

The Nearby Frontier: Structural Analyses of Myths of Orientalism

Andre Gingrich

University of Vienna, Austria

Diogenes
2015, Vol. 60(2) 60–66
Copyright © ICPHS 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0392192114568266
dio.sagepub.com


My contribution to this volume concerns the potential of a structural myth analysis, in a manner inspired by Claude Lévi-Strauss, to provide a critical view of the hegemonic relationships of the world in which we live. Today's post-colonial world can be characterized, among other things, by two primary movements that are interconnected yet contradictory. First, our world has networked more and more beyond the local level and has linked up transnationally. What were formerly cultural differences of an *external* variety, between one culture here and another there, have thus been transformed into *internal* differences within the globalized world we all inhabit (Hannerz, 1996). Lévi-Strauss spelled this out in his late text *Loin du Brésil* (2005). A backlash has occurred against this first sort of development, in that there are also marked tendencies either to close off defensively against it, or to participate in it, but only in an isolationist and competitive manner. In addition to religious revival movements, this second type of tendency expresses itself most notably in new nationalisms with varied manifestations.

In the three short sections to follow, I will focus on a special type of these forms of isolation, and on how they are connected to nationalist images. My main interest is in the critical potential of a structural analysis of the mytho-logic of these ideological forms. The version that I have named 'frontier orientalism' (Gingrich, 1998) will be introduced through an example in the first section. The second section will then discuss the typical features of 'frontier orientalism' and their differences from other versions of orientalism. Finally, in the third part I will cover the systematic elements of the connection between the political forces of the new nationalism and different versions of the old and new 'frontier orientalism'.

I. An Austrian myth

To illustrate the content and efficacy of 'frontier orientalism', I will draw on a case from the late 1980s. Former UN General Secretary Kurt Waldheim had been elected president of Austria by a majority of the people. In light of his highly dubious past in the German army in World War II, and because he continued to cover up and make light of this past, a majority of Western nations had instituted a boycott on any contact with Waldheim. Not a single democratic Western government maintained any official contact with him; no one wanted to see him.

Corresponding author:

Andre Gingrich, University of Vienna, Universitätsring 1, 1010 Wien, Austria.
Email: andre.gingrich@univie.ac.at

Finally Waldheim's diplomats were successful in arranging the first agreement by a European head of state to a visit from him, by the Polish Pope John Paul II. As things would turn out, this would remain Waldheim's only state visit (not counting the hospitality of various dictators such as Pakistan's Zia-ul-Haq). But at that time, Waldheim's supporters did not know this. So they were happy and optimistic about the coming visit of their hero to the Vatican. The morning before this state visit to the Vatican, the newspaper of the political party for which Waldheim had been a candidate ran this headline on its front page:

'A Pole Saves Us Again!'

To most people elsewhere in Europe, this headline would be incomprehensible. For the average Austrian newspaper reader, however, it was clear what was being said:

Just as 'we' were once rescued by a Pole, namely by the Polish King John III Sobieski in 1683 during the second Turkish siege of Vienna, now once more a Pole, namely the pope, was rescuing us again.

But at the same time, this analogy conveyed more. Specifically:

Just as 'we' were besieged by Orientals in 1683, namely by the so-called 'Turks' (to be precise, by the Ottoman army), now once again we are being besieged by Orientals today, namely by the so-called 'Jews'.

True enough, the World Jewish Congress, for quite understandable reasons, enthusiastically supported the boycott alongside many others in Austria and the rest of the world. Waldheim's supporters attempted to denounce this repeatedly and in a totally biased manner as an example of the power of Jewish conspiracies. The headline thus not only made a clear anti-Semitic allusion, and equated the so-called Turkish siege of 1683 with the so-called Jewish conspiracy against Waldheim beginning in 1986; it also communicated a fully illusory and megalomaniacal fantasy of salvation:

Just as the gradual expulsion of the 'Turks' and their retreat into the Balkans after 1683 enabled Austria to rise in central Europe under the Habsburgs, it would now soon get better for 'us' under Waldheim – as soon as Waldheim was visiting the pope and the World Jewish Congress was forced to stop its attacks on him. Soon 'we' would be better off, and the World Jewish Congress worse off....

