

Properly Understanding Other Peoples

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What is the proper way to study another culture, any other culture, and what is not? The subject of this symposium has been stated quite academically which is to say abstractly.

In recent years, abstraction has been the hallmark of how this subject has been discussed—under a variety of rubrics such as multiculturalism, feminist theory, queer theory, post-colonial and cultural studies, and the like. Academics have lavished much energy and affection on ever changing and ever more impenetrable jargon. But this has been somewhat misleading. Beneath and beyond these abstractions, many academics who purport to study culture have been engaged in politics, principally domestic politics, of both the academic and non-academic variety, and some of this cultural study has had concrete consequences.

There are many things wrong with these approaches to the study of culture. They have been bad for our politics and still worse for our understanding of culture in general and individual cultures in particular. In the course of these remarks, I will necessarily have to say something about the errors of their ways. But I don't want to begin with an enumeration of these errors, although our topic invites me to do so. Indeed I would prefer to ignore them altogether, if circumstances permitted, which they don't. For they distract us from what is most important—namely that we find the right way to study culture—which has also become extremely urgent.

For today, here and now, our question arises within a most serious context—peace and war.

Our study of culture, at least some cultures, is quite obviously very far from being an abstract or simply academic matter. On the one hand we seek peace with one culture in particular, Islamic culture, or perhaps better Islamic cultures, while on the other hand we know that we may find ourselves at war with it, if we are not so already.

In this context, the discussion of the study of culture, the rights and wrongs of it, has become a most serious business, even a deadly one, and not what it has so often been in the recent past, the superficial and even juvenile posturing of academics. In this context it is not appointments, tenure, or conferences in ritzy hotels in fashionable places that are at stake, but rather the real fate of millions of people in this country and throughout the world, including or especially the Muslim world.

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If academics have some self-respect, it is very much time, it is very much past time, to put away childish things and take their responsibilities seriously. This might include a reconsideration of their past efforts and the recognition and admission of such errors as they have committed—the misunderstandings or simple obfuscations into which they have led us.

I cherish no particular expectations in this regard. But of one thing I am reasonably certain. Unless their performance improves, they will find themselves with little audience for their researches other than their own similarly obtuse colleagues. The public has too great a need for instruction and guidance not to seek other experts if academic ones fail them.

For my own part, I know that I must approach our subject in a serious fashion precisely because it is the subject of Islam that has formed a large part of my own study of other cultures. It is largely on that experience that I will draw in addressing our important subject—what is the right way to study other cultures.

Despite what I have said about the current state of academic approaches, one might begin if not end by resurrecting an old academic formula drawn from the usage of intellectual history. What I have in mind is the notion that one should strive at a sympathetic understanding of the object of one's study.

This term is so out of date that I must explain what it originally meant, as well as its strengths and limitations as applied to our concerns. Sympathetic understanding did not necessarily mean that one would have sympathy with another culture, although that might in fact be the result, but that at least one would try to understand it first exactly as it understood itself. As I said, this notion had its greatest currency in intellectual history, but properly adapted it has other applications as well. It aimed to encourage the scholar to put aside as much as possible his own notions of the world and to enter as much as possible the mind and heart of the person and people he was studying. It meant to try to grasp their premises, follow their line of thought, and see the world as they saw it.

As I said before, the notion was that one might, or rather must, begin this way but not necessarily end this way. For upon very close and diligent study one might find that an individual thinker or leader, let alone a group of people, might embrace contradictory views. Indeed as applied to a whole culture or people it was almost inevitable that there would be such contradictions and that to understand this culture was, in the first instance, to grasp them and the conflict between them. Since this left one with a paradox on one's hands, sometimes several, the impulse to seek an understanding of human culture as such regarded this stage as preparatory for a deeper understanding of what was going on. Moreover one might conclude on the basis of a larger sphere of experience, including one's own, that some of the opinions or beliefs one had come to grasp were demonstrably false and hence

that the culture one was studying required an interpretation other than the one it supplied.

But whether or not one ever advanced successfully to that next stage, the level of understanding achieved at the first stage was still a great net plus. Despite or rather because of the paradoxical results, one had a good grasp of the basic framework of cultural life as well as its inner dynamic. As I said earlier, sympathetic understanding might or might not lead to sympathy in our sense of the word. A full and sympathetic understanding of, say, Hitler and Nazi culture, to take an obvious case, or perhaps for present purposes Khomeini and the Islamic Republic, might lead to repulsion. But to repeat, whatever the outcome, whether one's study led one to find a beauty or a beast or some mix of the two, such sentiments as one indulged would be based on a clear and accurate understanding. Moreover, one had the satisfaction of knowing that one had tried to be fair and just.

Of course, here one encounters objections, many of which underlie or inform the contemporary and conventional study of culture under the rubrics I mentioned earlier. One is told that it is always impossible to be fair and just. One always approaches study with one's own interests which necessarily prevent one from truly understanding the culture of the other and necessarily distort what little one does grasp. This is perhaps especially true in the study of religious culture or culture insofar as it is constituted or informed by belief in certain religious views. For faith, being a most inward thing, is least accessible to an outsider. Moreover it is most likely to conflict with the deepest convictions of the outsider, whether he is religious himself or agnostic. As it is further argued that one's ultimate interest is always power, power over the other, cultural study is necessarily unjust for it seeks to oppress. It aids and abets the most obvious forms of oppression like political and military, but in a way academic study of culture is even more deeply oppressive, seeking to tyrannize over the very inner life of others. From this perspective, it is hard to understand why one would engage in the study of another culture *except* to advance one's interests, and hard to understand, by the way, what is wrong with that, since this seems to be written in our hearts by the nature of things such that it is impossible for anyone to behave otherwise.

