

Jamie King Interviews Ziauddin Sardar on Postmodernism, the Internet and the Future (1998)

Metamute editor Jamie King in conversation with Ziauddin Sardar, a contemporary example of classical Islamic polymaths. Born in Pakistan, he grew up in Britain where he has worked as a writer, science journalist, television reporter, futurist and cultural Ziauddin is regarded as a pioneering writer on the future of Islam and a formidable critic of the dominating tendencies of all things western. Currently, he is Visiting Professor of science policy at Middlesex University and Consulting Editor of *Futures*, the monthly journal of forecasting, policy and future studies. Sardar has published some 30 books and over 200 learned articles and essays. His most recent books include *Barbaric Others: A Manifesto on Western Racism* (1993), *Cyberfutures* (1996), *Cultural Studies for Beginners* (1997) and *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture* (1998).

JK: 'To look at the inner reality of the West,' you have said, 'the darker side it projects on to the Other cultural and mental landscapes, we must look at the West's latest conquest, the new domain that it has colonised: cyberspace.' Before we begin our discussion of cyberspace in earnest, I feel I should ask how you characterise 'the West'? How, also, should we consider the dissident, anti-colonial voices within it? And what part do you think the US plays in fashioning, promulgating and maintaining a homogenised 'Western' discourse?

ZS: The West is much more than a geographical space. It is also a cultural, civilisational, conceptual and epistemological category as well as a worldview and, as such, collectively a mode of domination. As culture and civilisation, the West is, of course, everywhere: the western civilisation is not located in a geographical space but it envelops the entire globe with its desires, images, politics, and consumer and cultural products. As a concept, the West is a tool of analysis that gives us certain representations of history, good and virtuous life and Other people and societies. In other words, the concept of the West is a yardstick by which we measure all societies, including European and American ones, and judge Other people and their cultures. Western history, in this conceptual representation, is Universal History in which histories of all other cultures and civilisations merge, like so many tributaries: thus the function of all Other cultures and civilisations was actually to produce the West, the apex of Civilisation.

As an epistemology the West is a specific mode of knowing: a way of knowing where instrumental Rationalism is the only way to Truth; and all disciplines, from natural science to social sciences and humanities, emerge from this mode of knowing and are both a product and an embodiment of this Truth. As a worldview, the West is the dominant outlook of the planet. People everywhere - the way they think, plan, work, study - do the West. For example scientists everywhere, whatever their culture, creed or pigmentation do science as the West does science. Indeed, no other way of doing science is even contemplated. This brings me to my last characteristic of the West: as a mode of domination. Since the culture, the civilisation, the epistemology and the worldview are all defined by the West, the West itself becomes a defining category. The West defines what is Reason, History, Science, Religion, Freedom,

Democracy - indeed, what it is to be human; the other cultures of the world simply have to follow. It is in its power to define that the West becomes a metanarrative of domination.

So, it follows that the West is everywhere - in the West and in the non-West; 'out there' and 'in here'. As a concept, epistemology and a worldview, the West has colonised the intellectuals in non-European societies. Eurocentrism is thus just as rampant and deep in non-western societies as in Europe and the US: intellectuals, academics, writers, thinkers, novelists, politicians and decision-makers in Asia, Africa and Latin America use the West, almost instinctively, as the standard for judgements and yardstick for measuring the social and political progress of their own societies. The non-West thus promotes Eurocentrism, both wittingly and unwittingly, and colludes in its own victimisation. But the victims of the West are not just only in the non-West: they are also in the West.

The West is just as destructive and oppressive of its own people as it is of the peoples and cultures of the non-West. It is not surprising that inner cities in London and New York resemble and reflect the poverty, degradation, and inhumanity of so many cities in Asia and Africa. There is hardly any difference, for example, between certain parts of Chicago and Nairobi, or certain parts of Glasgow and Karachi. Neither is it surprising that rich and privileged in the non-West have exactly the same lifestyles as their western counterparts. I am unashamedly and unreservedly on the side of the victims of the West in all its manifestations - wherever they may be. And the dissident, anti-colonial voices everywhere - in Europe and America as well as the non-West - are my allies. Indeed, all those who challenge the definitional power of the West, in whatever form, are allies.

