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## *Reading Cotton, Climate and Camels as Critical Muslim Studies*

Richard W. Bulliet, *Cotton, Climate and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History*, Columbia University Press, 2011, 184 pp., \$28.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780231148375.

### *Of Black and White Cats*

Deng Xiaoping once famously remarked that it did not matter whether a cat was black or white; as long as it caught mice it was a good cat.<sup>1</sup> On the evidence of *Cotton, Climate and Camels in Early Islamic Iran* it would seem that Richard Bulliet is a good cat. It is perhaps odd to begin a reflection on Bulliet's book with reference to the Vice-Chairman and author of China's four modernizations. Deng's observation was made in 1961 but took on greater poignancy five years later when it seemed like a riposte to the excesses of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, in particular the insistence that ideology was more important than scholarship (for example, in the words of one of the slogans of the time "better Red than expert"). The same conflict between ideology and knowledge can be seen in the so-called culture wars in US academies. The significance of these campus culture wars is more than just an account of a bloodless game of thrones that characterizes academic careers (who is promoted, who has been tenured, who blocked who, etc.), for the battle lines are drawn between those who want to promote the idea of a self-contained Western canon and those who want to decolonize it. Those who want to imagine something that transcends the Western order of things are very often admonished not to worry about the color of cats but to focus on catching mice. In other words, an "ideological" critique is invalid and the academic should undertake research and teaching that adheres to the old verities and virtues of academia, that is, disinterested pure knowledge easily accessible and unencumbered by obtuse postcolonial or postmodern thought, the assumption being that academic knowledge, done properly, would be an uninterrupted tale of a world that goes from Plato-to-NATO. It is only ideology that distorts the self-evident truth of this sequence.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank AbdoolKarim Vakil and Shveta Vyas for their assistance with the various versions of this article, and also Lucian Stone for his patience and diligence throughout the whole process.

Good academics, like good cats, do what comes naturally and tell us the truth armed with facts and data. It is by the patient accumulation of facts that truth can be apprehended.<sup>2</sup> The royal road to wisdom, according to this view, is paved with a pragmatic positivism. Postcolonial posturing and post-structuralist theorizing, then, get in the way of this positivism and the Plato-to-NATO grand narrative that it discloses.

In many ways *Cotton, Climate and Camels* would seem to be an unlikely contender for a postcolonial reading. It is a book that seems to be unconcerned with postcolonial theory; there is no reference to Orientalism, let alone deconstruction. It is a book that seems very conventional in its presentation. Bulliet is very conscientious in the use of evidence (as much as the subject matter allows) to forge his argument. Its mode of exposition is easily accessible to a lay audience, such as one that is an avid consumer of popular historical synthesis like those offered by authors such as Tom Holland, or popular documentaries found on the History Channel (thankfully without their breathless faux excitement over new discoveries). The references in *Cotton, Climate and Camels* tend to be to other historians rather than literary theorists or postmodern philosophers. It does not focus on the modern or even on modernity's immediate antecedents. It is not a history of a subaltern formation or suppressed people that needs to be uncovered. The topics and philosophical pyrotechnics that are often the hallmark of postcolonial investigations seem to be missing altogether from its pages. In short, *Cotton, Climate and Camels* does not seem to belong to the genre of postcolonial reading of history at all. There is, however, more than one way to skin a cat.

The clue as to what *Cotton, Climate and Camels* does better than many postcolonial texts can be found in its subtitle: *A Moment in World History*. Bulliet is not presenting a detailed point-by-point critique of the domination of the Plato-to-NATO version of world history, but something more radical and unsettling. His book offers the prospect of what an alternative world historiography might look like—a historiography in which the Iran of the third/ninth century is a part of world history and not just regional history or national history. It is his attempt to capture something of this moment in world history that gives *Cotton, Climate, and Camels* its decolonial potential and its re-positioning within the emerging field of Critical Muslim Studies.

