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On the concept of axial space

Orientalism and the originary

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ABSTRACT

The problem of Orientalism as a system of classification that maps out the cultural and political boundaries between East and West has been widely discussed within the humanities and social sciences, but it has been less overtly prominent as an issue in the specific field of archaeology. This absence is peculiar, given the legitimating role of classical archaeology as an account of the primitive occupation of space. We can initially explore the question of archaeological Orientalism in terms of Karl Jaspers's notion of axial ages. This concept is useful in the analysis of what we might call the construction of a 'privileged space' in European philosophy. This article examines the European debate about the authority of cultural origins through a commentary on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and, following the Lacanian notion of the imaginary, describes the issue of authentic beginnings as the problem of 'the originary'. In postmodern social theory, Heidegger has been a dominant influence in the deconstruction of metaphysical assumptions about a universal subject, but Heidegger's notion of the origins of western culture was itself deeply Orientalist. My argument attempts to deconstruct Heidegger's map of philosophy that simultaneously privileged pre-Socratic philosophy and the

German language as the carrier of Greek thought. This commentary on western thought concludes with the theme of the decline of the West as a decadent version of originary spaces. Throughout this article, I trade on the metaphor of an archaeology of knowledge(s) in the work of Michel Foucault.

KEYWORDS

epistemology • Foucault • Heidegger • hybridity • Islam • Jaspers • Orientalism • originary

■ INTRODUCTION: AXIAL AGES/AXIAL SPACES

Contemporary intellectual interest in the problems of reading texts is an important indicator of the epistemological assumption of structuralism, that any adequate knowledge of social reality must recognize the play of power that constitutes and makes possible such knowledge. The objects of knowledge are produced by a complex interaction between systems of knowledge, the institutions (such as universities) that are the carriers or vehicles of such knowledge, and the cultural elite that acts as the gate-keeper of classificatory schemes (Foucault, 1970). The self-referencing of texts is an interplay of power, and thus all textual hermeneutics are a consequence of power conflicts. Hermeneutical exercises should be read as explorations of the authorities that lie behind all classificatory schemes. The history of biblical criticism could be taken as a test case of such conflicts over the conditions under which texts produce truths. Traditional classificatory schemes required a definitive charismatic authentication, typically divine in origin. While this Foucauldian influence was clearly borne out in twentieth century debates surrounding the post-colonial analysis of the Orient, the consequences of structuralism for archaeological theory have yet to be fully addressed (Shanks, 1992).

The contemporary question of the Orient has been closely associated with the literature of post-colonialism, but the controversy about the character of other cultures can be traced back through the problem of 'other religions', and thus to the ancient encounter between Christian protagonists and heretical antagonists (Turner, 1983). While Islam, Christianity and Judaism are variations of a generic Abrahamic religion, they have to be differentiated in order for the (Christian) West to be categorically separated from the (Semitic) East. The authority of the binary classification between the East and West requires a powerful charismatic force to be sustained. This division was elaborated through a theological narrative of origins in which Islam was a heretical sect and Judaism was a religion of betrayal. In



historical and cultural terms, the Abrahamic faiths cannot be precisely and definitely assigned specific archaeological origins or designated a determinate teleology, but for political and cultural reasons such a spatial designation has to be sustained. While the notion of the 'Christian West' and the equation of Christendom and Europe may be unproblematic for such practical purposes, Christianity is a religion whose theological roots lie in the prophetic tradition of Jewish monotheism and whose theological origins are Near Eastern. It is part of the charismatic effervescence of prophetic monotheism that is shared with a number of religions.

Within this historical conundrum, Edward Said's paradigm critically addressed Orientalism as a distinctive and pervasive ideology that constantly reproduces the Orient as outside (Said, 1978). This Oriental divide was an important precondition for the decisive definition of politics as a division between friend and foe in European reactionary modernism (Schmitt, 1976). The Orientalist paradigm connects sexual imagination with the exercise of total power in the form of Oriental despotism, and thus the Orient appears in Western imagination as the forbidden Other, which is both repulsive and seductive. Like the Muslim veil, the Orient is simultaneously secluded and inviting (Yegenoglu, 1998). Oriental spaces therefore exist within a literary and visual tradition that is fantastic. For example, the paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose study of the youthful snake charmer is the jacket illustration of Said's *Orientalism*, are perfect illustrations of the genre of French Orientalism which depicted the East as a place of magical sexuality and sensuality, at once erotic and exotic (Sweetman, 1988).

