This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30067794

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2012, Ashgate
Chapter 1  
Discourses of Democracy

In sum, the theory of oriental despotism was crucial not just to ‘explain’ Asian backwardness but, no less importantly, to cement the identity of Europe – both past and present – as the birthplace of advanced, democratic civilization. 
(Hobson 2004: 228)

The Discourse of Western Democracy

The etymology of the English word ‘democracy’ can be traced back to the sixteenth century when it was adapted from the French word *democratie*. Further back, the Late Latin term *demokratia* had its origins in a Greek word that is itself a composite of two other words, *demos* and *kratos*. The latter translates to mean ‘power’ or ‘rule’ and appears today in English words such as aristocracy (rule by the *aristoi*, the best or elite), autocracy (rule by the *autos*, the self), monarchy (rule by the *monos*, alone or one), and oligarchy (rule by the *oligoi*, the few or little) to name only some. The word *demos*, on the other hand, was a protean word that had several different, but related, meanings such as ‘citizen body,’ or ‘lower classes’ that can be generally translated to mean ‘the people’. Together, then, *demokratia* literally means ‘people power / rule’, or perhaps more eloquently, ‘rule by the people’.

The word *demokratia* is believed to have first appeared in the writing of the ‘Father of History’, Herodotus, around 460 BCE. In his seminal text, *The Histories*, Herodotus presents the origins, context and events of the Greco-Persian Wars of 490 BCE and 480–479 BCE with a remarkable penchant for detail and a vast knowledge of cultures and lands beyond those of his native Greece. Throughout his work, Herodotus repeatedly praises the freedom and democracy of Greece. For example, when Athens is liberated from the despotic rule of Pisistratidae (who owed his allegiance to Persia instead of Greece), Herodotus seizes the opportunity to praise the strength of Athenian democracy. Having thrown off the shackles of despotism,
Thus did the Athenians increase in strength. And it is plain enough, not from this instance only, but from many everywhere, that freedom [elsewhere translated as democracy (see: Forsdyke, 2001: 333)] is an excellent thing; since even the Athenians who, while they continued under the rule of tyrants, were not a whit more valiant than any of their neighbours, no sooner shook off the yoke than they became decidedly the first of all. These things show that while undergoing oppression, they let themselves be beaten, since then they worked for a master; but so soon as they got their freedom, each man was eager to do the best he could for himself. So fared it now with the Athenians.

(Herodotus 1996 [460 BCE]: V.78)

Athenian democracy emerged when the aristocracy issued Kleisthenes a mandate in 508/7 BCE to formulate a political system that would eschew the centralization of power. Kleisthenes, an adept and popular politician who had long advocated a system of ‘rule by the people’, devised a sophisticated method of participatory democracy centred on the notion of the *polis*, meaning the ‘city and its citizens’ (Aristotle 1984 [332 BCE]: 20–2). To govern the *polis*, the Athenians convened in an assembly, an outdoor meeting which presided over issues as vast as ‘war and peace, treaties, finance, legislation, public works, in short, on the whole gamut of governmental activity’ (Finley 1973: 18–9). All adult male citizens were encouraged to attend these assemblies, which convened about 40 times a year, and were permitted to *isegoria* – the freedom to voice their concerns in front of their fellow citizens. Furthermore, the assembly elected a few key officials and experts to positions of authority, while every citizen had more than a good chance of being chosen by lot for a short-term position in public office. While the developments in Athens remain among the most significant democratic moments of the ancient world, it must be remembered that the sheer size of the Grecian assembly would have prevented a robust exchange of views and that many citizens (women, foreigners, slaves etc.) were excluded from the proceedings. It should also be remembered that *demokratia* was very unpopular among many prominent Greeks. Plato believed that democracy was very far from an ideal form of government as it privileged the will of the uneducated lower classes; instead, he...
argued in favour of a republic presided over by a wise philosopher-king (Plato 1975 [380 BCE]). Despite such criticism, the Athenian experiment lasted around two centuries before it was overthrown by the superior military might of the Macedonians, who replaced it with their own oligarchic system in 322 BCE.

Concurrent to the rise and fall of demokratia in Athens, was the development of the Roman Republic. Interestingly, the etymology of republic comes from the Latin words res (meaning ‘thing’ or ‘affair’) and publicus (or ‘people’) which together make ‘the affairs of the people’, not altogether dissimilar to the Greek notion of ‘rule by the people’. While in the earliest years of the Republic, the workings of the Senate (originally composed of the heads of clans) and the Comitia Curiata (the general assembly of all arms-bearing men) were complex and relatively egalitarian, the Republic quickly descended into the kind of oligarchic power structures that the Athenians had been so determined to avoid. Nonetheless, scholars such as Polybius and Cicero went to great lengths to defend the Republic, arguing that it came closer to the ideal vision espoused by many earlier Greek philosophers because it combined elements of democracy with a virtuous ruling elite (Cicero 1998 [54 BCE], Polybius 1889 [150 BCE]).

Despite such optimism, there can be no denying that Rome was at best a robust oligarchy in which the interests of a small number of wealthy, land-owning nobles almost always trumped the will of the plebs (or ‘common people’). Although the plebs did eventually gain access to the inner workings of the Republic after having fought vehemently for the privilege, the Republic remained the domain of the elite and, as the empire spread out across the known world, an increasing number of citizens were disenfranchised. Eventually, the authority of Rome was undermined by a series of wars, corruption scandals, and a decline in the civic spirit that had underpinned the birth of the Republic.

Thus, the concept of ‘the affairs of the people’ administered by popular governance is commonly understood to have vanished from Europe for around a thousand years (Bryce 1921, Dahl 1998, Dunn 1992). Although the Vikings and the Venetians held assemblies as far back as
the fifth century, it is generally thought that it wasn’t until the northern city-states of Italy began to develop systems of popular rule around 1100 that democracy began to re-emerge on the continent. This period saw a thriving socio-economic and cultural atmosphere that paralleled that of ancient Greece and is now acknowledged as having given rise to the Renaissance. Although the authority over the early political machinations of these city-states was restricted to the aristocracy, who were granted supreme judicial authority, the system eventually evolved to include the popolo (the people of the middle classes). By the middle of the thirteenth century there were written constitutions which guaranteed each individual state their own ‘elective and self-governing arrangements’ (Skinner 1992: 57). Shortly after this however, these city-states descended into economic hardship and forms of oligarchy and autocracy replaced these increasingly unstable and short-lived democracies.