In what follows I will show in conversation with *Cotton, Climate and Camels* the possibility of a world history different from one centered on Europe, why this is different from the staples of scholarship on matters Islamicate, and the way in which this opens up decolonizing possibilities. This may seem to be a large (and perhaps unnecessary) burden to put on a small elegant book. *Cotton, Climate and Camels*, however, as I will argue, is more than able to bear the burden of a decolonial reading.

The study of the early Islamicate world confronts major challenges ranging from the narrowly historiographical to the broadly cultural. Clearly, the history of periods and problems dominated by a lottery of surviving and accessible documents, raises a profound methodological challenge to the very enterprise of conventional conceptions of what history should be. For some historians the claims that are made by Bulliet are perhaps too much and based on too little.<sup>3</sup> The study of early Islam clearly falls within the ambit of subjects in which profound uncertainty is not far from the surface. Some of this uncertainty is to be

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Fredric Volpi's excellent critique of this belief in the positivist credo as proclaimed by Olivier Roy. Fredric Volpi, *Political Islam Observed* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2010), 1-24.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Maya Shatzmiller's review, "Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran: A Moment in World History," *Iranian Studies*, 45:2, (2012) 308-311. An otherwise favorable review, Shatzmiller makes the point that sometimes Bulliet's argument carries him beyond the reach of his evidence (310-311).

expected simply in the way that evidence, upon which to base our understanding of this period, is unable to command the degree of confidence that many historians would like. While I would describe Bulliet's approach as innovative, for the more conservative scholars it may be more akin to *bid'ah*.

This methodological challenge of producing a historical analysis out of fragments and models is compounded when considering the history of societies and cultures which are doggedly marked as being non-Western. Since such considerations take place in the context of questions like: to what degree can Western representations of Western culture, history or social relations provide an implicit or explicit standard by which we can understand societies and cultures which are described as non-Western? Thus the difficulty of studying the early history of the Islamicate venture is not only due to the element of chance that governs the survival of evidence but also the uncertainty of the interpretive framework by which the evidence can be made meaningful. So, for example, does the category of religion as conceptualized by European Enlightenment thinkers have a purchase value outside of the cultural practices that made such a conceptualization of religion central to its way of life? Would Muslims (as much as Hindus, Jews, or Zarathustra's followers) find themselves running against the limit of such a conceptualization, so much so, that the use of this category of religion would hinder our understanding rather than enable it?

In the second decade of the war on terror and its attendant intensification of Islamophobia, many of these historical debates have spilled over into the wider culture and have become embroiled in disputes which have little to do with history as such but more to do with the present attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. From time to time historical controversies do become intertwined with wider cultural disputations, (e.g., Martin Bernal's argument for Egyptian influence on Greek culture and the politics of "Afrocentrism") and in so doing raise the stakes for the kind of continuity of normal protocols of knowledge production. Currently this is the case for any study of Islam and Muslims, since the history of the Islamicate past seems to be continually on trial in a kangaroo court comprised of "instant experts": Islamic imperialism is worse than European imperialism; the scale and durations of trans-Saharan slavery is contrasted with the apparently lesser scale and shorter duration of trans-Atlantic slavery; Muslim attitudes to minorities are contrasted to European attitudes to minorities; the interpretations of the Qur'an are contrasted with radical achievements of Biblical scholarship; et cetera. The point of these comparisons is enabled by a developing culture around the war on terror. The development of these cultural supplements to the war on terror puts into sharper relief the way in which the certainty of belief among Muslims is placed on the same ontological plane as the skepticism that is considered to be the hallmark of professional historians. Thus, the quest for a historical Prophet of Islam and the ideas of the non-existence of the original Qur'an in Arabic sit alongside problems common to historians about sources and their reliability. The study of Islamicate history confronts not only the challenges arising from the uncertainty of reliable source material and its limitations (in that our sources were not always interested in what we are interested in), but the polemicization of such historiographical endeavors often becomes a grist to the intensification of Islamophobia and leads to disciplining the range of historical explanations available.<sup>4</sup> Thus serious historians who wish to avoid the Islamophobic prism