Many similar examples from other contexts could be added to this one. But this example does show us a central element of the mytho-logic concerning us here. 'Frontier orientalism' always presents itself as an explanatory and interpretive model for current incidents that are initially staged with the aid of analogies to mythological versions of events in one's own history. Thus the present can be interpreted as 'destiny', in that one is mobilized for a 'mission' of one's own. In this model of interpretation and mise-en-scene, a dangerous threat always plays a key role: it can be a siege, or, put more plainly, any kind of immediate threat along a very nearby border. For this image of a contested, fluctuating border American English offers an appropriate term: 'frontier'.

The explanatory model of 'frontier orientalism' therefore functions first with the image of a contested, nearby border, and constructs secondly an eternal 'we' that is in direct, close confrontation with the 'Oriental'. Thirdly, the standard representation of this Oriental is the Turk and, more broadly, the Muslim. That headline from the Waldheim era shows us, though, that this Islamic Oriental can be substituted for as need be. In this case by the Jewish Oriental, but in other cases by the Slavic (Serbian or Russian) Oriental.

I would like to close the first section with another reference to the mythological character of this matter. It would be too shallow and short-sighted to characterize this Waldheim headline from the 1980s merely as a good propaganda ploy. To be sure, it was that. But it was effective only because everyone in the country *already* thought they knew what happened in 1683 and thereafter. So this sort of propaganda can only work because the myth of ‘us and the Turks’ had entered into the emotions, mindset, and public perception *long before* such a headline was printed, in order to activate, mobilize, and instrumentalize the already existing public perception for certain current-day purposes.

Finally, it is no coincidence that every schoolchild and every ordinary office worker in Austria knew what this headline was getting at. The subject of the ‘Turkish Wars’ is a central element of the obligatory school curriculum in Austria, and it is much more than that: village chronicles in all of eastern and southern Austria record the wars, popular songs and idioms allude to them, town names and public monuments refer to them, the entire map of Vienna is replete with more or less obviously mythologized symbols of the public memory of them. The entirety of the chronicles, legends, school textbooks, songs, monuments, museum artifacts, imprecations, and idioms constitute the mythological structure of ‘frontier orientalism’.

2. Variants of orientalism

I am designating as ‘classical’ orientalism the variant addressed by Edward Said (1978) – using as his primary examples the art, politics, and scholarship of the British and French colonial periods. Despite much justified criticism of Said’s findings, I believe his essential points are valid. However, it is certainly the case that there is an ‘occidentalism’ as a counterpart (Buruma and Margolieth, 2004). Moreover, there are also ‘enlightened’ forms of orientalism, for instance in Mozart’s ‘The Abduction from the Seraglio’. Altogether ‘classical’ orientalism by no means encompassed all the essential European forms of perceiving the ‘Orient’, as Said himself was thoroughly aware.

Gerd Baumann (2004) has shown that hierarchical modalities of exclusivity form the basis of all ‘orientalisms’. In this regard ‘frontier orientalism’ has a certain mytho-logical originality. As distinguished from the classical form, it does not refer to distant subjugated overseas colonies, but rather to nearby intruders at ‘our’ border. These are dangerous, almost evenly matched rivals, but not exotic subalterns, servants, and slaves. Women and the erotic therefore play very different roles in both forms, although it is always the men whose perspective is defining what we hear.

