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Eurocentrism

(English version of Turkish article)

One of the more drastic examples of a Eurocentric worldview has been formulated by Samuel Huntington in his well-known article "A Clash of Civilizations?", published in Foreign Affairs. He opined, that "Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures." (Huntington 1993, p. 40)

First of all the question arises whether the term "Western" values makes any sense. Whatever these values may be, they obviously are not stable. And they are full of contradictions. The value system in Europe has developed considerably over time, and has kept changing. A few examples: while stable family structures have been very important until into the twentieth century, today family cohesion has lost most of its meaning and importance. Even being married does not matter very much any longer, at least in big cities of Europe. In many of them, some one third of the household are single persons and one third of all marriages end in divorce. Just a few decades ago this would have been unthinkable. But what does it imply for "Western values"? Are family values not any longer part of them, after they were for centuries? Are they forever, even if they are not applied any longer? Or, to give another example: in regard to human rights and constitutionalism the "Western" balance is less from clear. While there does exist a strong pro-human rights tradition in Europe, the continent has also been the cradle of Fascism and Stalinism. It is very different to argue that both do not constitute a part of Western tradition. Western "values" have entailed both freedom and repression, both human rights and the holocaust, and both streaks of traditions have fought with each other. To define "Western values" only as the positive side of this double faced history and tradition might make people feel better and more comfortable – but it is an arbitrary attempt to purge European history of its destructive and depressing aspects.

Another aspect of this problem is that many of the "values" mentioned may have less to do with "Western" culture, but with economic modernization. The weakening of religion in Europe, the growth of individualism, or, again, the decline of the family, all not necessarily are "Western values" at all, but results of capitalism, of mechanization, of the market

1

mechanism. In this case they would just appear "Western", because these phenomena have first happened on a large scale in Europe, but they would in fact be above cultural specifics. These trends would then not constitute European values, but shape them. Only the societies affected would obviously perceive them as something forming part of their "original" identity. "Western thinking" at an earlier stage was basically driven by religious and mystical narrow-mindedness, by superstition in its Christian or non-Christian versions, by all the things that the West today believes are specific for Muslim or Hindu societies. The point here is that "Western values" is not anything stable or homogenous, and that just enumerating a few nice-sounding terms as Huntington does is a shallow approach based on wishful thinking.

Having said that it still is useful to more specifically look at the "values" Huntington thinks are Western: "individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state".

It definitely is a Eurocentric viewpoint to perceive all these as "Western" values. On the one hand, again, it is a very selective way of observation to simply interpret the West as "individualist", when conformity and conformism are at least as important. Huntington obviously takes the specific American self-interpretation of individualism at face value, while at the same time conveniently ignoring all research and evidence to the contrary. The classical experiments of US social psychology by people like Milgram and Ash tell a different story. Also, other cultures can develop their own versions of individualisms that are quite impressive: who ever, for instance, has seen the irrepressible individualism of Pashtoo tribesmen in Afghanistan or Pakistan can hardly consider individualism something just typically "Western".

Similar things apply to most of his other values. Liberty and equality, for instance, are both quite contested in the West, with equality often loosing out to a narrow version of economic freedom. But to imply that Non-Westerners are not interested in liberty and would prefer to be repressed can hardly be taken seriously. Why would resistance against local dictatorship and repression in the Third World have occurred in so many cases, if people would not perceive freedom as important? The fact of so many dictatorships is not a contradiction to this: when fascism was so strong in Europe, in Italy, Germany, Spain, but also in France, Austria, Eastern Europe and even Britain, this was hardly a proof that freedom and liberty were not of interest to Europeans.

Interesting in Huntington's enumeration of Western values also is that he includes "free markets". Markets, no matter how unrestricted, are a mechanism of economic regulation, of resource allocation. They are not a "value". The fact that many people "believe" in free markets, that they support economic policies that are based on capitalism (as long as they are not being hurt themselves) does not change this fact. Huntington transfers an economic mechanism into a "value", and puts it on equal footing with human rights, freedom, and other important matters. That the western tradition includes many tendencies that are and have been sceptical of markets altogether or have preferred regulated, mix economies over "free" markets, to him does not seem to matter. For him Western thought is based on free markets, and Westerners who would not agree are implicitly purged from the Western value

2

system. But even if we would follow Huntington's artificial trick and believe in free markets being a Western value: how can we explain that capitalism and free markets are – and have been – predominant in so many non-Western parts of the world? Who ever visited an oriental souk or bazaar will know that free markets are not specific to the Western culture.