Meanwhile, in Medieval England, King John was forced to raise taxes due to an escalating number of military defeats. This greatly enraged the powerful English barons and Catholic bishops who drew up a list of restrictions they wanted to enforce on the actions of the king and rights they wanted to secure. By 1215 the king was forced to sign the Magna Carta (Latin for ‘Great Paper’) which prescribed that the authority of the king was to be shared with a Great Council constituted mostly by noblemen and ecclesiastics. Eventually, this Great Council evolved into the more familiar Parliament (from the French parler, ‘to speak’) during the reign of Edward I. Under the leadership of his grandson, Edward III, the parliament was split into two chambers in the middle of the fourteenth century: the Upper Chamber, which went on to become the House of Lords and represent the interests of the elite, and the Lower Chamber which became the House of Commons and was constituted by representatives of the nation’s counties and boroughs. Although the introduction of the House of Commons has clearly influenced the development of representative democracy, it must be remembered that it consisted of borough representatives who had been elected by the mere ten per cent of the adult male population who were eligible to vote. Nonetheless, the rising power of the two chambers
came to the fore during the seventeenth century when the Parliament became increasingly
critical of the monarchy. This paved the way for the English Civil War (1642–51) which, in
turn, brought about the passing of the Bill of Rights in 1689 and the Act of Settlement in 1701,
both of which upheld the powers of the Parliament and serve as seminal moments in the story of
British democracy.

Paralleling these developments, the middle of the fourteenth century had seen German
national Johannes Gutenberg convert a winepress into the world’s first movable-type printing
press thus giving birth to the modern mass media. Following the onset of the Thirty Years War
in 1618, Europe was inundated with fledgling newspapers and, by the middle of the seventeenth
century, ‘political newspapers had the largest circulation of all contemporary forms of printed
material, or were at any rate the most widely distributed form of secular reading matter’ and
these papers ‘exemplified a norm of neutrality that has remained unequalled ever since’ (J.
Weber 2006: 399, 402). The common newspaper also played a critical role in transforming the
once esoteric world of kings, courtiers, politicians and ecclesiastics into legible fodder for the
common person; they fed into the emerging bourgeois civil society that was to prove so
influential in the series of political events and revolutions that paved the way for the
materialization of modern democracy. At the time of the French Revolution many previously
clandestine newspapers, journals and pamphlets flooded the streets of the nation, garnering the
force of public opinion and ‘undermining the credibility of established authority and spreading
new ideas of religious scepticism, social criticism and reform’ (Fontana 1992: 111). This led the
rebellious few who constituted the representatives of France’s Third Estate (the middle classes
and peasants) to found the National Assembly and vow to revolt against the existing monarchy,
advocating a system of ‘popular sovereignty vested in the whole of the French nation’ (Fontana
1992: 114). This call was heeded by the citizenry and a bloody rebellion swept across much of
France. Chanting Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, ou la Mort! [‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, or
Death!’] the insurgents went on to storm the Bastille prison in Paris on 14 July 1789, effectively
setting in motion a series of events that ended with the usurpation of the French monarchy. Later the same year, the French Constituent Assembly adopted ‘The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen’, which, in 1791, formed the preamble for the constitution and set in place a representative democracy with near universal male suffrage.

The next chapter in the unfolding story of democracy occurred not in Europe, but in the newfound colony of America. Here, according to Alexis De Tocqueville’s seminal study *Democracy in America*, the emigrants who arrived on the shores of New England from the beginning of the seventeenth century created a situation in which ‘A democracy more perfect than antiquity had dared to dream of started in full size and panoply from the midst of an ancient feudal society’ (de Tocqueville 1864 [1835]: 35). The Americans were able to overthrow their foreign monarch in the American Revolution, prompting their 1776 Declaration of Independence. The Framers of the United States Constitution then went on to deliberate over and re-draft their document until it was completed in Philadelphia in 1787. Although, the constitution had its imperfections, it was cleverly crafted to eschew the authority of a monarch while retaining what Americans saw as the merits of the English system. Finally, in 1789 the new republic began operating under the authority of the document following its ratification. As part of their effort to protect civil liberties, the United States also then issued the Bill of Rights in 1791 which included a series of amendments to the Constitution.

Just over a decade later in England, journalists were granted access to the House of Commons in 1803, allowing the birth of a more critical British journalism. The space where these media professionals sat came to be known as the ‘Fourth Estate’, a term which came to symbolize the media’s responsibility in not just reporting the news but in serving as the people’s ‘watchdog’ over the elite. In other words, the journalist’s democratic responsibility was to ‘highlight problems and weaknesses in government policies and performance, in order that corrective action might be taken’ (Romano 2005: 8). In this watchdog role, the media helped to hold governments accountable to their constituents, highlighting abuses of power such as corruption, detailing incompetence and scrutinizing government policy and administration.
Beyond this, the media played a central role in the emergence of modern democracy by creating an informed citizenry with a propensity for varied debate and discourse, which, as has been discussed, Habermas referred to as the ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1989 [1962], 1996 [1989]).

To state that the developments in England, France and America were heralded as a triumph is something of an understatement. Having witnessed European events first-hand, French philosopher Destutt de Tracy stated that ‘Representation, or representative government, may be considered as a new invention … [it] is democracy rendered practicable for a long time and over a great extent of territory’ (de Tracy 1811: 19). Later, the oft cited British political scientist, John Stuart Mill claimed that

> There is no difficulty in showing that the ideally best form of government is that in which the sovereignty … is vested in the entire aggregate of the community; every citizen not only having a voice in the exercise of that ultimate sovereignty, but being … called on to take an actual part in the government, by the personal discharge of some public function. (J. S. Mill 1962 [1861]: 57)

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, Europe also witnessed the rise of the Industrial Revolution. This engendered a system of capital whereby the wealthy continued to cultivate their riches and the masses were increasingly forced to work in abhorrent conditions for less and less recompense. These harsh conditions led to a series of further democratic revolutions across Britain and Europe through the mid-nineteenth century. In France, bloody protests led to the formation of the Second Republic with an emphasis on universal suffrage and unemployment relief. News spread quickly of the events in Paris and it was not long before a series of violent protests and subsequent democratic reforms occurred across the Habsburg’s Austrian Empire, Germany, Italy and Poland.

Following the end of the First World War and the dissolution of the great Prussian, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, several nominally democratic states emerged across Europe. However, such developments were countered by the effects of the Great Depression which brought with it significant economic hardships and a widespread dissatisfaction with the
existing political order. Under these conditions the 1920s and 1930s witnessed ‘the establishment of varied forms of dictatorship and totalitarianism of the left and the right in Russia, Germany, Italy, Japan and other countries’ (Saward 2003: 37) as well as the emergence of non-democratic regimes in parts of Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia. As David Held has pointed out, these events suggest that democracy is a ‘remarkably difficult form of government to create and sustain’ and that the forces of ‘fascism, Nazism and Stalinism came very close to eradicating it altogether’ (Held 2006 [1987]: 1).