This image of the East has proved to be remarkably enduring and consistent (Turner, 1994). Orientalism generated a picture of Oriental societies as historically stationary and, through the sedimentation of the divergent cultural phenomena of Oriental societies, Orientalism converted the diversity of Oriental traditions into a unitary, integrated and coherent object of western social science. The Orient is investigated, iterated and interpellated over time and space by these ideological forces, and in this sense the Orient is called to account as a subject of Western scholarship. While the Occident is seen to develop through historical stages in terms of a series of modernizing and violent revolutions, the unhistorical and stationary Orient exists outside of history. In the 'Asiatic mode of production', Marx and Engels contended that India and China had no real history, that is, no historical revolutions that brought about significant change in the basis of the social order through the introduction of private property (Turner, 1978), and, in a similar fashion, Max Weber's sociology of patrimonial empires pointed to a dormant and static social system (Turner, 1974). Such formulaic representations of political space were part of the durable legacy of the Hegelian vision of history as a dialectic of forces between master and slave producing a triumph of (Western) consciousness (Taylor, 1975: 151).

Said's critique of Orientalism was influenced by Foucault's analysis of the

necessary combination of power/knowledge, and the lineage of Oriental concepts is mapped out by the historical formation of power between Occident and Orient, namely through the history of imperialism and colonial expansion. The conventional separation of power and knowledge in liberal theory obscures the fact that the Orient is an effect of imperial powers, and cannot be known independently of that knowledge/power combination, but any simple dichotomy of the West and East involves an attempt to impose a false homogeneity or unity on cultures which are necessarily heterogeneous and hybrid. They are in reality recalcitrant to simple classification because there is no authentic, original culture. There is only, historically, diffusion and difference. We may call this issue, in an obvious reference to the Lacanian notion of 'the imaginary', the archaeological problem of 'the originary', namely the poetic quest for authentic origins or primitiveness in a context of obdurate differences. The originary is the poetic quest for a point of departure from which diversity is generated, and hence a quest for an original point of generative homogeneity. It is a nostalgic creation of the archaeological imagination whereby the originary legitimizes a fantastic occupation of space. These originary dichotomies encourage us to take sides with respect to archaeological claims to original occupation and creation. The need to give authoritative dates to remains and deposits is the intellectual motivation of the originary. By contrast, Said argued that, in reality, 'cultures are too intermingled, their contents and histories too interdependent and hybrid, for surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions like Orient and Occident' (Said, 1994: xi). This anthropological problematization of originary notions involves the reluctant recognition of foundational hybridity. In the beginning was diversity.

Discursive formations (or what we might more conventionally call 'paradigms of interpretation') are constructed around both positive and negative contrasts or dichotomies. These polarities constitute knowledge of an object through differentiation (Foucault, 1972). Knowledge of an object is constituted by a series of interrogations in the form of an account that responds to a set of polarities. In the case of Orientalism, these polarities are: dynamic/stationary; modern/traditional; progressive/reactionary; original/mimetic. As a result, Orientalism produces a cultural audit of negative and positive attributes between West and East in which the Orient is located by a series of lacunae. This negative accounting sheet found classical expression in such models as the Asiatic mode of production, patrimonialism, hydraulic society and Oriental despotism (Turner, 1996).

