

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Sunar, Lutfi, *Marx and Weber on Oriental Societies: In the Shadow of Western Modernity*. Surrey, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate. 2014. 208 pp., \$109.95 hardcover (9781472417169)

Recent wars in the Middle East, terrorist attacks in North America, and the growth of Islamophobia across the world has led to a renewed interest in Orientalism and the political effects of academic discourse. Social evolutionary ideas from the nineteenth century have returned to the centre of social policy debates. In Canada, the word “barbaric” is routinely used by members of parliament to refer to practices they believe prevalent within the Islamic world, while in Europe struggles over the position of Islam within multicultural societies frequently descends into xenophobia, calls to restrict immigration, and regulations governing women’s clothing.

It is therefore timely that we should have Lutfi Sunar’s book *Marx and Weber on Oriental Societies: In The Shadow of Western Modernity*. Sunar argues that the perspectives Marx and Weber held on Asian societies represent a neglected yet “central element” in their respective sociological theories. The book is divided into three main parts. Part one looks at the role Orientalism plays within Marx’s theory of capitalist development. Here Sunar focuses on two concepts – the Asiatic Mode of Production and Oriental Despotism – which Marx used to demonstrate the historical development of capitalism within Europe. In Asian societies, the means of production was never privatized and therefore free labour did not emerge. Marx viewed societies in Asia as stagnant and closed, ruled by despots who maintained their power through their control over irrigation systems. This image of the Orient runs throughout the book and for Sunar represents a common point of “convergence” between the theories of Marx and Weber.

The second part of the book examines the position of the Orient within Weber’s work. This section is richer as Weber published extensively on Oriental societies. Sunar persuasively demonstrates that Weber developed his concept of rationalization by using the Orient as Europe’s cultural Other. Starting from the perspective that goal-instrumental rationality is “unique” to the history of Europe, Weber seeks within Oriental societies cultural characteristics that hinder its emergence within

the region while highlighting examples of rationality within the West. In the East, these traits include the mystical character of religious life and its *qadi* system of justice; while in the West, the emergence of rationality is supported by the Judaic tradition of prophethood, the institutional history of Rome, and monastic asceticism. According to Sunar, this purposeful search for counterpoints to Western rationality causes Weber to ignore his own methodology, which stresses a value free, multi-faceted analysis of social phenomena, and leads to a teleological mode of thinking which requires that non-Western societies be understood in terms of a “lack” of rational features.

In the final part of his book, Sunar compares the way Marx and Weber use the Orient as an inverted reflection of European society. He concludes that while both men differ in their theoretical projects, Orientalism represents an important shared perspective that has been neglected by sociologists. Nevertheless, it is also clear from reading Sunar’s book that Marx and Weber differ a great deal in how they use Orientalist material within their theories. For Marx, Asia represents a counterpoint to the dynamism of Western capitalism, and this leads him to problematically support British colonialism in India, but one is left wondering whether this view is really an essential part of his theoretical system. The sections in Sunar’s book that examine the Asiatic Mode of Production largely cover debates within Marxist circles that occur years after Marx’s death, while Oriental Despotism appears more a holdover from the works of Enlightenment thinkers and the systematic philosophy of Hegel than it does a vital piece of Marx’s theory of capitalism. For Weber, demonstrating the uniquely rational character of European society depends more heavily on showing its absence in the Orient, and therefore Orientalist scholarship plays a much greater role within his writings.

Marx and Weber on Oriental Societies is a well-researched book, but at times its style reflects its origin as a doctoral dissertation. Furthermore, Sunar’s argument that their similar approach to the Orient makes Marx and Weber “incredibly close to one another” (9) is perhaps overstated. While both theorists use the Orient as a mirror for the West, this was widely the case during their time, as Sunar’s examination of the sources used by both reveals. How their use of this general discourse brings their particular theories together is not addressed in relation to the work of their contemporaries. One is therefore left agreeing with Sunar and admiring the work he has done bringing these themes to the fore, but also wondering whether this represents a point of theoretical convergence or whether it is a diffused perspective found within much of nineteenth and early twentieth century social theory.

Overall the book provides a thorough examination of Orientalism within the writings of Marx and Weber. It is meant for specialists rather than undergraduate students, but is written in a style that is accessible to readers possessing a background in classical sociological theory. Sociologists interested in the concept of rationality will no doubt find the book most engaging, as will people working in the area of post-colonial theory, while sections on Marx's Orientalism will likely prove more interesting for their historical insights than their contribution to current theoretical debates. Given the prominent position that both Marx and Weber continue to hold within sociology, the book also contributes to the decolonization of the discipline by forcing sociologists to re-examine widely used concepts and theories in light of their Orientalist influences.

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