Huntington presents a specific textbook case of Eurocentric thought. His mechanism is extremely simple: he takes a couple of general concepts that few people would disagree with, like human rights and freedom. Next he appropriates them by just calling them "Western values", implicitly disputing other cultures' authentic link to them. Thus he establishes the notion of a moral superiority of the West. And from this moral high ground it is quite easy to conveniently judge other cultures: being anti-Western and being anti-democratic becomes identical. Two psychological effects flow from here: one, an anti-Islamic or anti-Asian policy can easily be justified, since it automatically becomes a crusade of Good-versus-Evil, like the Cold War supposedly was. And two, it very much reassures Western political identity after the end of the Cold War: just being Western somehow implies being democratic, pro-freedom, pro-human rights, and so on, no matter what Western governments do.

While it is possible in principle to discuss distinct cultural ways of worldview and of values, this should be done from the starting point that all these views and values are in motion and full of internal contradictions. In hardly any society the values are undisputed, and not confronted with counter-values or conceptual alternatives. It may be possible to compare value systems of different countries or cultures, but it is a highly difficult and complex enterprise. One of the problems is that generally speaking all differences will be more of degree than of principle. All societies know conformism or individualism. And in all of them other, contradictory values exist besides each other. An attempt to describe one country's or culture's values cannot succeed if this is ignored and only some of the respective values are selected. Also, not seldom one set of values (e.g. passivity and conformity) is applicable in a specific sector of society (e.g. politics or family life), while another (e.g. private initiative, aggressiveness) will be tolerated or even expected somewhere else (e.g. economics and business). If these complexities are not taken into account any attempt to describe the value system of a society will fail. If someone only presents a set of values in a simple list, it may be of some degree of usefulness as a starting point for thought, but it will be hardly more than stereotyping. Eurocentric thinking will do exactly that. It will present a list of characteristics, made up of values many Europeans will like and perceive as important to them. This will somehow reflect reality, but only to some degree: this self-definition generally will include a heavy dose of wishful thinking. Starting from here Eurocentrism will put together (not always explicitly) other lists of other cultures' characteristics: of blacks, Muslims, Arabs, Turks, Asians, Chinese, whomever. And again, some elements of reality might be reflected in these stereotypes, to make them more plausible. Obviously phenomena like fanaticism, terrorism and violence do exist in the Middle East and can always be used to justify Eurocentic views. The problem is that they are taken as one of the key factors of Middle Eastern politics and culture, while the same problems will be taken less seriously in the West itself.

The Green Peril

The perception of "Islam" and of the Middle East from the Western perspective has not been stable over the centuries, but evolved in stages. The first major clash took place since the late 11th century, when European clergy and nobility tried to deal with problems of internal character by directing Europe's military potential and violence outwards, by trying to conquer a part of the Middle East, most importantly, Jerusalem. (Karen Armstrong, Holy War – The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World, New York 1991) The conquests did not result in a permanent control of the area, but finally collapsed. Its result were to create a tradition of military and ideological (that is religious) confrontation, and an increased level of communication between Europe and the Middle East, between societies shaped by Christianity and by Islam.

The next confrontational phase began in the 15th and 16th century, with Ottoman expansion into Europe.

"Since the fifteenth century, the importance of the Islamic world for Europe has been characterised less by direct cultural influence than by the awareness of a political and military threat. With the decline of the Byzantine empire and the establishment of Ottoman rule on its ruins in former Constantinople in 1453, and then the Ottoman expansion in the Balkans up to the gates of Vienna, the Orient presented Europe with a principally 'Turkish face'. This, according to Luther, bore the features of the apocalyptic Antichrist and spread terror, barbarity and a new religion 'with fire and sword'. A flood of tracts and leaflets bear witness to the fear of the Turks and to this image of the Turkish enemy till late into the seventeenth century, especially in German-speaking Central Europe.