But no matter if it concerns Flaubert’s *Salammbô* or paintings of an imaginary harem: ‘classical’ orientalism is always also about a *voyeuristic* view of the women *in* the Orient, and of all forms of the erotic *there*, which are at the same time banned in the Occident. By contrast, ‘frontier orientalism’ in fact does not take up the issue of women and the erotic *in the Orient* at all: the Oriental aggressor and invader is in this case usually a man, and this man is so dangerous in this basically *paranoid* viewpoint precisely because he covets our wives, sisters, and daughters. Finally a third matter must be added, one that perhaps makes the decisive difference: ‘classical’ orientalism is primarily a product of imperial elites, as employers and as the principal layer of consumers in the former colonial metropolises. But ‘frontier orientalism’ is more than this. It is not only the product of imperial elites, but also simultaneously a deeply rooted component of folk culture. Sculptures of dead Arab or Indian soldiers can be seen neither in English nor in French villages, not in St Paul’s Cathedral or in Notre Dame. But you will find sculptures of slain and humiliated Turkish soldiers not only prominently displayed at St Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna, but also in many smaller cities and villages in Austria.

The mytho-logic of ‘frontier orientalism’ hence functions with the central mythological arrangement of being threatened or besieged on a nearby, contested, and fluctuating border through which an almost equally matched, dangerous, and therefore ‘evil’ Oriental invades and existentially threatens



Photo. Humiliation and triumph forever and ever. The dying, half-naked ‘Turk’ slips down along with his weapons. The body of the vanquished serves as a stepping stone for the transfigured Christian to ascend toward heaven. The baroque apotheosis (1738) above the Capistrano pulpit on the north side of St Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna shows John of Capistrano, canonized in 1690, as the vanquisher of the ‘Turks’. Moreover, until after 1945 the inscription ‘1683 – schau Mahomet, du Hunt’ (1683 – Look Muhammad, You Dog) hung resplendent above the main entrance of the cathedral. It was only removed by order of Cardinal Franz König.

in two other parts of Europe. These would be Russia with regard to the Caucasus and central Asia (Strasser, 1998; Staudinger, 2006) and Spain vis-à-vis northwest Africa (Bishko, 1980). Thus ‘frontier orientalism’ in major parts of eastern, central, and southern Europe can be linked to the historical interactions of these regions with the Islamic world before the beginning of the early modern period and during its first phases (fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) and can provide a specific regional mythological repository that can be activated for today’s use.

3. ‘Frontier orientalism’ at the beginning of the twenty-first century

In the USA ‘frontiers’ are core elements in the hegemonic self-understanding of the state and its origins. The old ‘frontier’ in the Wild West marked the expansion of white settlement in the

‘us’ as well as our women. Two principal deductions from this prototypical and mythological basic motif are possible: in the first, more pessimistic variant, the siege continues and enjoys greater and greater success. In the second, more optimistic variant, the siege is defeated (for instance, with the assistance of heroes from Poland or elsewhere). The Austrian version of this optimistic variant is more expansive, in that it includes the glorious phase of the final rolling back of the Ottomans to the southeast, which is identical with the rise of the House of Habsburg. In this respect there would come an additional orientalist high water mark: the occupation and subsequent annexation of Bosnia between 1878 and 1918. The Bosnians thereby became the prototype of the ‘good Oriental’ in the Austrian version of ‘frontier orientalism’. This overlaps partially with ‘classical orientalism’, since the ‘Bosnian’ also symbolizes the classical colonial subaltern: the subjugated, integrated, loyal Oriental who protected and defended the imperial border from his outpost until the end. Even in the 1990s during the civil wars in former Yugoslavia, much of Austrian foreign policy was supported and legitimated when the media took recourse in these sorts of mythological and nepotistic details about ‘our Muslims’. The per capita support of the Austrian populace in those years for the Bosnian Muslims was greater than in any other state of the European Union.

Historically older forms of ‘frontier orientalism’ have emerged in the main forms of perception and narrative structures not only in Austria, but also in more or less similar versions in other parts of the former Habsburg Empire in central Europe – for instance in Hungary and Slovenia, but also in parts of northeast and northern Italy. I believe we can also identify clear and similarly ancient parallels

nineteenth century vis-à-vis the indigenous inhabitants. The proclamation of ‘new’ and ‘last’ frontiers served as a call to action in the conquest and domesticating of other, unfamiliar wild zones – first in space and then in the human genome. With this historical background, after the attacks of 11 September 2001 the administration of George W. Bush (2001–2009) went to great lengths to exploit the anxieties of the American people in order to deploy troops in Iraq. In addition to making reference to the memory of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in World War II, a creative new version of ‘frontier orientalism’ played a large part, one in which, due to the influence of the Christian right, the theme of the medieval crusades played a not inconsiderable role. This can be described as a combination of the pessimistic and optimistic versions of ‘frontier orientalism’:

‘We’ are no longer just threatened and besieged. Rather, the ‘evil’ Orientals are already in our midst, they have infiltrated and murdered us, the security of the country is gravely threatened. Therefore we must invade the heart of the threat to find the ‘good’ Orientals and put them into power. In this way we will divert the threat that had come so close.