However, with the success of the Allied powers at the conclusion of the Second World War, ‘all of the main alternatives to democracy either disappeared, turned into eccentric survivals, or retreated from the field to hunker down in their last strongholds’ (Dahl 1998: 1). This, coupled with the successful democratization of the occupied nations of Germany and Japan as well as the growing economic strength of the West during the 1950s and 1960s, meant that democracy was once again flourishing across much of Europe and the Western world, even spreading to parts of South America and Asia during the 1970s and 1980s. However, the end of the Second World War also saw the USSR emerge as one the world’s two leading superpowers and the power vacuum created by the defeat of Nazism led to the ‘mutual suspicion and vilification, arms building, proxy confrontation and ideological posturing of the Cold War’ (Saward 2003: 43). But the economic pressures of the 1980s, as well as internal resentment of communist oppression and external demands for democratization, caused the socialist republics of the Eastern Bloc gradually to give way to form more liberal, democratic governments. Then, in 1991, under the weight of these same pressures, the USSR disbanded and the long Cold War was over.

The end of the Cold War prompted many libertarian Western intellectuals to herald the triumph of the Western world and its ideology of free market-based liberal democracy. Foremost amongst this body of work was Francis Fukuyama’s controversial thesis that the world was witnessing ‘not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological
evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’ (Fukuyama 1989: 1). Whether or not Fukuyama’s central thesis is correct, democracy certainly continued to spread across much of the globe throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. Much has been made of this Third Wave (Huntington 1991) or Global Resurgence (Diamond and Plattner 1996 [1990–1995]) of democracy. Along these lines, one influential Freedom House Report claimed that the twentieth century had been ‘Democracy’s Century’, an era which witnessed the transformation of democracy from a handful of ‘restricted democracies’ in 1900 to a situation where more than half of the world’s population lived and thrived in ‘electoral democracies’ by the end of the century (Democracy's Century 1999). Since the coming of the new millennia, democracy has continued to flourish with developments across much of the globe. Perhaps most telling has been the modest successes of a series of people’s movements in the former states of the USSR, including the ‘Rose Revolution’ (Georgia, 2003), the ‘Orange Revolution’ (Ukraine, 2004) and the ‘Tulip Revolution’ (Kyrgyzstan, 2005).

Similarly, recent developments in countries such as Thailand, Iran, Burma, Pakistan and Nepal indicate, at the very least, the popularity of democracy and its continuing support amongst various people’s movements opposed to oligarchic or autocratic forms of power. Even the tiny Himalayan nation of Bhutan recently held its first general election (March 2008), ironically enough under the orders of the king himself. Most recently, the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2010 and 2011 has not only toppled long-standing regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, but also served as a mechanism for people across the region to express their disdain for authoritarian and oppressive forms of government (Isakhan, Mansouri, and Akbarzadeh 2012). It is fair to say that recent history has witnessed democracy spread across much of the globe to stand today as the preferred method of human governance.

As democracy spreads, it is interesting to note the degree to which it is understood according to the lineage of events, practices and movements outlined above. Clearly, these developments – from as far back as the Greek concept of demokratia and the Roman Republic,
but more directly since the establishment of the British Parliament, through the American Declaration of Independence, the French storming of the Bastille and the apparent global spread of democracy since the fall of Communism – have had a profound impact on our understanding of the Western world today. This extraordinary sequence of events has frequently been invoked throughout the various political and social movements that litter Western history. For example in Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘On the Concept of History’, he discusses briefly this connection between Europe’s political past and more contemporary events. He states that ‘The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress’ (Benjamin 2003 [1940]: 395). More broadly, the Western story of democracy has been invoked among people’s movements across the globe. Consider the intriguing paradox recounted by Jack Goody in which citizens of Burkina Faso (then known as the Upper Volta) protested against French occupation in the 1950s under banners reading Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité (Goody 2006: 246).

Today, concepts such as human rights, justice, liberty, personal freedoms and minority representation are said to have a long and rich narrative that can be traced backwards through the great moments of Western civilization. Underpinning this understanding of the origins and development of modern Western society is a particular discourse of democracy. Here, the body of knowledge and lineage of events outlined above have come to generate a very specific understanding of the nature of democracy itself where ‘rule by the people’ has come to signify those political moments and traditions of Western Europe and the United States. It has also engendered an understanding of Western civilization as underpinned by an inherent tendency towards egalitarianism and methods of collective governance. In this way, the Western world has asserted itself as the rightful legatee of legitimate forms of democracy and therefore believes in its dissemination and emulation across the globe. It is this combination, the understanding of Western civilization as the product of this genealogy and, at the same time, the notion of this civilization’s unique propensity for and propagation of democracy which converge to form what is termed here the discourse of Western democracy.
This discourse of Western democracy – like the discourses uncovered by Foucault that had constituted the clinic, the asylum and the prison for example (Foucault 1961, 1990 [1976], 1991 [1979]) – has been established within the parameters of the West’s own episteme. It is inherently Eurocentric in nature, reflecting events, institutions, practices, social movements, revolutions and participations from within a relatively narrow historical narrative. The link formed between the history of Western politics and the discourse of democracy is made explicit by John Hobson when he argues that

Eurocentrism typically extrapolates backwards the modern conception of political democracy all the way to Ancient Greece. It then fabricates a permanent picture of Western democracy by tracing this conception forwards to Magna Carta in England (1215), then to England’s Glorious Revolution (1688/9), and then on to the American Constitution (1787/9) and the French Revolution (1789). In this way, Europe and the West is (re)presented as democratic throughout its long rise to power. (Hobson 2004: 290)

In a sense, this means that discussion of democracy is not only describing something often seen as exclusive to the West, but is also actively defining it against those ‘others’ who have not formed part of this larger narrative. Along similar lines Larbi Sadiki argues that ‘From Hellenic times down to the present, it seems that democracy has mostly been a narrow conception at least in two ways: the philosophers and seminal thinkers who constructed it; and the “publics” they constructed democracy for’ (Sadiki 2004: 6). In terms of the first point, Sadiki goes on to demonstrate that the individuals who have debated and defined democracy over the years have (until very recently) belonged to a very exclusive group, that of Western males, mostly from the elite class in their respective societies. Perhaps because of this elite patriarchal lineage, democracy has also almost always been about inclusion and exclusion. Clearly this might firstly involve women, minorities, slaves, and the working poor who for so much of democracy’s history have been excluded from its practices and narratives from within the very Western culture which is so often assumed to have a history of egalitarianism and human rights. More to
the point, the discourse of Western democracy is therefore also defined as not non-Western. As
Sadiki notes,

The story of democratic achievement in the modernist metanarrative is exclusively equated with its inception in parts of the Western world, especially England, France and the United States. If those societies which are exemplars of democracy are, for instance, distinguished by rationalism, secularism, urbanism and individualism, then those societies which are characterized by the absence of these ‘universal laws’ are condemned to continuous democratic impasse. (Sadiki 2004: 149)

In this way, the discourse of Western democracy has largely ignored the Middle East and the broader non-Western world and tended to disregard its systems of governance, its revolutions and civil movements and, more specifically, its methods and models of ‘rule by the people’. As Said has pointed out, where any attention has been paid to the complexity of Middle Eastern politics it has tended to rely on Orientalist assumptions regarding their tendency to authoritarian or despotic rule, their abhorrence of collective governance and their general inability to democratize (Said 2003 [1978]). This has led to the assumption that Middle Easterners – even when offered democracy and freedom – either cannot rise above their cruel, brutal nature or are simply unable to grasp the complexities of this Western concept. Essentially, this reflects the Colonialist adage that lies at the heart of Orientalism, that it may well be impossible to reform the savage. This notion depends on a binary opposition between the two historical discourses outlined in this chapter, the discourse of Western democracy which marks the West as the hallmark of the modern, civilized and democratic world and that which constructs the East as its antithesis, the backward, barbaric and despotic nether region, as characterized by the discourse of Oriental despotism.