Of all the countries of the Middle East, Turkey had, over the centuries, developed the closest political, military and economic ties with the West. In the sixteenth century, after conquering Arabia and North Africa (Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria) the Ottomans had achieved supremacy in the Mediterranean and left the stamp of their rule on the entire region." (Petra Kappert, From Romanticism to Colonial Dominance: Historical Changes in the European Perception of the Middle East; in: Jochen Hippler / Andrea Lueg (Eds.), The Next Threat - Western Perceptions of Islam, London (Pluto Press) 1995, p. 32-56, p. 33)

It was not surprising that until deep into the 18th century Europe, which still perceived itself as "Christian" at that time, felt militarily threatened. Ottoman troops attacking Vienna was not exactly a situation that created a feeling of security in Europe, and much less a feeling of superiority. All of this drastically changed with the French, Napoleonic conquest of Egypt (1798-1801), which demonstrated a helplessness of both the local Mamluk rulers, and the Ottoman Sultan. Also, the French expedition made clear that militarily Europe had surpassed by far the major Muslim power.

Since then the interrelation between Middle Eastern and European societies has been shaped by extremely uneven power relationships, putting Europe into a domineering

position. Since then a colonial or neo-colonial mentality has generally colored mutual perceptions and policies. Kiernan has described how these feelings have developed in its early stage:

"Europe's estimate of its fellow-continents was sinking, on the whole, as the nineteenth century went on and knowledge of them grew more realistic, or seemed to because new distortions of vision went unnoticed. Its estimate of its own effect on these others showed signs of drooping too. Colonizing countries did their best to cling to a conviction that they were spreading through the world not merely order, but civilization; which implied that other peoples were not civilized yet, but were capable of becoming so." (Kiernan, Victor; The Lords of Human Kind - European Attitudes to Other Cultures in the Imperial Age; London (Serif), 1969,1995, S. 325)

From the European perspective its relationship to the rest of the World had completely changed from the second half of the 15th (the fall of Constantinople and the "discovery" of the American continent) till the early 18th century. Europe had transformed itself from being one among so many other areas of the World into its dominating power center, a development finally concluded in the 19th century, when the colonial powers had divided the World among its leading powers. This transformation was connected to a major change in European self-perception and identity. In the course of it, the mainstream of European thought developed a strong, often even racist feeling of superiority over non-European peoples and cultures. The Spanish conquest of what today is Latin America and the genocide of so many indigenous peoples, the British conquest of India with its brutalities and massacres were just examples of both power and a cruel disrespect for non-European, non-White peoples. While Europeans also did not hesitate to kill each other, they hardly disputed each other's humanity. But in regard to Non-Europeans this was a different matter: Africans, Asians and Native Americans often were perceived as something sub-human, and definitely dealt with that way. This perception was reinforced when European settlers in North America introduced slavery and imported black slaves from Africa. Being white, Christian and of European stock meant being special, being superior, it often meant having a license to rule and dominate. And all this implied that the other cultures were of lesser value. European culture – generally in the form of a specific national form – perceived African, Asian and American peoples as inferior, as barbaric and subject to missionary and civilizing work.

This tendency has never completely stopped, even if it has weakened over time. But the strong link of power and the feeling of superiority were never broken. Andrea Lueg has pointed to this in regard to the Gulf War:

"In the Gulf War, Western dominance was demonstrated in its ability to kill more efficiently. At the same time, it was possible to justify the military action and the many victims of this war more easily by using an image of people in Islamic countries as inferior to us and therefore of less value. 'We caught them with their pants down. They were still in their sleeping bags. It was just like shooting turkeys' was how the American company commander Jess Fairington expressed himself after a helicopter gunship attack on Iraqi positions during the Gulf War. The war seen as turkey shooting, people as turkeys - does

this illustrate the civilising superiority of the West? Only if we measure civilising superiority in terms of standards of weapons technology. (Lueg, Andrea; The Perception of Islam in the Western Debate; in: Jochen Hippler / Andrea Lueg (Eds.), The Next Threat - Western Perceptions of Islam, London (Pluto Press) 1995, p. 7-31, p. 21)

Media and Perceptions

Today one of the key factors to keep Eurocentric views alive is the mass media. Since most Europeans and Americans have never travelled to – for instance the Middle East - and personally know few or hardly any persons from the region, their images on the topic are generally from second-hand sources, and mostly from TV and print media. It is extremely difficult to determine in which degree the media reflect public sentiments and prejudges on the Middle East and Islam, and to which degree they are creating them. But it is quite obvious that we are talking about a mutual, dialectical process. If public sentiments toward Islam and the region would not be sceptical or sometimes hostile, the media would hardly be able to create these sentiments out of nothing – in case they wanted to. And if many media would not present embellished visions of Middle Eastern reality to make more "colourful" reporting, the public would have little to feed its predetermined perceptions. Some of the standard clichés connected to Islam and the Middle East include "fanaticism", "irrationality", "violence", being "anti-modern", "medieval". Bearded men with Kalashnikovs would be a typical visualization.