As far as terrorism is concerned, this metanarrative doubtless has a basis in reality. The line by Sigmund Freud, whereby lies and jokes work all the better the more elements of reality they contain, applies to myth as well. To no small extent the tragedy of Iraq was imbued with and inspired by this imperial and militaristic reformulation of the myth of ‘frontier orientalism’, which was globalized in this manner.

It is not always about present-day military conflicts. The much more common use for myths of ‘frontier orientalism’, with all their pessimistic scenarios of threat and infiltration, and with their mobilization for antipathy, hatred, and exclusion, results rather from non-military civil factors stemming from transnational migration. For over two decades a populist movement in Austria has been campaigning with slogans like this:

‘What did our forefathers fight against the Turks for? It wasn’t so that we could let them all in!’

‘Frontier orientalism’ serves marvelously as an effective instrument for the mise-en-scene of threats, sieges, infiltration, and undermining one’s own society, and then for mobilizing against this pessimistic scenario: the targets of this bellicose mobilization are people of African or Asian heritage with legal immigration status but who have run afoul of the law, illegal immigrants, and undesirable candidates for membership in the European Union, as well as the construction of mosques in the home country.

Thus we come to the phenomenon of neo-nationalism, as Marcus Banks and I have termed it as a result of our comparison of these sorts of movements in many parts of Europe (Gingrich and Banks, 2006). In their more chronologically distant versions, individual elements of ‘frontier orientalism’ can stand on their own – in village chronicles, in anti-Turkish idioms, or as the name for a row of houses in Vienna (‘Heidenschuß’, execution of the pagan) it is made into a more or less chauvinistic, offensive component of folk culture. Once ‘frontier orientalism’ is instrumentalized for nationalism and neo-nationalism, this latent mythological potential is transformed into a manifest ideological weapon.

In their basic structure, neo-nationalist ideologies contain three hierarchies. At ‘the top’ are powerful enemies like the Brussels bureaucracy and their unscrupulous cosmopolitan friends; ‘at the bottom’ are threatening opponents such as minorities, migrants, and poorer countries. Pressed and threatened from both sides, ‘in the middle’ of the neo-nationalists’ view their own nation fights for survival. It is there, where neo-nationalists make use of or reinvent ‘frontier orientalism’, that they intensify and accentuate the bottom part of this world view with the assistance of the

manifest weapon of the emotionalized *mise-en-scene* of an 'us' facing the existential threat from the Orientals.

In many an instance the connections between neo-nationalism and 'frontier orientalism' are more direct and immediate than in other contexts; in a similar manner, 'frontier orientalism' and neo-nationalism can sometimes link completely with racism (Lévi-Strauss, 1987), without this union always being compulsory. In Austria, for instance, the mythological and political source material is therefore more closely connected, because one of the legends about the origin of the red-white-red Austrian flag maintains that the red symbolizes the blood of fallen Muslims in a victorious battle during the medieval crusades. With the exception of the seven-year Nazi occupation, entire generations of school children were indoctrinated with this legend between 1870 and 1970, along with the accounts of the Turkish siege of 1683, when Austria – in its self-portrayal – defended Europe.