The Discourse of Oriental Despotism

The antecedents of the discourse of Oriental despotism can be traced back as far as that of its binary opposite, Western democracy. In some of the earliest examples of classical Greek literature, including Homer’s Iliad, Aeschylus’s The Persians, and Euripides’ The Bacchae,
the Orient was associated with a kind of mystical backwardness and a tendency towards irrational violence and immoral depravity (Aeschylus 1961 [472 BCE], Euripedes 1973 [400 BCE], Homer 1950 [700 BCE]). Patricia Springborg argues that entrenched in the ‘seemingly innocent, archaically quaint or apparently arbitrary elements’ of the writings of individuals such as Polybius, Plato, Hesiod, Diodorus, Isocrates and others, there are tropes and motifs which can be seen ‘to shore up racial and elite hegemony quite deliberately’ (Springborg 1992: 1–2).

More specifically, while key Greek thinkers such as Herodotus and Aristotle are widely recognized for their contribution to the understanding and formulation of demokratia, they were simultaneously amongst the first to discuss the concept of despotism, which they often attributed to the Orient. Herodotus’ re-telling of the events of the Greco-Persian Wars not only represents the first serious scholarly attempt at writing history, but also, the first comprehensive attempt ‘to translate “others” into the terms of the knowledge shared by all Greeks, and which, in order to make credible these “others” whom it is constructing, elaborates a whole rhetoric of “otherness”’ (Hartog 1988 [1980]: xxiv). This is evident in the contrast drawn between the tyranny, oppression and civic weakness of the despotic Persian empire and the liberty, egalitarianism and civic strength of the Greek model of demokratia (Herodotus 1996 [460 BCE]: V.78; VII.102–4, 139). Another method employed by Herodotus to construct the Persian other was to both over-estimate the size of the Persian empire and also point out the inferiority of their weapons and military skills (Herodotus 1996 [460 BCE]: VII.209–13). This is perhaps best illustrated in Herodotus’ re-telling of the battle at Thermopylae, where the brave 300 Spartans and a loose collection of other Greek soldiers are reported to have made a stand against the encroachment of a total of five million Persians (Herodotus 1996 [460 BCE]: VII.183–6). The cumulative effect of this construction of the Persian ‘other’ not only underlined Greek superiority and bravery, but also stipulated the need for Greek unity against the fundamental threat posed to the freedom and liberty of Greece by the dark, despotic peoples to the East.
The assumptions that Herodotus made about the inferiority of Oriental politics are well illustrated by his passage covering a debate among seven noble Persians over which governmental system is most suitable for the Persian empire (Herodotus 1996 [460 BCE]: III.80–7). Of the seven nobles, Otanes is said to have argued in favour of democracy, Megabyzus in favour of oligarchy, while Darius, eyeing the throne of the world’s foremost superpower, argues in favour of monarchy. In his powerful address, Darius claims that both democracy and oligarchy lead to violent disputes until a single individual ‘stands forth as champion of the commonalty, and puts down the evil-doers. Straightway the author of so great a service is admired by all, and … appointed king; so that here too it is plain that monarchy is the best government’ (Herodotus 1996 [460 BCE]: III.82). The remaining four Persian nobles then vote in favour of installing a monarch and, through a clever ruse, Darius himself is able to ascend the throne. Through this story, Herodotus cleverly demonstrates to his audience the backwardness of the Persians via their failure to recognize the superiority of democratic governance and the fact that they were tricked into succumbing to a monarchy, a situation which would presumably never occur in democratic Greece.¹

¹ On the one hand, it is little wonder that figures such as Herodotus – or the many listed below like Pope Urban II or Martin Luther – portrayed the Middle Eastern other as brutish, backward and inferior. These people lived through times of great conflict and rivalry between East and West and it is an unfortunate reality that during such periods even the most intelligent commentator is often prone to reductionist stereotypes. This is not just an Occidental phenomenon and the same can certainly be said of Persian portrayals of the Greeks or Arab portrayals of the Christian Crusaders for example. On the other hand, as Patrick Porter points out in his Military Orientalism, ever since the ancient Greeks obsessed over the threat posed by the expansive army of Xerxes, the West has been drawn to the exotic nature of Oriental warfare. Feared, revered or commandeered, eastern warriors have played a central role in western imaginings of the dark and brutal territories that lie beyond the Occidental–Oriental line. These imaginings have contributed much to the development of Orientalist sentiments in the West. Such deep-seated notions remain embedded in the western consciousness and resurface in new guises and with renewed impetus each time Western civilization is seen to be under threat from the Eastern barbarian (Porter 2009).
These themes are reiterated in Xenophon’s *The Persian Expedition*, in which he recounts the story of 10,000 Greek mercenaries who had been hired in 401 BCE by Cyrus the Younger of Persia in a plot to usurp the throne of his brother, Attaxerxes II (Xenophon 1986 [360 BCE]). The 10,000 travelled all the way from Greece to central Mesopotamia, making it as far as Cunaxa, just north of ancient Babylon and in the middle of modern day Iraq. The circumstances that unfolded left the 10,000 Greeks stranded deep in enemy territory and they had to fight their way northward, enduring countless battles and betrayals by the Persians, Kurds, Chaldeans, Armenians and various other so-called ‘barbarians’. Throughout his tale, Xenophon frequently contrasts the tendency towards despotism amongst these ‘barbarians’ against the civility and democratic nature of the Greeks. This clear divide in Xenophon’s work is uncritically acknowledged in George Cawkwell’s ‘Introduction’ to a recent edition of the text:

> On every page of the *Anabasis* the contrast between Greek and barbarian is sharply drawn – the barbarian world vast and diverse, feudal and ancient or tribal and savage, the Greek world compact and united by the sea, and, despite variety, essentially one in its approach to life. The Greek was pre-eminently a ‘political animal,’ and the Ten Thousand are all the Greeks in miniature. When they are left leaderless, the crisis is not resolved by authority or seniority. They assemble and debate. Arguments and the art of words prevail. The army is really a polity on the move. Let barbarians fall to the ground in submission to whoever wins the contest for the crown. The Greeks will give their allegiance to the man whose reason, not his blood, proves his fitness to lead. (Cawkwell 1986 [1972]: 9–10)