The table below summarizes a few of the key techniques and misunderstandings that many journalists and analysts apply to their publications on Islam:

Islam - Some mechanisms to produce a Negative Perception

1. Comparing un-comparable categories. The „West" often is compared to „Islam", that is a geographic (or political) area to a religion. Instead Europe and the Middle East, or Islam and Christianity should be compared.

2. Presenting fundamentalist argumentation and definitions as "Islam". Often western observers take fundamentalist positions and present them as defining „Islam". They quote fundamentalist leaders to point to a „true" Islam, ignoring that most Muslims take quite different viewpoints.

3. Religious interpretation of secular policies. Declarations of Middle Eastern politicians and religious leaders are being taken at face value. Religious terminology is automatically perceived as an expression of religion, the instrumentalisation of religious terms for political and other purposes are being ignored.

4. Assuming what should be proven. Instead of analyzing the importance of religion in the Middle Eastern discourse, it is being assumed as crucial. From this assumption it is concluded that politics is being of a religious character.

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5. Confusing Islam as a religion with Islamic culture and tradition. Middle Eastern societies are often culturally influenced by Islam. Islam has become an important part of popular culture. Many seemingly religious manifestations have more to do with culture and tradition, than with religion.

6. Non-historic interpretation of Islam. Recent events are not being analyzed in their historic context, since they supposedly are of „religious" character and therefore can be explained from the Koran and the Sunnah. The historical conditions and developments of current phenomena are being substituted by referring to holy texts. .

7. Neglecting analyses of political and economic interests. Problems and conflicts in the current Middle East will often be reduced to „religion", instead of analyzing political and economic interests behind them. Again, this is being done by reducing „Islam" to the Koran and statements of religious experts.

8. Cultural arrogance. From Western dominance in regard to economic and military power often a cultural superiority of the West is concluded.

9. Using double standards. Things the West considers legitimate for itself are being perceived as off-limits to Muslim societies, e.g. weapons of mass destruction, which are supposedly useful for peace and stability when in Western hands, but dangerous otherwise.

10. Perceiving politics in purely psychological terms. What in the West might be termed „power-politics" or „real-politic" in a Middle Eastern context will be often termed "insanity", "irrationality", "aggressivity". Instead of analyzing conflicts of interests observers will use psychological categories.

These are some of the mechanisms, which colour Western perceptions of the Middle East.

"For a long time the Islamic Middle East was seen as the polar opposite to the West and as the enemy of Christianity. Even today the region remains alien to the average citizen, making it difficult to place news reports on the area in their proper context. Hardly anything on the Middle East, or on historical clashes or points of contact between the East and West, is learned in schools. Instead of knowledge or at least an unbiased examination of Islamic societies, we have clichés and stereotypes, which apparently make it easier to deal with the phenomenon of Islam. The Western image of Islam is characterised by ideas of aggression and brutality, fanaticism, irrationality, medieval backwardness and antipathy towards women. Although we do have a positive image of 'the Orient' as well, represented by the Tales of A Thousand and One Nights, Turkish delight and belly-dancing, this is commonly associated with a more or less bygone fairytale world rather than with Islam. Besides, this view has little or nothing to do with the realities of the Middle East. (Lueg, p. 7)

These views still are quite common. But why is the Western perception so highly emotional?

One of the reasons is that Islam is foreign, something alien. Perceiving "The Other" as threatening reassures "Us" to be someone better. And criticizing foreign fanaticism and irrationality relieves us from frightening symptoms of the same diseases in our own

societies. Burning down of abortion clinics or the Oklahoma City Bombing like violence against immigrants in Germany therefore can be perceived as simple crimes or aberrations, while similar acts of terrorism in a Middle Eastern context will often be interpreted as somehow inherent in Islamic culture and politics. Or, to take another example, it is quite striking how the same people who want to keep women out of the labor market in Europe suddenly enjoy protesting women's discrimination in the Middle East. These kinds of double standards are definitely not a result of political campaigns or of media reporting, but of a psychological need of individuals and societies. That biased reporting regularly reinforces them is obvious. It can be concluded that a big part of negative perception of Islam has preciously little to do with anything Islamic.