Let me now turn to the last part of your question. What we now talk of as globalisation is essentially Americanisation: the world is being shaped in the image of Pax Americana. In a world dominated by a single superpower, the definitional power of the West has shifted to one of its single units: America. So in a sense, the plurality of the West is itself being homogenised and the West is being transformed into a monolithic entity. The Western discourse is thus being homogenised into the American way of domination.

JK: And how much do you think that the West's latest 'conquest', cyberspace, is also its own creation - deployed to continue this process?

ZS: The West has perpetual and insatiable needs for new conquests. Just look at the four hundred years history of colonialism. And this omnivorous hunger, like the Vampire's ravenous desire for blood, always finds new victims and new territories to conqueror. Beyond the boundaries of earth, there is of course the moon, the solar system, the infinite universe. In a sense, the conquests of these areas have already began in cultural products like Star Trek and its progenies, Star Wars and so on - all of which reflect the deep inner desire of the Western man for new territories to conqueror.

Cyberspace is a kind of pause, a comma, in this incessant, linear trajectory. The West needed something to do while contemplating really big territories to conqueror. Hence cyberspace. It is, in fact, a totally western creation: the projection of its darker side on an imagined and

virtual, but none the less real and powerful, space. Witness the fact that the Net is a product of the war machine of the West. Its original function was not to bring people and communities together, but to facilitate communication within the military in the event of nuclear war. Not surprisingly, it has developed with its original language of conquest intact.

JK: It certainly seems a plausible thesis that cyberspace is an explicitly Western, and perhaps more specifically (given what you've said) American space. But isn't this an entirely new phenomenon: the creation of a fantasy topography purely in order to have a 'place' to colonise? And isn't there the danger of forgetting the degree to which 'cyberspace' is a manufactured topography, given this ubiquitous prevalence of the spatial metaphor? Should, therefore, our discussion be limited to the way in which this space is characterised culturally, or could there be more value in disengaging with the spatial metaphor in itself - since that is the most critical stress-point of cyberspace's operation as a vent for America's colonial and expansionist urges?

ZS: It does look as though cyberspace is an entirely new phenomenon. And in one way it is: it is a totally new technology. But it is not a new topography in the sense of being an imaginary space. The West has created other topographical fantasies. The most prominent one is Orientalism. The creation of Orientalism followed a similar pattern to cyberspace - and today cyberspace itself is retracing the footsteps of Orientalism.

Let me explain. Orientalism was constructed as a representative space - a space where the West fabricated a representation of the Other. Orientalism was consciously created as an intellectual, scholarly and literary space based on constructed ignorance. In other words, the images of the non-west that Orientalism produced were designed to promote ignorance about Other cultures even though the West had knowledge of Other cultures and societies. It was a fantasy with ideological goals: it sought to represent the Others as the binary opposite, the darker side, of the West. So if the West was rational, other cultures were irrational; if the West was peace loving and civilised, the Others were violent and barbaric; if the West had history, the Others were people without history. Now the classic notion of Orientalism, as formulated, for example, by Edward Said, limits Orientalism to art, fiction, travel literature and certain kind of scholarship. Nowadays the boundaries of Orientalism are much greater. Orientalism can be found in films, television programmes, music, advertisements - indeed, all varieties of postmodern culture, including, of course, the Net. And it has shifting contours. It is not always direct and blatant; it often comes in the guise of entertainment and games, policy and analysis, new age religion, even pluralism and multiculturalism.