At around the same time that Xenophon was transcribing the struggle of the 10,000 through the hostile Orient, Aristotle was compiling some of the earliest known writings on topics as diverse as philosophy, physics, poetry, logic, biology and ethics. Amongst his writing, Aristotle took particular interest in politics, outlining the key parameters of the various political systems of his time. As with Herodotus and Xenophon, Aristotle tended to equate the Occident with democracy and the Orient with despotism, arguing that the hotter climates of the East had
created peoples who were susceptible to oppression by forms of total power. Along these lines, Aristotle claims in Politics that,

There is another sort of monarchy not uncommon among the barbarians, which nearly resembles tyranny. But this is both legal and hereditary. For barbarians, being more servile than Hellenes, and Asiatics than Europeans, do not rebel against a despotic government. Such royalties have the nature of tyrannies because the people are by nature slaves; but there is no danger of their being overthrown, for they are hereditary and legal. (Aristotle 1943 [350 BCE]: III.14)

In the years that followed, the works of these early Greek writers were reiterated and confirmed across Europe as empires such as that of Alexander the Great (who was a student of Aristotle) and later the Romans expanded. Later, the teachings of Christianity eventually spread out from the Levant and up into Europe. While this brought with it something of a renewed interest in the Orient across the West, ironically it also enabled a new way for marking many of the people of the region as the ‘other’: they were the descendants of Abraham’s eldest son, Ishmael, who had been cast out by Abraham into the desert, condemned to a life of tribalism and barbarity. In this way, well before the rise and spread of Islam in the middle of the seventh century, terms such as Ishmaelite or Saracen were used pejoratively across Europe. These terms signified the inferiority of the people of the Middle East, rather than indicating an enemy posing a credible threat (Rodinson 2002 [1980]: 3–5).

This discourse was to evolve somewhat as the religion of Islam expanded and the armies of Arabia were able to launch successful attacks on Christian territories. Having little if any information about the actual tenets of the Islamic faith it was not the religion that concerned Europe so much as the threat of military invasion. Europe was, at first, unable to fully grasp how the Ishmaelites had been able to wage such sophisticated attacks on the might and virtue of Christendom (Beckett 2003: 1–13, Daniel 1979: 107–8). Both the confusion and burgeoning sense of threat experienced in Europe are perhaps most evident in the literature of the Anglo-Saxon period in England where renowned biblical scholars such as the Venerable Bede (673–
merged both contemporary politics and theology in his interpretation of the story of Abraham’s son Ishmael (Genesis 16:12) to claim

This means that Ishmael’s seed was to dwell in the desert, and without fixed habitations. These are the nomadic Saracens who raid all the peoples on the edge of the desert, and who are attacked by all. But this was long ago. Now, however, his hand is against all men, and all men’s hands are against him, to such an extent that the Saracens hold the whole breadth of Africa in their sway, and they also hold the greatest part of Asia and some part of Europe, hateful and hostile to all. (Bede 2008 [700]: IV.16:12)

A pivotal historical era in the continuation of the binary opposition between Occident and Orient were the Crusades of the late eleventh century through to the thirteenth century. Throughout this epoch, Christian Europeans captured important cities across Anatolia and the Levant including the Holy City of Jerusalem which had been conquered by the Muslims in 638. This era was also witness to the first Latin translation of the *Quran* and a more developed understanding of the religion and practices of Islam. Perhaps because this growing body of knowledge was largely sponsored by the Church, it served to focus European energy against the Muslim threat, rather than to foster any sense of tolerance or genuine scholarship.

In the lead up to the Crusades, Pope Urban II gave a public address at Clermont in south-east France in 1095. In it, the pontiff attempted to invoke the wrath of European Christians over the capture of Jerusalem as well as Islam’s expansion across Asia, North Africa and even into Spain (some 300 hundred years earlier). In a series of powerful rhetorical turns, the Pope relied on a number of Orientalist clichés to build his case for war, arguing that the Turks and Saracens are ‘miscreants’ and ‘the enemies of God’ who ‘eagerly anticipated’ their conquest of Europe and that they were cowardly and underhanded in battle (Pope Urban II cited in Malmesbury 1895 [1120]: 359–61). Interestingly, and in ways not at all dissimilar to Aristotle some 1500 years before him, Pope Urban II asserts that environmental factors are to blame for Asiatic backwardness, where ‘every race, born on that region, being scorched with the intense heat of the sun, abounds more in reflexion, than in blood’ (Pope Urban II cited in Malmesbury 1895
This speech is widely recognized for having set in motion roughly two centuries of conflict between the worlds of Christendom and Islam, with one renowned Middle East historian, Philip K. Hitti having referred to it as ‘probably the most effective speech in all history’ (Hitti 1968: 168).

It is at this point – at the height of the Crusades – that the Occidental/Oriental relationship took on a new dimension. Until the Crusades any tension between the two regions had been largely framed in terms of territories, ethnicities and cultures, rather than between religions. While these earlier differences remain embedded within the broader discourse, the Crusades saw many adherents of both Islam and Christianity become increasingly antagonistic towards each other. Instead of viewing the other religion as a compatible alternate theology, some began to view the other as apostates and blasphemers, a distinction which remains prominent in many quarters today.

This cultural legacy regarding Western perceptions of the Orient was passed down from the Greco-Persian Wars, through the Crusades and into modern Europe. Here, new technologies such as the printing press not only enabled the dissemination of political and religious materials, but Volkskalender’s, early lunar calendars that also contained lengthy poems of a political nature (Brévart 1988). The first example extant is the Turkenkalender: An Urgent Appeal to Christendom Against the Turks (printed in late 1454) which, as its name suggests, urges the leaders of Christian Europe to take up arms against the Turks after their capture of Constantinople in 1453. The pamphlet begins by asking God to help ‘us Christians against our enemy, the Turks and pagans … and to avenge the atrocities committed against the Christians of Constantinople’ (Simon 1988: 7). From here, the pamphleteer moves on to incite each of the heads of Europe ‘to take up arms against the Turkish infidel’ and to leave ‘no Turk alive in Turkey, Greece, Asia and Europe’ (Simon 1988: 7, 10). In this way, the text sharply contrasts the Turks as ‘enemies’, ‘pagans’ and ‘infidels’ who deserve no less than complete extermination, against Europeans who are portrayed as ‘noble’, ‘privileged’ in possession of
‘superior and spirited strength’ and are therefore required to ‘support the battle for our faith and eternal salvation’ (Simon 1988: 11–12).