Eurocentrism and the End of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War considerably strengthened the foreign policy position of the West in international relations, since its main antagonist had disappeared. But at the same time it had created several problems of ideology and legitimacy:

One, the Cold War had partly defined Western political identity, in the framework of anti-communism. The West could easily perceive itself as democratic, freedom-oriented and liberal, by contrasting itself with the opponent and its Stalinist or repressive practices. The East-West-Conflict was interpreted as a struggle between Freedom and Repression, Democracy and Dictatorship, Capitalism (or market economics) and Command Economy, and the West could feel confident to be on the right side of history. Being Western meant being democratic, liberal, and all the other things that the West liked to be (and the ones Huntington had portrayed as "Western values"), and its fighting Communism provided the proof. With the end of Communism, the West lost part of its political identity. Instead of being able to define itself by contrast with the Soviet Union, it now was forced to develop a stronger positive identity.

Two, Western policy at the same time lost part of its legitimacy. When formerly Western powers had supported doubtful governments or dictatorships in the Third World, it could always argue this to be a lesser evil compared to a communist threat. Also its tremendous military expenditures and the build-up of the 1980s could be legitimized similarly. But after the end of Communism, these convenient justifications lost credibility, and support for repressive regimes or human rights abuses became much harder to explain.

It was exactly at this juncture that many foreign policy analysts or politicians discovered the new "Islamic threat". Leon Hadar put it this way:

"Indeed, like the Red Menace of the Cold War era, the Green Peril is perceived as a cancer spreading around the globe, undermining the legitimacy of Western values and political systems. The cosmic importance of the confrontation would make it necessary for Washington to adopt a long-term diplomatic and military strategy; to forge new and solid alliances; to prepare the American people for a never-ending struggle that will test their resolve; and to develop new containment policies, new doctrines, and a new foreign policy

elite with its "wise men" and "experts." (Hadar, Leon T.; The "Green Peril": Creating the Islamist Fundamentalist Threat; Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 177, August 27, 1992)

Part of the mass media put it in much stronger terms. The U.S. News and World Report was one of them.

"The Gulf War was just one paragraph in the long conflict between the West and radical Islam; the World Trade Center bombing, just a sentence. We are in for a long struggle not amenable to reasoned dialogue. We will need to nurture our own faith and resolution." (US News and World Report; Editorial; in: US News and World Report, 22. March 1993)

But this confrontational approach was not shared everywhere. For example, Peter Hartmann, Staatssekretär in the German Foreign Office, rejects all theories of a "Clash of Civilizations".

„Schließlich spielt die Frage eine Rolle, wie sich die Globalisierung unserer Welt mit der Existenz historisch gewachsener, verschiedener Kulturen verträgt. Soweit hier Politik überhaupt gefordert ist, kann es und darf es nicht darum gehen, neue Feindbilder oder gar den "Krieg der Zivilisationen" heraufzubeschwören, sondern den Dialog zwischen den großen Kulturen zu fördern - eine Aufgabe, die nicht neu, aber vielleicht dringlicher als manches andere ist." (Hartmann, Peter; Führungsaufgaben und globaler Wandel: Aufbruch ins 21. Jahrhundert; Rede des Staatssekretärs des Auswärtigen Amts Dr. Peter Hartmann vor dem "Global Panel 1997" am 4. December 1997 in Aachen)

Indeed, in many regards the simple notions of people and cultures of the Middle East being "fanatics", "medieval", "aggressive" and "anti-Western" has not convinced the foreign policy elite in Europe and North America. They may be fashionable in some parts of the media and reflect a certain pattern of prejudges existent in the general public, but they are hardly ever part of the decision-making process in Western governments. On the other hand, occasionally they do crop up – but only when they are perceived as useful. One example was Chancellor Kohl's notorious remark about the European Union (EU) being a "Christian Club". But basically Western foreign policy towards the Middle East is determined by "rational" considerations, like economic advantages, oil-resources, limitation of migration into Europe, and strategy. In the case of the United States the main goal also is the strategic domination of the Persian-Arab Gulf area, no matter what kind of culture, tradition or religion might be prevalent there.

Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism is a variant of Ethnocentrism. In general, ethnocentrism puts the own ethnic, national, religious or linguistic identity as the norm to judge other countries and cultures, or even subgroups in the own society. Since the other cultures or groups can never fully conform to the standards or criteria defined by another group to apply to itself, it tends to imply a biased judgement about "good" and "bad". The own cultural context is automatically perceived as positive, as good, and as the proper yardstick for everybody

else, and any deviation from this yardstick will be interpreted as a weakness, as something "uncivilized", or as morally inferior. Eurocentrism is a mental attitude to perceive non-Europeans (or today, non-Westerners) as less relevant, less modern, less civilized, and less than equal.