Although these issues have an important contemporary significance in the context of academic controversy over, for example, the process of decolonization and the legitimacy of the Western canon (Bloom, 1994), they have a well-established lineage in traditional scholarship. The problems of periodization have been constitutive and permanent components of modern historical scholarship. The authorization of dates is fundamental to



establishing the discipline of an archaeology of cultures. From the point of view of this proposition, Jaspers's account of the 'axial age' is useful as a point of departure. In *The Origin and Goal of History* (1968), Jaspers promoted the notion of 'axial ages' as a scheme for the identification of major historical ruptures. The Axial Age of 800 to 200 BC represented a crucial turning point in the formation of civilizational complexes. As an extension of Jaspers's notion, I propose the concept of 'axial spaces' to indicate cartographic representations of major spatial allocations of power and their presentation in both academic discourse and political practice.

An axial space may be defined as a cultural and political location, the placing of which is essentially contested. Axial spaces are often but not exclusively territorial arrangements that are constituted by a political act which simultaneously established the sovereignty of a state. We can define a state as a political institution that enjoys the monopoly of violence within a given territory, and thus axial spaces are contested typically because they involve acts of exclusion and imperialism. They establish political boundaries that attempt to resolve heterogeneity and difference within a founding mythology. One illustration can be taken from Alexis de Tocqueville's claim that Native Americans occupied but did not possess the land (Connolly, 1995: 168). Their dispossession was thus rendered less morally problematic. Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of the American frontier provided a perfect setting for Hegel's narrative of the progressive encounter of civilization and native culture in the West (Klein, 1997). Similar colonial claims have been made about the emptiness of Israel and Australia. These contests are not simply physical or military contests; they involve controversy about the nature of representation. The point of these decisive borders is to rule out what I will call 'historical porosity', that is the ineluctable nature of leaking boundaries between cultures. Archaeological divisions of space constrain the irritant of leaky spaces, the diffusions of cultural porosity.

Orientalism has been, in these terms, a major account of axial space. Disputes about the origins or place of a social movement or culture are disputes about how to draw the boundaries and borders of an axial space. The representation of such spatial locations involved the creation of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983) set in a relationship of antagonism and conflict. For example, the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens is an important component of such a dispute and was employed in the political philosophy of Leo Strauss both to separate and to relate revelation and reason in his *Jerusalem and Athens* (1995). For Strauss, 'Western man became what he is and is what he is through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought' (Strauss, 1995: 179). Athens, Rome, Mecca, Jerusalem, Anatolia – these are originary places that discipline the boundaries between the West and East.

This analysis of axial spaces involves an Oriental quest for originality,

namely where was the space from which Europe (that is, western civilization) was launched? The discovery or search for the origins of a civilization is an important aspect of its subsequent legitimization. Is the normative origin of Europe in the secular democratic tradition of Athens or in the prophetic revelations of the Judeo-Christian religion? The monotheistic religions which have been crucial to European development – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are in this respect critical because these cultures inconveniently straddle what is regarded as European axial space. Neither Jerusalem nor Mecca neatly inhabits the originary of Europe. Athens may be equally inconvenient in the sense that its slave economy contradicts, from a modern perspective, its claim to be democratic.

‘Orient’ is a noun that defines a geographical and political arena, but it is also a verb (‘to orient’), because Orientalism offers a social and psychological positioning which constitutes social identities in a condition of antagonism. Orientalism as a textual practice divided the world into friends and strangers, whose endless struggles define political institutions. In the moral geography of the imagination, the Orient is that part of the political map by which the West has historically and negatively oriented itself. The Orient is critical to the axial space of the West by which it has historically taken its own orientation within the system of nation states. The Orient has been the negative Other that defines the edges and boundaries of the civilized world, and thus monitors the transgressive possibilities of culture. The East was a necessary part of the ethical cartography of the West by which it could celebrate its own interior world of moral responsibility and probity, for example in its accounts of asceticism and sexual control. It is this archaeology of Otherness that defines our subjective inwardness; our being is articulated in a terrain of negativities that are oppositional and, according to Said, permanent and ineluctable. In *Culture and Imperialism* (Said, 1993) the modern identity of the West has been defined by its colonies, but these subject spaces are not merely physical places in a military geography; they also organize the boundaries and borders of our conscience by defining our identities and attitudes towards, for example, sexuality and race. The West has been persistently defined in terms of cultural difference, namely in terms of the cultural production of particular types of personality (Stauth and Turner, 1988). The archaeological roots of such personalities lie in the geographical distribution of the ‘great religions’. Within the paradigm of Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis, the ‘native’ is defined as a subject who is not only poor and traditional, but lewd and lazy (Weber, 1930). Colonial policy and ideology produced a wide range of national types based on the myth of the lazy native. For example, in the evolution of Orientalism, Shakespearean drama presents a valuable insight into Oriental characterology, namely Othello, Shylock and Caliban (Said, 1985). These are the fantastic figures of a cultural originary of difference.



■ THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF REASON: ATHENS, JERUSALEM, MECCA

The problem of the originary can be explored initially through a consideration of European intellectual responses to the question of the origins of civilization. Martin Heidegger has played a major role in Western controversies over the role of technology and science in the twentieth century. Heidegger's philosophy was dominated by the crisis of the First World War, the German military defeat, the intellectual crisis of Roman Catholicism and the challenge of technology to traditional German values. The two major intellectual responses to these cultural crises were either forward-looking and imaginative, or backward-looking and nostalgic. Heidegger's quest for the origins of philosophy, his critique of modern technology and his celebration of pre-Socratic Greek philosophy were nostalgic. Western technology threatened to destroy Western civilization, and Heidegger's philosophical quest to explore the nature of Being was designed to challenge the destructive force of instrumental rationality. For Heidegger, the contemporary world and its characteristic nihilism was derelict (Megill, 1985), and thus, as we shall see, his attitude towards western culture was ultimately ambiguous.

In Heidegger's discourse, there are frequent metaphorical references to the path, the way and the clearing. His aim was to discover a radical way back to the origins of the philosophical quest in order to open up again the question of Being. For Heidegger, this search for Being took him back to the origins of Greek philosophy. It is interesting that he rejected any notion that Roman civilization could provide 'Man' with any answers. In a lecture in 1943 on 'The Beginning of Western Philosophy', he claimed that the Roman philosophers had completely failed to grasp the importance and characteristics of Greek thought. In this sense, philosophy had been in decline since the time of Anaxagoras, Parmenides and Heraclitus (Petzet, 1993).

The consequences of this quest for the origins of man's encounter with Being in pre-Socratic thought produced, in one respect, a remarkably narrow view of human history. In this context, 'Man' meant Western civilization, because only Western man had a history. For Heidegger, history was essentially philosophical history and only the West had philosophy. Philosophy was Greek philosophy. We can see this type of argument most profoundly in *What is Philosophy?* (Heidegger, 1963), where he denied the possibility of an eastern philosophy – 'The word *philosophia* appears, as it were, on the birth certificate of our own history; we may even say on the birth certificate of the contemporary epoch of world history which is called the atomic age. That is why we can ask the question, "What is philosophy?" only if we enter into a discussion with the thinking of the Greek world' (Heidegger, 1963: 35).

We can only hope to understand philosophy if we listen closely to the actual meaning of the Greek vocabulary. Only the Greek language is *logos* (Heidegger, 1963: 45), and the word 'philosophy' was coined by Heraclitus. In this context, Heidegger argued that philosophy indicates a love of wisdom in the sense of being in a condition of harmony with Being, within which all things are gathered together. The philosophical life involved a yearning or striving (in an explicitly sexual sense) for Being. The pathos of early philosophy was expressed in a sense of wonder or astonishment before Being. The next step in the argument was to claim that, while philosophy had lost its way because Being had been forgotten or neglected, there was a return to the original pathos of pre-Socratic philosophy in Germany. In the struggle to recover philosophy, man had to become German. In this argument, the discovery of the significance of the poetry of Holderlin was crucial. For Heidegger, the recovery of the original pathos of philosophy was to be achieved through poetry, and only the Greeks and the Germans were a nation of poets and philosophers. However, Heidegger was very selective. In Germany, the philosophers who were worthy of consideration included Leibniz, Schelling, Hegel and Nietzsche.