Later, as the Ottoman Empire expanded through Belgrade and Hungary, the printing press continued in its role as the disseminator of early Orientalist propaganda. Across Germany pamphleteers ran-off scores of polemical texts against the Turks and Islam, creating a whole new genre known as *Turkenbuchlein* (Bohnstedt 1968). Even the highly esteemed monk and theologian, Martin Luther, whose challenges to the papacy gave birth to modern Protestantism, wrote several treatises against the Turks (Edwards 2003, R. O. Smith 2007). At the time there was much debate in Europe about the correct response of Christianity to the Muslim encroachment and, in 1529 as the Turks reached Vienna, Luther’s tract *On War Against the Turk* sought to make clear his own personal opinion that the Turks were the ‘servants of the Devil’, ‘wild and barbarous people’ who lead ‘an abandoned and carnal life’ full of ‘wickedness and vice’ (Luther 1974 [1529]: 126–30). Here, invoking the kind of rhetoric that is indicative of Orientalism, Luther states:

> In the first place, the Turk certainly has no right or command to begin war and to attack lands that are not his. Therefore his war is nothing but an outrage and robbery with which God is punishing the world, as he often does through wicked scoundrels, and sometimes through godly people. The Turk does not fight from necessity or to protect his land in peace, as the right kind of ruler does; but, like a pirate or highwayman, he seeks to rob and ravage other lands which do and have done nothing to him. He is God’s rod and the devil’s servant; there is no doubt about that. (Luther 1974 [1529]: 125)

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the technology of the printing press improved and literacy rates climbed across Europe, bringing with them a burgeoning market for printed books, journals, pamphlets and newspapers. While these early media formats are so often lauded for their role in fostering the bourgeois civil society that was to provide the impetus for the emergence of modern representative democracy, they have rarely been critiqued for their contemporaneous use of Orientalist discourses. One particularly popular example is the
early travelogue in which wealthy aristocratic British and French explorers recorded their adventures. In *Sir Jean Chardin’s Travels in Persia* for example, the narrative exposes the drunken, brutal and arbitrary despotism of the Persian king through the eyes of a rational French merchant and diplomat. The king is seen to command absolute obedience to his every whim, no matter how heinous his request or how inebriated he is at the time of his demands. This is perhaps best illustrated in the relationship between the king and his Prime Minister who admits to the king ‘I am your Slave, I will ever do what your Majesty shall command me’ (Chardin 1720 [1686]: 16). Despite such submission, the king repeatedly humiliates the Prime Minister in front of the court by using ill language, by striking him, by throwing wine in his face and ‘a thousand indignities of this nature’ (Chardin 1720 [1686]: 17). Such despotism was reported back to Europe as indicative of the Persian – and by implication, Eastern – model of governance, a model of drunken cruelty that would have contrasted sharply with the apparent civility of Europe at the time (Grossrichard 1998 [1979]).

Drawing heavily on Chardin’s accounts of Oriental despotism, French philosopher Charles Louis Montesquieu attempted to illustrate that despotic power benefited no one by using Persia as the model despotic empire which he viewed as representative of a broader Oriental despotism that pervaded all aspects of Asiatic life² (Montesquieu 1923 [1721]). In *The Spirit of the Laws* Montesquieu went on to claim – in a similar vein to both Aristotle and Pope Urban II before him – that climate and geography predisposed certain regions to particular political systems. In vast, hot lands Montesquieu argued, the ‘effeminacy of the people … has almost always rendered them slaves’ (Montesquieu 1949 [1748]: 264). ‘This,’ Montesquieu continues, ‘is the grand reason of the weakness of Asia, and of the strength of Europe; of the

² It should be noted here that while Montesquieu’s work relied heavily on the notion of Oriental despotism, this aspect of his work received criticism from scholars such as Francois-Marie Voltaire and Francois Quesnay who held very positive views on India, China and Persia, arguing that they had made some of the greatest contributions to humankind (Quesnay 1946 [1767], Voltaire 1963 [1756], 1994 [1779]).
liberty of Europe, and of the slavery of Asia … Hence it proceeds that liberty in Asia never increases; whilst in Europe it is enlarged or diminished, according to particular circumstances’ (Montesquieu 1949 [1748]: 266). This line of reasoning leads Montesquieu to the conclusion that ‘Power in Asia ought, then, to be always despotic,’ because, ‘it is impossible to find in all the histories of that country [Asia] a single passage which discovers a freedom of the spirit’ (Montesquieu 1949 [1748]: 269).

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed not only the series of events and upheavals across Europe and the United States that were to pave the way for modern representative democracy, but also saw the Colonial project extend its reach to subjugate much of the world under Occidental control (Bhabha 1990, Said 2003 [1978]). This period also brought with it the cementation of familiar stereotypes regarding the Oriental ‘other’ into a series of received wisdoms that were frequently drawn upon without scrutiny or independent research. This is evident in the works of influential scholars such as the German philosopher Georg Hegel who developed a Eurocentric approach to world history in which the Asiatic civilizations that had once contributed to the narrative of human history, now lay at its periphery (Bernal 1991 [1987]: 294–6, Gran 1996: 2–3). While Hegel is considerably more generous to the kingdoms of the Near East than he is to those of the Far East, this is only because ‘They are related to the West, while the Far Eastern peoples are perfectly isolated’ (Hegel 1952 [1837]: 235). In discussing the Persian Empire he argues that its success was enabled by its ability to quell the natural barbarousness of the people. He argues that

> It was not given to the Asiatics to unite self-dependence, freedom, and substantial vigour of mind, with culture, *i.e.*, an interest for diverse pursuits and an acquaintance with the conveniences of life. Military valour among them is consistent only with barbarity of manners. It is not the calm courage of order; and when their mind opens to a sympathy with various interests, it immediately passes into effeminacy; allows its energies to sink, and makes men slaves of an enervated sensuality. (Hegel 1952 [1837]: 242)
This picture of the Orient as naturally despotic, barbarous, enslaved, disorderly, degenerate, culture-less and effeminate was particularly useful to the imperial forces of Europe in justifying their control over, and abuses of, the increasing number of territories and peoples who came under their control.

Similar sentiments are also evident in James Mill’s six volume *The History of British India*. Mill reiterates the notion of Oriental despotism as he imagined it to be in India throughout his work, claiming that ‘Among the Hindus, according to the Asiatic model, the government was monarchical, and, with the usual exception of religion and its ministers, absolute. No idea of any system of rule, different from the will of a single person, appears to have entered the minds of them, or their legislators’ (J. Mill 1972 [1817]: 212–213).

These ideas are also present in Alexis de Tocqueville’s writings on the French occupation of Algeria. While Tocqueville was so generous in his appraisal of *Democracy in America* (de Tocqueville 1864 [1835]: 35) and so certain that it would continue to flourish there, he was equally as certain that, despite the best efforts of the French to civilize the Arabs, the Arabs would never overcome their penchant for violence and tyranny. This theme is reiterated throughout his many letters and essays that deal with Algeria – known collectively as *Writings on Empire and Slavery* (de Tocqueville 2001 [1833–47]). In one particularly revealing passage, De Tocqueville writes

that for quite a long time – we cannot know how long – domination of the Arabs will be onerous. This is because of the social organization of this people, their tribal organization and nomadic life, something we can do nothing about for a very long time, perhaps ever. Very small, nomadic societies require great effort and expense to be held in an order that will always be imperfect. And this great governmental effort produces very little, because the same causes that make them so difficult to govern also make them poor, needing little and producing little. (de Tocqueville 2001 [1841]: 62)
Similarly, Karl Marx⁳ also inherited notions of Oriental despotism and the Asian propensity for stationariness. Overall, Marx tended to view the Orient through a series of stagnations or absences – those of civil society, bourgeoisie culture, private property, propensity for social change and modernization. He further believed that the only route for Asian salvation was for the Orient to undergo ‘Europeanization’ (Avineri 1968, Turner 1978). In this sense, Marx provided some justification for European colonization, particularly in the contemporaneous instance of British India, about which he stated,

> England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. (Marx 1973 [1853]: 493)

Central to Marx’s understanding of the Orient was his formulation of what came to be termed the ‘Asiatic Mode of Production’. Asia was thus stifled by the constant dynastic change and the centralized ownership of property and production. The people were reduced to being the slaves of their despotic ruler, forced into menial labour and thereby unable to form civil movements or become upwardly mobile (Krader 1975, Sawer 1977, and Turner 1994).