We have to ask how these feelings could and still can develop what the result is and how non-European people have reacted towards it.

Obviously people always will observe and judge others as soon as they come into contact with each other. They recognize differences in skin color, language, customs, economic conditions and so on. And the only way to compare these differences and form opinions and judgements about them is to hold them against the own experiences, against the own habits, traditions and conditions. They judge what they do not know against what they do know. And what they know best is their own environment, their own families and societies. This should not come as a surprise.

"The individual's personal environment encompasses all contact with the reality that he experiences during his lifetime and with which he must come to terms. This environment grows and changes with every new confrontation, new experience, and new insight. His environment is created not from his confrontation with the objects and events themselves - be it with understanding, feeling, action, love, or hate - but only from his images of them. This environment contains what has been and can be proved, as well as misunderstandings, illusions, memories, and dreams of the future. It creates the space and defines the time within which he moves. At the same time it protects him from that, which he cannot grasp, from the nameless - in short, from that which is radically alien, although this too, like a flood, can suddenly roar down upon him out of the unknown and unconscious. The segment of reality experienced by several people from the same vantage point forms their common environment. This, too, links them to one another." (Weilenmann, Hermann; The Interlocking of Nation and Personality Structure; in: Deutsch, Karl W. / Foltz, William J. (Eds.), Nation-Building, New York (Atherton) 1966, S. 33-55, S. 39)

To find out that someone else is black instead of white or Muslim instead of Christian or atheist is by itself a quite innocent discovery. The problems may start when being black or Muslim is not being perceived as a difference, but as a deficit. But how and why should people conclude from a difference in appearance or tradition to value judgements?

This question raises two quite distinct points. One, it deals with problems of "internal" production of identity and homogeneity in one specific society or group. In this context the "external", "other" culture is not really the topic, but only a pretext for fabricating a positive self-image. The reality of "the other" does hardly matter, since it is only an arbitrary occasion for self-reflection. Two, the arbitrary transfer of difference into a negative value judgement historically has been linked to uneven power-relations. Eurocentrism, in that sense, has been a result of European colonialism and global domination by Western powers. Since colonial times Europeans have perceived most of the World as open to conquest, control and domination. The population of the Third World has been perceived as weak or vicious, and as in need of being "civilized". Western economic

10

and technological superiority put Westerners automatically in a superior position vis-à-vis Non-Westerners. More often than not this superiority in power was mentally perceived as a moral, or of cultural or religious superiority. To be fair it should be stated that this mechanism may be very wrong, but still is understandable. And it also can be observed in Non-Western countries: people in the Third World often admire the technical or cultural achievements of Europe and North America, with its computers, airplanes, wealth, pop music, and consumption habits. It is very difficult living in a Slum in Cairo or Karachi or in a small village in Anatolia or the Punjab and not perceive anything Western as superior. (The same applies to Westerners visiting these places.) The most general way to react to this impulse to admire a foreign culture and degrade the own one often is to turn this feeling around into rejection and hate. Instead of admiration the West in these cases will be demonized – a reaction as crude as the other one. Many Islamist movements in the Middle East still feel this discrete admiration of Western achievements and technical strength, but reject the Western culture. This approach is as immature as Western prejudges perceiving the Middle East as something barbaric. Both viewpoints share the same deficit: they try to avoid dialogue and ignore possibilities to learn from each other. They both do not deal with the other side in an open-minded way, but only with self-invented images of the other side. This means that both of them are different versions of ethno-centrism: the Westerners ignoring the richness of Middle Eastern cultures, and many Islamist ignoring that the West has cultural things to offer, not just technology and a colonial attitude.

We should also not forget that Eurocentrism may be specific for Western thinking, but that segments of Middle Eastern societies have similar ethno-centric approaches. An example is the Iraqi government official I met in Baghdad a few years ago, who tried to convince me that Kurds are not really humans, but kinds of animals. Also in Turkey, some people still believe that Kurdish speaking people are at most second-rate citizens, or even somehow barbaric or violent. It is obvious that these perceptions mirror closely some of the Western arrogance towards Arabs or Turks. Both should be rejected on the same basis of thought: that different groups of people can only live together peacefully and fruitfully if they respect each other, despite religious, linguistic or cultural differences.

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