shell against the excessive militarization of public life and landholdings. But it was under the Mongols, and later the Mamluks, that courtly control of waqf endowments became the norm. Besides attempting closer links with the 'ulama', what was the economic significance of such an approach? With the peasantry being trapped in corvée labor, and the value of rent for both milk and waqfs in disarray, courtly control over a domain that kept the a'yan–'ulama' factions quasi–autonomous would only create a balance between state iqṭāʿ and the waqfs, whether public or private. And the Ottomans were no different: "by the end of the 16th century the state had taken almost total control of the field of waqf" (p. 117). It was indeed that imbalance, due to the excessive assignments in landholdings, between various types of rents, that gave the imperial state a golden opportunity to intervene. That investment in public waqfs, however, seems to have relinquished throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, while the traditional grip that the 'ulama' maintained over the shari'a courts persevered, and the dismal rents only contributed towards more procedural fictions in the courts (marsad, long leases, dismemberment techniques, etc.). It is therefore a gross error to conceptualize the language of the courts, as van Leeuwen does, as a discourse of the state (p. 153). But they are not anti–state either: a centralization of the court system would have implied far more sophisticated and costlier methods of domination than those deployed by the Ottomans.

Waqf systems have been generally described as tools to protect private property in the face of large state landholdings, even though, as the late Mamluk scholar Burhan Tarabulsi noted (who was apparently assassinated in the first year of Ottoman rule in Syria), that most lands converted to waqfs were originally "possessed" by their "owners," and if strict ownership was to be followed as a rule, the majority of waqfs would cease to exist. Clearly, then, if individuals were converting "possessed" rather than "owned" properties to waqfs, it could be either that those possessed properties felt much safer as waqfs (to transfer them to future generations related to the founder), or it could have been a "rent control" mechanism: properties that were part of a compendium would survive better the hegemony of the rent system controlled by the state.

To conclude, a city like Damascus was kept with its major institutions running without much control from the imperial center. But the socio-economic ties with the rest of the empire, and in particular the rent

control mechanism (both in its militaristic and non-militaristic patterns), did not help in creating a homogeneous bourgeois culture within the city. Thus, even though waqfs contributed in creating an urban culture, they nevertheless represented more a sign of resistance to structural socio-economic problems than a healthy indication of an urban cultural renewal.

Jacques Derrida (1930—2004)
Aleppo, 13 October 2004

"Je suis en guerre contre moi-même" (Derrida)

If we were to define something as indefinable as "deconstructionism," it would have to be something like this: each text assumes a "coherence"—the cement that brings it together into a cohesive whole—which is taken-for-granted, and which needs to be questioned, or deconstructed. The assumption towards coherence does not have to be "in" the text itself, or come from the "author"—actually, such assertions are meaningless for a pure deconstructionist—but is generally constructed by the "reader." In other words, the assumption towards coherence is projected by a reader who is anxious to find the meaning of a text. The reader therefore comes to a text with his/her own projections and fore-meanings, assuming a degree of cohesiveness that needs to be "found" through a dedicated hermeneutical understanding. Faced with such a task, the reader might question his/her competence towards an hermeneutical historical understanding of a text, and might judge himself/herself incompetent towards such a laborious task. That's why various civilizations have historically delegated the function of interpreting texts—and primarily religious texts—to sacerdotal classes: the Church in Christianity, the ulama in Islam, or to a well trained bureaucracy that would master the key Confucian texts. Thus, even in our secular and modern world, where belief in positivist sciences and technologies is the key to knowledge and mundane success, the aura of genuine—that is, correct—interpretation is left to the happy few who can master the elaborate process of hermeneutics. We tend to believe in historical hermeneutics, namely that the text needs to be contextualized relative to its period, on the one, and that the practice of interpretation would vary from one period to another, and from one society to another, for the same text, on the other.