This archaeology of philosophical pathos not only ruled out Rome; it ruled out Christianity. The God of Christianity was, for Heidegger, a sort of technical agency that instructed man to multiply and occupy the earth. Heidegger, whose own career was originally cultivated by the Church, had rejected Catholicism. By taking this narrow view of humanity as thinking Greek humanity, Heidegger has been accused of 'intellectual racism' (Marten, 1992: 173). While Heidegger did not adopt a biological view of Aryan supremacy, his language did suggest that only those who inherited the Greek love of wisdom were capable of having a history or deserving of Being. Romans and Christians were circumscribed by a narrow mathematical or technical rationality; only Greeks and Germans apprehended Being poetically.

There are obvious problems with Heidegger's attempt to define the axial space of philosophy (or, more broadly, Western civilization) in terms of 'the Greeks' and the fact that the Greek language was the necessary vehicle or conduit of 'the love of wisdom'. We now know that Heidegger was very familiar with the achievements of eastern philosophy through his encounter with leading Japanese scholars like Tanabe Hajime in the early 1920s. Through these Japanese scholars he became fully acquainted with the themes of existentialism and radical ontological contingency in the traditions of Daoism and Zen Buddhism. It is now clear that Heidegger's turning away from western metaphysics was profoundly and decisively influenced by eastern religion and philosophy (May, 1996). This influence was denied or suppressed, because Heidegger wanted to claim an intellectual relationship with pre-Socratic thought as the intellectual cradle of the West.



In addition, Heidegger's argument had to presuppose some original purity of Greek as a language which had some exclusive and unique properties. While we can criticize Heidegger in retrospect, his 'intellectual racism' was to some extent also present in the archaeology of the 1920s and 1930s. Heidegger gave his lecture on *Was is das – die Philosophie?* in 1955, but the ideas in the lecture went back to his research on Aristotle in 1924, the foundations of ancient philosophy in 1926 and to the lectures on Hölderlin in 1934–5 (Guignon, 1993). We have seen that Heidegger combined a conventional criticism of western civilization based on technology and materialism with an idealized and nostalgic view of pre-Socratic philosophy. He also combined this critique of modernity with a profound anti-Semitism (Wolin, 1993). Heidegger's attachment to National Socialism grew out of his earlier commitment to the conservative wing of Roman Catholicism in southern Germany and his complete opposition to communism. Potent religious pre-commitments remained prominent in Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, but he lived in a secular age, that is, one dominated increasingly by technological materialism rather than spirituality. Global technology is indifferent to sacred spaces and traditions. The decline of the importance of space in a technological society that depends on velocity rather than rootedness has raised problems for the pre-commitments of an Orientalist archaeology.

■ THE DECLINE OF THE WEST

In his brilliant discussion of nihilism, Karl Löwith (1995) noted that the unity of European societies developed not, so to speak, out of itself but out of a contrast with Asia. The Greeks inherited this contrast from the Phoenicians, and on Assyrian monuments this distinction was signalled by the contrast between 'ereb' (the land of the setting sun) and 'asu' (the land of the rising sun). In the German version of this distinction, the West is the land of the evening ('Abendland') and the East is the land of the morning ('Morgenland'). Europe is the telos of history, where self-consciousness is finally realized. For Hegel, history finds its ultimate realization in this setting sun of history. But the *fin de siècle* melancholy of the nineteenth century saw the European spirit in decline, because Europe had been overtaken by a technological civilization, where the capitalist market was merely a mechanism for the distribution of commodities.

The war of 1914–18 was simply a dramatic illustration of this crisis of the spirit. Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1922) was a reflection on the tensions between civilization as the ossification of culture, that is, the triumph of a technological intellect over the soul; it was the world of 'petrifying world-city' (Spengler, 1922: 31). Spengler's thesis was a summary of

the mood of the intellectual elites, but the cultural crisis had deeper roots in Nietzsche's *Thoughts out of Season* or *Untimely Meditations* (1980), where the collapse of the Christian West was measured by the dominance of the Last Men. The dominance of a mass society had destroyed the creative possibilities of the tension between Apollo and Dionysus that had been the creative artistic force behind Greek civilization (Stauth and Turner, 1988). For Heidegger, the West had lost the original meaning of technology in Greek culture, as a mode of knowledge that brings something forth out of its concealment. *Technē* for the Greeks was not a mode of action, but a form of knowledge that involved care and required a method of enticement whereby the potential of things could be revealed (Thiele, 1995: 195). Heidegger's analysis of Being can be seen as a philosophical reaction to the critical Marxism of Georg Lukács, who saw the modern capitalist world as a system that produces the reification of social relations, that is, an economic order that transforms social relations into relations between things (Lukács, 1971).