The Net is not just awash with Orientalism; it is reconquering the Others all over again. Many computer games, from Mario Bothers to Colonisation and Gulf War simply regurgitate the classical Orientalist fantasies. The history that comes wrapped in CD-ROMs, both as encyclopaedias and instructional material, presents history as though it was the invention of the white man, and nothing has actually happened in the last forty or fifty years in terms of scholarly advance that has reclaimed so much of non-western history. So once again we see constructed ignorance in action; and the colonial intellectual space brought to the forefront. Just as Orientalism was a manufactured space, cyberspace is being manufactured as a new

tool of and for representation. There is always a danger of forgetting that cyberspace is a manufactured space - particularly when forgetting is a specific trait of postmodernism. The fact that Orientalism has returned with such vengeance is a clear indication of forgetting in action.

This is why we need to do both simultaneously - disengage with the spatial metaphor and constantly and continuously deconstruct and expose the oppressive cultural dimensions of cyberspace. It is interesting to note that cyberspace is diametrically opposite of what it is made out to be. It conjures up an illusion of plurality and infinite choice - all sorts of groups and people are supposedly on the Net doing all sorts of things. In fact, the Net is a monolithic entity: English is the dominant language, American and European culture the dominant theme, and white middle class males the dominant players. As such, cyberspace is a classic ideology: it creates an image of itself which is an inversion of the truth. We thus need to be ruthless in exposing its cultural, ideological and Orientalist underpinnings.

JK: Are there other ways of looking at cyberspace that are not bound within these metaphors of the frontier and 'unclaimed' land? Could we perhaps employ these to free the network from these cultured categorisations?

ZD: I think we must try. We need to construct a totally new discourse of cyberspace based on new metaphors. What could these metaphors be? To begin with, instead of thinking of cyberspace as a frontier, let us think of it as a projection of our Inner Self. Cyberspace is Us. The question then becomes: what do we want ourselves to be? Moreover, what is happening in cyberspace, including cyberpunk culture, now becomes a warning system, a set of cautionary moral tales, alerting us to the dangers of future developments in cyber technology. It becomes a signpost of what we may be inside and what we may become in totality. We tend to think of our inner self as a sacred space: we do not poison ourselves willingly, we do not embrace psychological pathologies knowingly, we do not, normally, extend ourselves beyond our limits - we do not eat ourselves to death, for example. If cyberspace is seen as a sacred arena, we will voluntarily keep it free of pollution and toxins; just as we try to keep our own bodies as healthy as we can. We tend to forget that silence is a very important part of communication. So what about cyberspace as silent meditation?

Currently the Net is seen as a tool. But let us see it as a set of relationships. Most non-western cultures tend to emphasise relationships rather than individual action. In both Chinese and Islamic thought, for example, relationships between things are more important than individual things themselves. The Sufi poet Rumi uses the ideas of male and female, and heaven and earth, to describe a general principle: in the view of reason, heaven is the man, earth the woman. Whatever the one throws down, the other nurtures. The point is the inter-relationship, the end product of which is nurturing. The Chinese express the same ideas in their notions of Yin and Yang. Outside the context of relationship little can be understood. So if we focus on relationship - between ourselves and this thing out there called cyberspace - we come to realise that the two items are united as one and whatever happens in one is projected on to the other. Domination then becomes a suicidal game. Nurturing comes into play.

JK: You have also said that 'the hunger for new conquests stems from the insatiable desire to acquire new wealth and riches which in turn provides impetus for the development of new technologies of subjugation which are then employed to bring new territories under the servitude of the West.' Is, then, cyberspace something like a Foucauldian 'technology of power'? If so, what is the 'territory' that it seeks to bring under control?

ZS: As presently structured, cyberspace is undoubtedly a Foucauldian 'technology of power'. It is its will to power that I think those of us who are on the side of the victims of history must challenge and subvert. To begin with, it is an extension of the Western will to power. As such, it is an instrument for creating western desire and control and new markets for the West in this arena. The new territory it seeks to project and control is the inner consciousness of Western man; it seeks to entrap non-Western cultures and societies in this territory and thus exercise a new mode of domination over them. It seeks to give further legitimacy to the darker side of the West, to retrench, for example, the images of Orientalism even further.