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<sup>4</sup> Thus organizations like Campus Watch, and the hounding of individual academics (e.g., Norman Finkelstein, Edward Said, or Joseph Massad—just to name a few prominent examples) contribute to the challenges that studies of the Islamicate (in its various manifestations) often confront.

often find themselves under attack not just for the political positions they take but also for their professional practice as scholars.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most challenging issues historians not entirely caught up in the study of specific constellations of “recent” events confront is the question of what exactly the entity that they are analyzing is. Bulliet, taking his cue from Fernand Braudel, points out that “traditional political boundaries and dynastic eras” may not have much value for historians that study conjunctures and *longue duree* (143-144). This lack of purchase of traditional categories is compounded by a problem any history that stretches beyond a particular horizon of intelligibility faces, that is, the persistence of the themes of its narrative. Outside essentialist accounts, the existence of objects of historical analysis is recognized to be mutable. The parameters and degree of that mutability is what is often the bone of contention. A historian is faced with the task of having to invent a vocabulary capable of wrestling with this mutability of the object of its narrative or carry out a translation between the past and the present, which may or may not be clumsy or misleading. This is why Marshall Hodgson’s *Venture of Islam* provides not only one of the earlier critiques of Orientalism but also one of the most influential attempts to forge an alternative conceptual vocabulary that seeks to go beyond the constraints of Orientalism.<sup>6</sup> For the most part historians writing in and from the modern episteme rely on translations based on Westernese, in which the sequence from Plato-to-NATO becomes a universal comparator and its terms are considered to have more or less general applicability. One way to describe this kind of writing is to call it Orientalism.<sup>7</sup>

Traditionally, Orientalism has tended for many periods of history to be dominated by the study of Islam and Islamicate phenomena. The “venture of Islam” has a robust metonymic relationship with the Orient in the Western imagination. One way to think about Orientalism is to understand it as fulfilling the conditions of what Thomas Kuhn described as normal science. Normal science is understood as a body of knowledge that a community of scholars relies on for the basis of further research and teaching.<sup>8</sup> Like any normal science, Orientalism provides the standards and protocols which seek to organize the production of knowledge, indicate the fruitful paths for future research and what tracks one should not take or trespass on. Normal sciences are capable of incorporating many criticisms as long as they do not appear to challenge the paradigm itself.

According to those who dismiss Said’s *Orientalism*, his scorched earth critique leaves nothing in its wake but ashes—i.e., it does not tell us how to replace Orientalism. One way to understand the project of decolonizing knowledge is to see it as an attempt to replace Orientalism. There have been two responses to the critique of Orientalism: one has been to carry on as before and pretend that it’s really not an issue, while the other response has been an attempt to struggle with some of the implications of the critique of Orientalism but assimilate them into the interior of the existing paradigm. Thus, Orientalism has managed to

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Richard Bulliet’s elaboration of themes such as those outlined in his book, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), are often condemned by neo-conservatives because they assume that the scholarship of those who do not share their worldview is necessarily tainted by partisanship.

<sup>6</sup> It has to be pointed out that Bulliet, in his 1978 review of *The Venture of Islam*, was rather dismissive of Hodgson’s new conceptual vocabulary. See Richard W. Bulliet, “Review of *The Venture of Islam* by Marshall G. S. Hodgson,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1978), 157-158.

<sup>7</sup> By Westernese I mean a language game that establishes the centrality and continuity of the Western enterprise.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 24-28.

incorporate some of its criticism often in the guise of post-orientalism, and continued to safeguard its overall coherence and continuity.

There is, as I have argued elsewhere, a key difference between a weak version of Said's criticism of Orientalism and a strong version.<sup>9</sup> In a weak version, Said's critique takes the shape of a sociology of knowledge in which what is wrong with Orientalism is particular to one or more authors or approaches. This is the sort of criticism that in its more popular versions becomes little more than an elaborate conspiracy of epic proportions in which all those who study matters Islamicate are considered to be either acting in bad faith or are delusional. Unfortunately, many scholars respond to the charges of being accused of (weak) Orientalism by reading the structural critique as biographical criticism. Weak Orientalism has difficulty in accounting for regularities in the production of knowledge without the intervention of co-ordinating agents, as a consequence its import simply gets lost in the more mundane issues about good and bad scholars.