But such a conclusion—the abandonment of justice simply—is too hard for us to bear. Hence it has led to the view that if, in the end, one is to study other cultures one must rectify this injustice by empowering the powerless. This produces a kind of sympathetic understanding different than the one I described above. It is always in sympathy with the people it studies and has as its chief object to convey their beliefs and opinions as always and necessarily a true understanding of themselves and the world as well as the oppression under which they labor. Its chief object is then to convey the grievances of another culture, as if culture was essentially and sometimes only constituted by grievance. All other sentiments, longings, and aspirations enjoy a very much di-

minished status in this kind of study of culture if they are not ignored altogether. It is subject only to the restraint that one must conceal any beliefs or sentiments that might lose them sympathy with crude and benighted non-academics. For in that event, this kind of sympathy would do more harm than good.

There is of course something to the difficulties that the current study of culture champions. We all know that human beings are subject to the frailties to which they refer. But the real question is whether those weaknesses are simply decisive in the most important case—serious and disciplined study of other cultures—and whether the alternative that they articulate does justice to other cultures and their proper understanding.

Here I must say that my own experience belies that. Without doubt it has taken me considerable effort and time. Unfortunately, I am a slow learner. Yes, Islamic discourse, especially Qur'anic discourse, was once alien to me. But that did not prevent me from trying and, by my lights, succeeding in understanding how the Qur'an viewed the world and especially its sister religions, Judaism and Christianity. Nor did it prevent me from understanding and appreciating the argument it presents on behalf of its views, for it indeed presents an argument and in so doing means not only to command but persuade. I mention this because, unlike our current students of culture, Islam and the Qur'an do not think they are unintelligible to the other or the outsider. As a result, it escapes me how one could do justice to Islam by operating on the conventional premises of contemporary academic study. At least in this regard, the conventional wisdom would not only have been of no help, but positively deleterious to my attempts to understand Islam.

Of course, the world can live without my personal enlightenment though, according to Islam, God cannot. But more serious is the damage that our current approach to culture does to the contemporary self-understanding of Muslims themselves by indulging their weaknesses as well as our own.

It is obvious that one of the most important features of contemporary Muslim society is a generalized sense of humiliation and oppression. This is epitomized by the view, still held by a majority of Muslims, that the attacks of 9/11 were not and could not have been the work of Osama bin Laden but were instead perpetrated by the Mossad or the CIA or both. It was impossible, according to the Muslim view, because on the one hand the attacks required careful planning and above all exact timing and on the other hand Muslims are never on time and usually disorganized. Hence the attacks must have been the work of the West itself. But why would the West attack itself? To provide a pretext for attacks on the Muslim world like the campaign in Afghanistan.

There is obviously something pitiable in this fantasy and the feelings that have led to its embrace, although pity is something which may fail the families of the victims of 9/11.

It is nonetheless an important cultural datum. How should we understand it? Conventional academic study will point to 150 years of colonial or semi-

colonial rule and regard this as a proof that its strictures regarding oppression and the other are decisive. But this is almost manifestly false. Even if the current lowly state of the Muslim world is the beginning of the inquiry, it cannot be the end. For it is manifest from what Muslims themselves say that their sense of humiliation derives not only from the current ignominy of their condition but from the recollection of a more glorious time when it was they rather than the Western or developed world who were powerful, when it was they, to put it in the terms of current cultural study, who were the oppressors rather than the oppressed. If we follow the crude logic of contemporary cultural study, and it is truly crude, we might say that Muslim oppression of their “other” in the West led the West to seek a means of overcoming its weakness, which in succeeding led to the oppression of the Muslim world. Hence Muslim oppression has led to Muslim humiliation. Q.E.D. We reach a conclusion, but of what use is it either for understanding the Muslim world or assisting it?

Would it not make more sense, in the interests of understanding Muslim culture, to ask what accounts for the decline of the Muslim world, from its last great highpoint, perhaps its greatest highpoint, the Ottoman Empire, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? Or if one is to limit oneself to the Middle East, would it not make sense to ask why the Arab world, liberated from colonial rule at the end of WWII, has failed so miserably politically, economically, and militarily ever since? Above all would it not make sense to ask what aspects of Muslim or Arab culture, independent of the depredations of outsiders, have been operative in these sad consequences?

Both questions have been thoughtfully pursued, the first by Bernard Lewis, the second by Fuad Ajami. Both have pursued their efforts with great learning, respect, affection, and even love. For those efforts, they have been rewarded by their colleagues with misrepresentation and frequently vilification. They have however achieved a real understanding, and I suppose that is a great reward.

Unfortunately for the rest of us, the community of scholars did little to nothing to prepare us for 9/11. Equally important it has done little to help the Muslim world achieve any progress—any progress in self-understanding, any progress in assessing its virtues and its vices and any progress in addressing the problems it confronts.

As I indicated at the beginning, I think that the failures of our present orientation should lead us to resurrect an older academic approach. This will, alas, require hard work, harder work than we have come to be used to, having taken so much refuge and comfort in the repetition of simple-minded dogmas. Indeed we will have to work even harder to make up for the fact that we have wasted so much time during the past generation. But there is really no alternative if we truly want to understand other cultures and be of some use to our fellow citizens and, above all, to the “other.”