JK: You regard postmodernism, if I understand you correctly, as a continuance of the modernist tendency to efface and deny the integrity of Other cultures and Other ontologies; in your reading, the postmodern gaze has sought those interstices left, perhaps, untouched by that of modernity. What, then are the territories now sought out by the discourse of postmodernism? How is the network complicit in attacking those territories?

ZS: We tend to think that, as a conceptual and instrumental category, the West is only located in the history of colonisation, from Columbus' 'discovery' of the 'New World' to the present day. Rampant Eurocentrism is easily recognisable in colonial constructions of the 'lazy native', the licentious and barbaric Muslims, the shifty, effeminate and untrustworthy Hindu and other representations of the non-West in Orientalist fiction, travel literature and scholarly explorations. But the time dimension of the West extends from colonialism to modernity, modernity to postmodernism and to the future. Most critics also recognise that modernity's construction of tradition as an impediment to advancement, the non-west as 'developing societies' and 'Third World', and instrumental rationality as justification for progress, are just as Eurocentric as the plainly racist categorisation of colonialism.

What is not appreciated, however, is the Eurocentric nature of postmodernism. This is largely due to the fact that postmodernism emerged as a reaction against modernity and self-avowedly tried to shape itself in pluralistic terms. But the basic premises of postmodernism are just as, if not even more, Eurocentric than modernity. For example, postmodernism's overriding concern with the demolition of Grand Narratives such as Religion, Tradition and History are detrimental to the very existence of the non-West for it is these very narratives that make the non-West what it is: not West. The insistence that everything is meaningless and that nothing can give meaning and direction to our lives is a distinctively western assumption that finds no echo whatsoever in non-western cultures, societies and civilisations. Moreover, postmodernism's obsession with irony, ridicule and cynicism becomes an instrument for further marginalising and hence writing off the non-west. A discourse that seeks to give representation to the Other, voice to the voiceless, paradoxically seeks to absorb

the non-west in 'bourgeoisie liberalism' and secular history of the West. Not just that postmodernism continues the Eurocentric journey of modernity and colonialism, but we get a higher, more sophisticated forms of Eurocentrism as we move towards the future.

This is where the Net comes in. As a mode of domination, the West is not limited to the past and the present: the West is also the future. The West was not just in history; it is remade in the present and reconstructed in the future - particularly on and by the Net. At each stage, it is internalised more and more and becomes an integral part of the global consciousness. As such, the future has been colonised by the West and if the Net continues to function in its current structure, it will enhance the western colonisation of the future.

The New is a major instrument by which the future is defined in the image of the West. There is an in-built western momentum that is taking us towards a single, determined future. In this Eurocentric vision of the future, technology is projected as an autonomous and desirable force: as the advertisement for a brand of toothpaste declares, we are heading towards 'a brighter, whiter future'. Its desirable products generate more desire; its second order side effects require more technology to solve them. There is thus a perpetual feedback loop. The New is an integral part of that feedback loop. One need not be a technological determinist to appreciate the fact that this self-perpetuating momentum has locked us in a linear, one-dimensional trajectory that has actually foreclosed the future for the non-West. An illusion of accelerated movement is produced to create an illusion of inevitability and shroud the Eurocentric dimension of the exercise.

Conventionally, the colonisation of the future was known as 'westernisation'. Now it goes under the rubric of 'globalisation'. It may be naive to equate the former with the later, but the end product is the same: the process that is transforming the world into the proverbial 'global village', rapidly shrinking distances, compressing space and time, is also shaping the world in the image of a single culture and civilisation.

JK: You speak of a 'Western psyche'. What, do you feel, are its salient psychological characteristics? In what ways is it 'dark'?