Given Said's deployment of Foucauldian insights, it is odd that such a non-structuralist approach to Orientalism has taken hold.<sup>10</sup> Part of the reason for this is perhaps because this sort of criticism can be seen as demanding not a paradigm shift but rather a series of corrections. The strong version of the critique sees in Orientalism the need to dismantle the paradigm, not to reform the normal science, because the problem is not reducible to the skill or otherwise of particular approaches or authors but rather to something far more profound than that—it is about the logic and coherence of the paradigm itself.

The challenge to Orientalism's status as a normal science has come from a number of quarters, but what empowered and facilitated the critique of Orientalism is the postcolonial turn. This is based on the recognition that that world was organized around a violent hierarchy between the West and the non-West. The difference between the West and non-West tended to trump all other differences in a sustained and systematic manner. This organization of the world was not only economic and geopolitical, but also epistemological. It is the erosion (not elimination) of this violent hierarchy that best describes the postcolonial condition.<sup>11</sup> The subject matter of *Cotton, Climate and Camels* seems to be distant from the concerns of the postcolonial; however, as I will show, conceptually the book shares an epistemological family resemblance with postcolonial considerations, to the extent that these considerations turn upon the dialectic of agency and structure across the West and non-West divide.

### *When Cotton was King*

Under Abbasid rule the land of two rivers had regained a centrality that it had lost in the last century of Seleucid rule.<sup>12</sup> Iraq was the center of a world system stretching from Tunisia to Central Asia (136-137). Bulliet's book analyzes the manner in which this centrality was eclipsed by the Iranian plateau in the 300 years after the Muslim conquests. *Cotton, Climate*

<sup>9</sup> S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islam* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 32-36.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, had a complicated relationship with structuralism, but would concede that his work could be seen as belonging to a kind of structuralist genre until the *The Archeology of Knowledge*. See Herbert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, with an afterword by Michel Foucault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), xi-xii.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," in *Formations of Modernity: Understanding Modern Society*, ed. Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (UK: Polity Press, 1992), 275-332.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 257.

*and Camels* can be seen as an investigation into one of the main questions that haunt the history of the Islamosphere: almost 300 years after the Muslim conquest of the Sassanid empire, how did the Persianate come to play such an important part in the development of the Islamicate? The prominence of the Persianate is evidenced by the way Persian became the second language of the Islamicate world system, by the way in which apparently Persian memes began to influence Islamic religious beliefs and Muslim cultural practices, and by the way in which so many Persian speakers began to play such a prominent part in the Islamosphere.

Bulliet follows an indirect approach to answer this question. He starts by trying to explain why the Iranian plateau, not previously known as an area of relatively high rates of urbanization, began to see the emergence of (what were by pre-modern standards) very large cities. Even when Iran was the center of the world order around the time of Cyrus and Darius and when perhaps over half of the then population of the planet paid homage to the King of Kings, such large-scale urbanization was absent in the Iranian plateau. Explaining pre-modern demographic growth in non-Western contexts has generally meant seeing cities as little better than Weber's military camps. Even if we are to discount the blatant Eurocentrism of some of these accounts, there seems to be general agreement that large pre-modern cities tended to be associated with capitals, since it was only political authority that established the necessary conditions for sustained urban growth in economies dominated by agriculture and unlikely to be much more productive beyond the subsistence level.