³ While this book is guided by the work of Karl Marx in the sense that he provided a revolutionary approach to the ways in which bourgeoisie culture is able to legitimate and propagate its elite position via the assertion of certain ideologies, this work is also conscious of his position as both an inheritor and producer of Orientalist stereotypes. It was Said who not only recognized and critiqued the presuppositions that Marx relied on in formulating his understanding of the Orient, but who also understood that, while Marx’s work was clearly problematic along these lines, it was also ironically valuable as a tool for comprehending the same lineage of Orientalism of which Marx was himself a part. In this way, this project parallels Said’s work if only because it can be seen as both a utilization of key aspects of critical theory (such as Foucault’s work on discourse and the power/knowledge nexus) which developed out of the work of Marx and, at the same time, a substantial critique of the ways in which these methods have served to construct the Middle Eastern / Islamic / Arab ‘other’.
Together, scholars such as Hegel, Mill (and his son John Stuart Mill), De Tocqueville and Marx contributed much to the modern world’s understanding of the benefits and pitfalls of representative democracy. They were also certain that, while Europe had a unique proclivity for democracy, the non-European world was destined to stagnate under oppressive forms of governance. To argue, however, that such notions are isolated to the works of nineteenth century European scholars is to profoundly underestimate the pervasiveness of this discourse (Isakhan 2010b). This rubric continued to develop in the works of several notable early twentieth century scholars, such as Maximilian Weber who began his work on the sociology of religion by writing *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Following Hegel and relying mostly on secondary Orientalist sources, Weber developed a profoundly Eurocentric view of world history. Weber believed that the religious dichotomy between East and West had a profound effect on the realms of politics and law, arguing that

> all Indian political thought was lacking in a systematic method comparable to that of Aristotle, and, indeed, in the possession of rational concepts. Not all the anticipations in India (School of Mimamsa), nor the extensive codification especially in the Near East, nor all the Indian and other books of law, had the strictly systematic forms of thought, so essential to a rational jurisprudence, of the Roman law and of the Western law under its influence. A structure like the canon law is known only to the West. (M. Weber 1992 [1904–5]: 14)

Furthermore, Weber viewed Islam as a religion guided by instability which thereby prevented Muslims from successfully challenging the political order and instigating social change (Salvatore 1996, Turner 1974, 1996 [1981]). Despite the fact that Weber spent much of his life writing about Oriental cultures and religions, he rarely bothered to challenge his erroneous assumptions regarding the superiority of the West over the East. Perhaps even more problematical is the fact that his work went on to have a profound impact on European scholarship of Islam where, at least until very recently, ‘the great majority of studies of social movements in Islamic societies tended (either implicitly or explicitly) to be situated within the Weberian tradition’ (Burke 1988: 20).
Building on the work of Weber and Marx, Karl Wittfogel argued that Oriental societies demanded the centralization of authority and the subjugation of the peasantry under the auspices of an agro-bureaucratic state. Wittfogel went on to claim that such a ‘hydraulic state is not checked by a Beggars’ Democracy. Nor is it checked by any other effective constitutional, societal, or cultural counterweights. Clearly it is despotic’ (Wittfogel 1957: 126). In addition, such hydraulic states were also required to maintain their hegemony over the people via the obliteration of any civil movements that may challenge the existing political order. In this way, according to Wittfogel, the Oriental understood total submission to authoritarian rule.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Orientalism had developed into an academic discipline in and of itself. Here, scholars such as Gustave von Grunebaum and, more recently, Bernard Lewis focused their analysis of Middle Eastern socio-political history less on agricultural factors and more on the practices and rituals of Islam. Although it has to be stated that such scholars contributed enormously to the body of work on Islam and the Middle East, they have nonetheless been heavily criticized for their propagation of Orientalist ideologies including their understanding that ‘Despotism was implicit in the very core of Islam’ (Sadowski 1993: 16). For example, Grunebaum argues that the potential for egalitarian and collective models of governance in Islam had been steadily decaying since as far back as the ninth century. Accordingly, he asserted that it was doubtful the political model of ‘the caliphate as designed by the legists ever had any real existence’ and that Islamic law thereby descended to a point where the ‘believer was thought under obligation to obey whosoever held sway’ (Grunebaum 1946: 168). By the eleventh century, as Grunebaum goes on to claim, ‘the tendency natural to despotism and orthodoxy’ were responsible for Islamic civilization having become ‘ Arrested in its growth’ where it ‘remained an unfulfilled promise’ and ‘ stagnated in self-inflicted sterility’ (Grunebaum 1946: 322). As Mohamad Abdalla points out, Grunebaum ignored the ‘rise, rather than the decline of science in the Muslim world after the eleventh century’ (Abdalla 2007: 67).

Similarly, Bernard Lewis has made a number of sweeping statements about the nature of Middle Eastern politics under the authority of the caliphs, which he saw as an era of ‘almost
unrelieved autocracy, in which obedience to the sovereign was a religious as well as a political
obligation’ (Lewis 1964: 48). According to Lewis, this is a rather predictable consequence of
the fact that Islamic law itself
knows no corporate legal persons; Islamic history shows no councils or
communes, no synods or parliaments, nor any other kind of elective or
representative assembly. It is interesting that the jurists never accepted the
principle of majority decision – there was no point, since the need for a
procedure of corporate collective decision never arose. (Lewis 1964: 48)

Perhaps more controversially, Lewis argued that because Christendom was able to eventually
overcome the historic threat of Islam, a vacuum had been created in which ‘Muslim Rage’
emerged and it was only ‘natural that this rage should be directed primarily against the
millennial enemy’ of Christian Europe and its colonies (such as the United States) (Lewis 1990:
49). According to Lewis this, along with the Islamic world’s alleged failure to separate church
and state and the advancement of the West since the Crusades brought about ‘a feeling of
humiliation – a growing awareness, among the heirs of an old, proud, and long dominant
civilization, of having been overtaken, overborne, and overwhelmed by those whom they
regarded as their inferiors’ (Lewis 1990: 55). The convergence of this sense of rage and
humblement is supposed to have led to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, which will bring
about a ‘Clash of Civilisations’ between Islam and the West in which these Islamic
fundamentalists will react against ‘our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the
worldwide expansion of both’ (Lewis 1990: 56).