Even when myths of 'frontier orientalism' do not so explicitly overlap with central national symbols, neo-nationalism happily makes use of its scenarios, or recreates them for its own purposes. In those places where local history cannot offer a Turkish siege of 1683, or historic battles against Chechens and Tatars, or a naval battle of Lepanto, other attacks on 'our core values' are complained about. The myth of 'frontier orientalism' can indeed be continually reinvented – here, too, the 'myth thinks for itself', as Lévi-Strauss put it. In this respect, we can see today that the older myths of 'frontier orientalism' from central, eastern, or southern Europe have long since been Europeanized on a continental scale. The very image of a 'fortress Europe' suggests a make-believe military scenario with defenders and threatening invaders from the south, east, and southeast.

Neo-nationalist parties are not successful, or necessary, in every political situation. Sometimes their program is already espoused by existing parties, and at other times mainstream parties can advocate for it better and more quietly. But in those places where neo-nationalist forces have become influential since the 1990s – in Italy, France, Switzerland or Austria, in Scandinavia, the Netherlands or Belgium – they require confrontations, spectacles, and the emotionalizing of the populace. Only these can move the voters away from the old parties, and toward them. Thus the threat to our identity, our jobs, our women, and our security – in short, to all that is important and valuable – must be staged by these new intruders according to the pessimistic version of the myth: we're not only being besieged – the invaders have been among us for a long time now. They must be defeated, so that the 'good ones' are domesticated and the 'evil ones' chased away. These are precisely the relationships inside the myth that can be revealed through a structural analysis. The identification and decoding of the myth is in point of fact necessary, so that a debate beyond myth on the real problems of migration can succeed.

Even the prophets of new nationalism are rarely truly concerned with the issue of migration. They mainly want the leadership of a newly configured nation that in an isolationist and competitive manner is to rise in globalized competition to the ranks of the victorious. Hence confrontation is sought so that the reconfigured nation, raised to a high level of emotion, stands behind this new leadership and is prepared for sacrifices. To this extent the new nationalists need the figure of the migrant – to think with this image, and to have thought with it, about something totally different, namely about themselves: the competitive and reshaped nation under their own leadership. The reified and dehumanized image of the migrant thus becomes a totemic kangaroo (Lévi-Strauss, 1962) in the mythology of the new nationalisms. It is indispensable and offers food for thought about nationalist visions of the future.

Structural analysis therefore remains relevant. By emphasizing only change and transformation, the persistent power of such structures is glossed over and trivialized. And trivializing nationalism – that has never yet proven a wise strategy.

Translated from the German by Daniel E. Rogers

References

- Baumann G (2004) Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach. In Baumann G and Gingrich A (eds) *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*. London-New York: Berghahn, pp. 17–51.
- Bishko Ch J (1980) *Studies in Medieval Spanish Frontier History*. London: Variorum Reprints.
- Buruma I and Margolieth A (2004) *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*. New York: Penguin.
- Gingrich A (1998) Frontier Myths of Orientalism: The Muslim World in Public and Popular Cultures of Central Europe. In Baskar B and Brumen B (eds) *Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School, Piran/Pirano Slovenia 1996*, MESS, II. Ljubljana: Inštitut za multikulturne raziskave, pp. 99–127.
- Gingrich A and Banks M (eds) (2006) *Neo-Nationalism in Europe and Beyond: Perspectives from Social Anthropology*. London-New York: Berghahn.
- Hannerz U (1996) *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*. London-New York: Routledge.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1962) *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui*. Paris: PUF.
- Lévi-Strauss C (1987) *Race et Histoire*. Paris: Denoël (1st ed. 1952, UNESCO).
- Lévi-Strauss C (2005) *Loin du Brésil: Entretien avec Véronique Mortaigne*. Paris: Chandeigne.
- Said EW (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- Staudinger K (2006) *Freie Nomaden, edle Räuber, skrupellose Sklavenjäger: Zur Darstellung von Turkmenen in Reiseberichten aus dem 19. Jahrhundert*, Diploma thesis, University of Vienna.
- Strasser A (1998) *'Das Krebsgeschwür der Kriminalität': Ein ethnologischer Beitrag aus diskursanalytischer Sicht zum Tschetschenienfeindbild in der russischen Regierungszeitung 'Rossijskaja Gazeta' vor der Invasion 1994*, Diploma thesis, University of Vienna.