ZS: It is dark in the sense that it is diametrically opposite of what the West believes and says about itself. It is the evil within the West that the West, while projecting it on to Others, denies both to itself and to other cultures and peoples. Of course, it is not to say that evil is the sole property of the West. All cultures, in so far as they are human, have evil within them; otherwise they will be angelic or superhuman. And, for any culture, the most difficult thing to acknowledge is the evil within them. The West has solved this problem by projecting their inner evil on those who they saw as outsiders. Amongst the first victims of these projections were the Muslims who presented three problems to Christendom. The first problem was theological: what need was there for an Arabian Prophet when God's own son had died on the Cross to redeem us all? The second problem was intellectual and civilisational: throughout the middle ages, from the eighth to the fifteenth century, the Muslim civilisation was intellectually superior to the West and thus presented it with a cerebral challenge. The military strength of Islam presented the third problem: Islam had penetrated Spain and was

knocking on the doors of Vienna. Demonisation was thus used as an instrument both to contain and deal with Islam. Thus Muslims were represented with all that Europe considered to be evil: depraved, licentious, barbaric, ignorant, stupid, unclean, inferior, monstrous, infidels, ugly, fanatic and violent. These categories are the darker side of the West.

Later on, this form of representation was made into a general principle of conquest. Any culture that Europe wanted to conquer or subjugate was described in these terms; the categories provided legitimacy for suppression, conquest, colonisation and even total annihilation. Moreover, the categories were also refined - and, as I said earlier, we find them in their refined form in modernity and postmodernism.

JK: Are you saying that demonisation of Other cultures is unique to the West?

ZS: Yes. I am. All cultures, at least to some extent, see outsiders as a threat; some even demonise them. But no culture has this form of representation as a knowledge industry. I mean there is no equivalent of Orientalism as a discourse in Islam, China or India. Indeed, there is no discipline or forms of knowledge devoted to the study of the West in the major civilisations of the world. Given that these civilisations have suffered at the hands of the West one would expect them to devote some of their scholarly energies to studying the West and seek to develop discourses of representations. But this is not the case, partly because demonisation is not a knowledge category in non-western cultures, but also because, as I mentioned earlier, what is knowledge and what is not knowledge is actually defined by the West. So when the white man wanted to study his own society, he called the discipline sociology - its aim was to understand western society. When he studied Other cultures, with the goal of controlling and managing them, he called it anthropology. Now the tragic irony is that when non-western societies study themselves, they do anthropology; in other words, they study themselves as the white man studied them!

We find that Eurocentrism is intrinsic in the disciplinary structure of knowledge. Virtually all the disciplines of social sciences, from economics to anthropology, emerged when Europe was formulating its worldview and are geared to serving the needs and requirements of Western society and promoting its outlook. Eurocentrism is entrenched in the way these disciplines are structured, the concepts and categories they use for analysis, and the way progress is defined within the disciplines. Of course, disciplines have evolved and changed with time. But just as modernity represents a more sophisticated form of Eurocentrism than colonialism, and postmodernism refines it even further, so the evolution of disciplines has made them more and not less Eurocentric. But whereas in the colonial shape of these disciplines Eurocentrism was overt and obvious in their modernist and postmodern incarnations, Eurocentrism is more deeply embedded and therefore not so easily discerned. There is nothing that says social and physical reality is laid out as defined by the disciplinary structure of the western knowledge system. The idea that reality is compartmentalised as 'physics' and 'sociology', 'religion' and 'politics', 'law' and 'ethic' is not based on some universal axiom; rather, it is a product of the worldview of the West. All disciplines, including those of natural sciences, are a product of the cultural milieu of colonialism and modernity, are manufactured entities, and have evolved to perpetuate the worldview of the West. Thus

Eurocentrism is embedded in the very structure of knowledge and the construction of individual disciplines. Thus demonisation of Other cultures is not only unique to the West; it is in fact an integral part of the disciplinary structure of knowledge as it exists today.