It was this final section of Lewis’ article which was to provide the impetus for Samuel P.
Huntington’s essay and later book in which he expanded the notion of a ‘Clash of Civilisations’.
As early as 1984 Huntington was arguing that ‘among Islamic countries, particularly those in
the Middle East, the prospects for democratic development seem low’ (Huntington 1984: 216).
In his later work, Huntington argued that, each region of the globe had its own individual
religio-cultural essence that plays a large part in determining receptivity to democratic systems
(Huntington 1987: 24). He isolated Islam and Confucianism as ‘profoundly anti-democratic’ and claimed that they would ‘impede the spread of democratic norms in society, deny legitimacy to democratic institutions, and thus greatly complicate if not prevent the emergence and effectiveness of those institutions’ (Huntington 1991: 298–300). The ‘Clash of Civilizations’ was therefore based on the fundamental differences between these anti-democratic civilizations and the West (Huntington 1998 [1996]). Here, Huntington reserves particular vitriol for the world of Islam which he accuses of never having successfully grasped the concept of the nation state, preferring the macro-level politics of a succession of pan-Islamic empires such as the Caliphates and the Ottomans. Later in the book, Huntington draws out his notion of a looming threat between Islam and the West via a historical account that relies heavily on the work of Bernard Lewis and other Orientalists. He concludes by arguing that ‘The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power’ (Huntington 1998 [1996]: 217).

More recent scholars of the Middle East have continued the long Orientalist tradition of defining the Middle East and Islam according to its absences. Patricia Crone has argued that when the Shariah (Islamic law) was first codified around the middle of the eighth century, it was embedded with the nuances of the existing tribal laws. This meant that Islamic politics was predisposed towards encouraging the long-held divisions between the various sects and peoples (Crone 1980). Similarly, Daniel Pipes and John Hall claim that these medieval events have left Islamic society with only a very tenuous understanding of politics and precluded it from developing an active civil society or model of democracy (Hall 1985, Pipes 1983). Taking this a step further, Mehran Kamrava states that ‘it is the forces of primordialism, informality and autocracy that have shaped and continue to shape the parameters of life in Middle Eastern societies’ (Kamrava 1998: 32). It is this fundamental lack of a democratic history, Kamrava goes on to argue, that has left the Middle East without the prerequisite social and cultural
dynamics to foster various democratic movements, institutions and classes that make up a thriving civil society and give rise to democratic governance (Kamrava 1998: 31–2). This assertion is made even more explicit when Anthony Black concludes that

> the very idea of a constitution, the rule of law, procedures which precisely define legitimate tenure of power, presupposes a separation of authority from the individual. In the Islamic world, authority remained tied to the outstanding individual and dynasty … This affects political culture and practise today, making a peaceful transfer of power and the introduction of new blood through elections very difficult. (Black 2001: 351)

Returning briefly to the work of Bernard Lewis it is worth noting that, since the events of September 11 2001 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’, Lewis has published several works that have continued to foreground the perceived dialectic between the Orient and Occident. In one article, which appeared only a few months after 9/11, Lewis opened with the following paragraph:

> In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear that things had gone badly wrong in the Middle East – and, indeed, in all the lands of Islam. Compared with Christendom, its rival for more than a millennium, the world of Islam had become poor, weak, and ignorant. The primacy and therefore the dominance of the West was clear for all to see, invading every aspect of the Muslim’s public and even – more painfully – his [her] private life. (Lewis 2002: 43)

This tendency to reduce ‘all the lands of Islam’ down to a homogenous entity and to describe them as ‘badly wrong’ and ‘poor, weak, and ignorant’ against the ‘primacy and therefore the dominance of the West’ is, as has been demonstrated above, a tendency that harks back through the canon of Western scholarship to its earliest formal roots in classical Greece. From Herodotus to Huntington, a whole list of reasons have been cited by Western scholars who wish to explain away Middle East politics and justify its exclusion from what Derrida would call the ‘emancipatory promise’ of democracy (Derrida 2006 [1993]: 74).

**Conclusion**
The discourses of Western democracy and Oriental despotism create a political distinction between East and West. While the Occident is constructed as forthright, righteous and democratic, the Orient becomes the ‘other’, known only for its backwardness, its moral deficiencies and its tendency towards violence, barbarity and despotism. Paralleling one another, these twin discourses of democracy have an ancestry that dates at least as far back as classical Greece, where several scholars not only sketched out the Western propensity for *demokratia*, but clearly delineated it from the Eastern world which was condemned to the rule of tyrants and autocrats. The lineage of these competing discourses continued through many key moments in Western civilization, from the Anglo-Saxon era, the Crusades, the Reformation and through the Colonial period right up until today. To say that this Eurocentric lineage has had a profound effect on Western understandings of the Middle East throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first century is an understatement. Here, a collection of Orientalists have claimed that the Middle East has little tradition of power sharing, tolerance or egalitarian government and that certain cultural and religious factors continue to thwart any attempts to democratize the region.

The problems relating to this lineage of Orientalist discourse are manifold. One such problem is the fact that these discourses are so firmly embedded in the canon of Western scholarship. For example, the modern Social Sciences and Humanities is constituted by those authors who repeatedly make a distinction between the democratic nature of the West and the despotic tendencies of the East: History students are taught the works of Herodotus, Xenophon and William of Malmsbury; Political Scientists read Aristotle, John Stuart Mill and Huntington; Sociology and Philosophy majors sit through long lectures on Hegel, Marx and Weber; Theologians scour the works of Bede, Pope Urban II and Luther; and students of the Middle East frequently cite the works of Grunebaum and Lewis. What is rarely stated explicitly throughout these lectures, courses and readers is the Orientalist nature of these texts, their reliance on presuppositions about the Orient that are long-standing, ubiquitous and provide for
us a certain picture of the region’s inability to democratize. It is little wonder then that these assumptions penetrate into wider society and are drawn upon by policy-makers, politicians, journalists, film-makers and artists who so often resort to a kind of Orientalist short-hand in order to explain away events involving the Middle East or Islam. It is also little wonder that, as we shall see, this rich discursive heritage has so often been brought to bear on Iraq’s political history.

However, uncovering the lineage of these discourses of democracy is one thing, but asserting the genealogy of an alternative set of discourses and uncovering their genealogy is quite another. To do so, it is essential to expose and critique the assumptions which envelop our understanding of democracy and its history and investigate marginalized narratives and histories. As Said argued shortly before his passing in 2004, ‘There was never a misinterpretation that could not be revised, improved, or overturned. There was never a history that could not to some degree be recovered and compassionately understood in all its suffering and accomplishment’ (Said 2004: 22). It is the central premise of this project that Iraq’s history has been profoundly misinterpreted and that it must be ‘revised, improved, or overturned’. The ensuing chapters are an attempt at ‘recovering and compassionately understanding’ the democratic history of Iraq ‘in all its suffering and accomplishment’.