We can now read Heidegger's attempt to connect the values of the pre-Socratics and the legacy of Hölderlin as a desperate attempt to save Europe through the revival of the spiritual life of Germany against the technological materialism of Russia and America (Heidegger, 1977). In the years leading up to the Second World War, Heidegger came to argue that the history-creating nations had a profound responsibility to save the West. Ancient Greece once more provided a model of historical struggle. Greece had survived the threat of Asia whose waves beat on its shores, because it transcended the tensions between rationalism (Plato) and historicity (Heraclitus). Contemporary Europe was confronted by a different Asiatic threat from Russia and America (Safranski, 1998: 325). From Heidegger's standpoint, it was not possible to distinguish between the Russians and the Americans, and in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Heidegger, 1959) he argued that both societies were dominated by a technology that was out of control and by the rootlessness of the masses. Heidegger's spiritual world was a rural utopia, and his critical view of technology was inspired by Georg Lukács's notion of reification (1971) and by Weber's vision of society dominated by the processes of rationalization. National Socialism failed to save Germany from this crisis, because it was merely another step on the way to Weber's 'iron cage' of capitalist rationalism (Herf, 1984). Weber's exploration of the economic ethics of the world religions had shown how Protestant asceticism had contributed to the growth of the secular spirit of capitalism; the this-worldly rationalism of the Protestant sects had created the cultural conditions of the heartless world of modern capitalism (Turner, 1999: 48–71). The rational ethos of modern technology had, however, destroyed the spiritual legacy of the West that Heidegger had sought in the pre-Socratic world of Greek philosophy. The definitive axial divisions of the nineteenth century were being eradicated by the technological chaos of modernity.



We can regard the scholarship and politics of Said as a reflection on the problem of 'beginnings'. At the beginning of Said's academic career was the seminal contribution to an analysis of intention and method in literary theory and literary production, namely *Beginnings* (Said, 1975). A theory of beginnings had to be a theory about authorial intention and methods, because it was also a statement about particular types of creativity. Said's thesis was, in part, that structuralist theories of knowledge had denied any authority to an author by identifying the notion of a system or formation or discourse as the generic force behind ideas. Structuralism tends to rule out authorial intention. For Said, origins were more passive than beginnings. Charles Darwin as the author of the *Origins of Species* was now seen as simply an effect of a transformation in the field of biological knowledge. Said noted that, ironically, the authors of theories of structures, in particular Nietzsche, were themselves radically interested in beginnings and origins. Nietzsche as the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967) laid the foundations of modern structuralism.

The further irony of any quest for origins is drawn from Vico's dictum in his *New Science* (1999), that all doctrines must take their beginning from that of the subjects that they treat, but all inquiries into origins tend to produce unclear and indefinite results. The more we moderns delve into our ancestral past the more obscure, fantastic and poetic it becomes, because it is modernization itself (from example through Cartesian rationalism) that produces clarity. These origins speak to the fantastic garden of human beginnings, where labour had not yet destroyed the poetic or sacred connections between beings and their place. In an argument that anticipated Weber's rationalization thesis, Vico spoke to a sacred origin of the world before its disenchantment, because modernization ultimately produces meaninglessness as the poetic is overtaken by the rational. This idea is fundamental to the melancholic sciences as described by Heidegger and Lukács.

My reflection on the problem of axial spaces is intended to be a commentary on one aspect of Said's analysis of beginnings in which I have developed the idea of the originary as a method of contemplating the relationships between authority, origins and axial spaces. From this perspective archaeology has played a decisive if covert role in this intellectual site as the fabulous science of the originary.

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