The Enlightenment (Aufklärung), with its sole focus on reason, and the faculty of judgment that each individual is endowed with, thought that it would rid us of all prejudices. Ever since hermeneutics was confronted with the task of interpreting religious texts—the quintessential task of all hermeneutics—it took for granted the sacredness of such texts, their elaborate metaphorical meanings, multi-layers, different "voices" and

points and views (for instance, variations among the four gospels, each one reflecting on its own—différance!—a world-view of the message of Jesus). The Enlightenment thus provided us with that awkward "modern" feeling that, as independent and free individuals endowed with the faculties of reasoning and judgment, texts—all texts, even religious texts—are "accessible" to us. In other words, texts are meant to be read—and interiorized—individually, from person to person, from author to reader, and among independent readers. There is no supreme judge in the process, no one that is supposed to impose anything arbitrarily upon us from above. Hans-Georg Gadamer (d. 2001) beautifully summarized the ethos of the Enlightenment as follows: "Have the courage to make use of your own understanding." The motto of the Enlightenment is therefore one of understanding a text rationally and without prejudice. Rationality presupposes "the progressive retreat of magic in the world." Left without magic and having denied the traditional authority to any sacerdotal class, the modern world has left its text at the mercy of competing readers: let us see if you can understand Plato and Heidegger on your own! But as Gadamer has pointed out, the main prejudice of the Enlightenment is that it thinks of itself as moving in a world without prejudices: "the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power." In other words, as it is impossible to "read what is there," a radicalization of the Kantian message of the Enlightenment implies a reading of texts while "being aware"—deconstructing, in Derrida's language—of the modus operandi of the historical authority that brought it into existence, and which is embedded in the meaning of a text. Ideally then, the work of deconstructionism is one that would enable us to detect that "authority" and "over-hastiness" in reading texts. With the ever increasing bureaucracy of academics who claim to be endowed with such an authority, the modern reader is at the mercy of new secular sacerdotal class of interpreters, which in the final analysis contributes more in freezing our thoughts rather than liberating them. Hannah Arendt expressed that "freezing of language" as follows:

It is in [the nature of thought] to undo, unfreeze as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought—words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines), whose "weakness" and inflexibility Plato denounces so splendidly. . . . The consequence of this peculiarity is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics.

In sum, deconstructionism falls into a long tradition of the Enlightenment of reading texts, and into a radicalizing of the experience of the

Enlightenment in the search for prejudices and authorities. Considering that "fore-conception of completeness" (Gadamer), Derrida would look for margins: all kinds of statements that would not fall within the "complete whole," which readers have to assume beforehand for the text to be intelligible. Reading through those marges de la philosophie, Derrida gave an impressive opus—as much as 80 books, according to many of the Internet obituaries. Once freed from the constraints of the "complete whole," and enjoying his task as a Socratic mid-wife, the philosopher can now freely re-discover all texts with a fresh start—without prejudices. And as if to highlight that "lack of prejudice," a Derridean text would typically avoid offering its reader a center-point from which it would be easily trapped.

Derrida seems to have taken Heidegger's idiom, that "language is the house of Being," so much for granted to the point that the flux of statements, their grammar and style, or to use a cinematic metaphor, their montage, and the process of cut and paste (Derrida was fascinated by computers, which he thought rendered traditional typing and handwriting obsolete), become more crucial than the logic of ideas, or the Foucauldian rarity of statements for that matter. Derrida thus transformed philosophy into a stylistic expression, bringing it much closer to literature at large than it used to be. That's probably why his world fame was less an outcome of his popularity in France, but rather from the departments of literary criticism and cultural studies in the United States. But that's not necessarily a good sign, considering how little of the literary criticism of the 1960s and 1970s and later has survived to the present. I myself much prefer Barthes' short and incisive essays on the "logic and construction of texts," which assumed a great deal of linguistic knowledge, over the tons of literary verbiage that flooded U.S. academic circles. Certainly "reality" cannot be locked into texts—and what is "left out" from a text is definitely what matters most. To perversely paraphrase a famous Derridean idiom, tout est hors-texte.