JK: To recap somewhat, you have said that you reject the projected notion of technology as an autonomous and desirable force: by your reckoning, it follows a vector that moves us toward a culturally 'one-dimensional' territory. I'm disposed to agree with this. As early as 1941, Marcuse notes 'the standardisation of thought under the sway of technological rationality' and the resultant creation of 'one dimensional', capitalistic culture. In *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology*, he glosses Instrumental Rationalism ('matter-of-factness') as being complicit with this process, in the sense that it cooperates in turning 'human instincts, desires and thoughts into channels that feed the apparatus'. But whereas Marcuse was responding to the threats of fascism in isolated geographical zones, we may be confronted with, as you say, a globalised homogeneity of culture already underpinned by a set of powerful, operational strategies - such as Postmodernism itself.

Given the advancement of this process, what tactics could we employ (assuming that the possibility of a 'peoples' revolution' has already been annulled) in order to encourage a breaking of rank?

ZS: First of all, I must say that I do not believe in violent, political revolution. Even if this possibility was there, we have enough historic evidence to suggest that revolutions do in fact devour their own children. But we do need to work towards transforming the world, including the Net, into a more pluralistic, just and equitable place. It would not happen automatically; it has to be thought about, worked for and fought for.

In thinking about tactics, one of the first things to note is that we have no real language of dissent. Dissent has actually been co-opted. If you accept my argument that Eurocentrism is in fact deeply ingrained into the disciplinary structure of knowledge, then all dissent articulated within this disciplinary structure does not really constitute true dissent. I mean an anti-colonialist anthropologist is still an anthropologist; he or she still does anthropology, with all its disciplinary connotations, however much he or she is aware of the ideological underpinnings of the discipline.

Dissent within modernity still promotes modernity - in fact, it makes it stronger. Witness how the Green movement, for example, has been totally assimilated into the dominant power structure. How the sixties hippies are now the leaders of corporations. The Net itself is supposed to be a product of dissent - yet, as I have tried to show, it is now a major instrument for foreclosing pluralistic futures. So all conventional form of dissent works only as a fashion: in the academia as new movements within well-defined disciplines or in the outside world as new style statement. The point is that any new form of dissent, any new theory of liberation, as long as it comes from within the dominant structures, is transformed with adequate time into a civilising mission, a new justification for oppression and promotion of the status quo. Thus, the first thing we need is a totally new language of dissent - a language of dissent that is

itself a form of dissent in that it shapes a discourse over and above the current structure of knowledge.

I do not know what form this language will take. But I do feel that we need to look at non-western categories of thought for some guidance here. We look at non-western ideas and notions, say of Buddhism or Hinduism, in basically two forms. We either romanticise them, which is a form of Orientalism; or we celebrate them for their diversity and difference as though they represented some form of annual festival. What we actually need to do is to embrace them as our categories of thought and analysis. I have already argued that if we replace the territorial metaphor so common in cyberspace with say the notions of the Inner Self we will both react differently to cyberspace and shape its future in a radically different way. I would like to offer that as a general principle: we need to learn to think and work with radically different concepts and categories and the only place where truly different modes of knowing, being and doing exist is the non-West. Now, I am not saying that we should freely appropriate non-western categories and notions and consume them - that would be a very postmodern thing to boot. What I am saying is that we should create a culture and tradition of thought and analysis and action based on non-western categories with the full participation of the non-West.

I suppose it goes without saying that such an exercise would create new, radically different disciplines - disciplines that would emerge not necessarily from opposition to the West but from a matrix of concepts and categories that are not of the West. As such they would be genuinely different.

Finally, the whole function of the exercise, the real meaning of dissent, is to keep the future open. I think the sole function for breaking ranks is to defy and subvert the 'inevitable' in the future. The future has simply become another term, to use the words of my friend Ashis Nandy, 'for a tomorrow which dare not be anything other than a linear projection of yesterday'. In other words the future has been colonised; and the Net is a major instrument of that colonisation. What do we break ranks from? We break ranks from a colonised future by attempting to decolonise it. We have to do that, indeed we must do that, because the future is the only arena that can provide us with enough space to be different - to be other than the West.

JK: Ziauddin Sardar, thank you very much.

Ziaddin Sardar Wikipedia Entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziauddin_Sardar

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