Bulliet's answer to the reasons behind this urbanization is to see it as being caused by what can be described as kind of proto-industrialization. To be more precise, he argues that this urban growth was based on the development of a textile industry centered on a cotton boom. There is little doubt that there exist many historical instances in which large-scale cotton production has been at the heart of an entire social formation (11). The challenge is to provide evidence for the existence of such a cotton boom, given that, as Bulliet himself clarifies, prior to the third/ninth century there is no indication that cotton was grown on the Iranian plateau on a commercial scale. Cotton production was mainly confined to oasis towns like Bukhara and Samarkand in Central Asia (8).

Bulliet's explanation for the cotton boom in Iran combines the analysis of supply and demand for cotton. The supply side of the argument is based around the imperatives and consequences of the emergence of commercial agriculture in an economy largely dominated by subsistence farming. The injunction of large-scale investment into an economy that must have been close to subsistence level most certainly would have produced a major transformation of social relations.

Salaried armies were fairly rare prior to the military revolution of the sixteenth century. This rarity was such that it could often confer a long term comparative advantage when facing armies of soldiers who were not paid professionals. Paying a large military force has a number of consequences. Firstly, it is a most powerful force for the institution of the state. The resources needed to pay for salaries tended to be the largest item of expenditure in pre-modern armies ranging at around the fifty to seventy percent mark. Secondly, the payment of a large military force helped to commercialize pre-modern economies. Soldiers in receipt of regular income had to spend the money.<sup>13</sup> Michael Mann, writing about the Roman

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<sup>13</sup> See Keith Hopkins, "Taxes and Trade in the Roman Empire (200 B.C.-A.D. 400)," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 70 (1980): 101-125, for a model of the Roman economy based on the recycling of taxes paid to soldiers by trade. This highly influential model has subsequently been tweaked but not to my knowledge substantially replaced.

Empire, describes the process as being a form of military Keynesianism. Expenditure on military garrisons, logistical and communications infrastructures, and a salaried soldiery all combined to boost “coinage, trade and economic development.”<sup>14</sup> Bulliet describes a somewhat analogous process in which Muslim soldiers use their salaries paid in coin (rather than land or rent) to invest in commercial agriculture (15).

The specifics of the caliphate’s military Keynesianism are provided by climatic, environmental, and cultural factors. Climatically cotton could be grown alongside wheat and barley in the Iranian plateau and in different times of the agricultural cycle. Environmentally the Iranian plateau could be irrigated by *qanats*. *Qanat* irrigation was expensive and therefore needed a crop that could yield higher rates of return. Thus, Bulliet argues the proliferation of what he calls *fulanabad* (so-and-so settlements) is linked to the development of settlements based on *qanat* irrigation (17-19). For, as he notes, etymologically the suffix *-abad* is associated with the term for water (22). Cotton has a number of advantages as a product; it is relatively of high value and relatively easy to transport. Bulliet demonstrates its value by using the scheduled tax to determine the high value of cotton relative to saffron, wheat, and barley, concluding that cotton farming was more profitable than wheat farming (16). He strengthens his argument by arguing that caliphal tax policy sought to discourage the production of cotton in favor of growing wheat (17). Bulliet admits, however, that this seems like a relatively modern take on tax policies, but he does not think that proto-modernity could not occur within the Islamic world system.

Thus cotton could become a cash crop in the Iranian plateau. The question is why it did not do so earlier. If Bulliet was wedded to an economic explanation, then the existence of an investment opportunity would be sufficient to explain its being taken up by profit-maximizing actors. Bulliet, however, is not content to simply see the cotton boom as a product of investment opportunities for an armed Muslim salariat. The rejection of economicism requires Bulliet to account for the gap between the possibility of a cotton boom and its actuality. This leads him to examine the demand side of his argument.

Bulliet argues that the cotton boom itself was also a product of increased demand for cotton, which itself was a product of the prohibition on Muslim men wearing silk. Many (Orientalist) accounts of Muslim behavior would rest at this point. It would be sufficient to find the Prophetic or Qur’anic injunction, cite it and that would be that. Such a method is not only a function of non-Muslim scholarship but is also the mode of reasoning that contemporary and past Muslims would be comfortable with.

If *Cotton, Climate and Camels* refused essentialism of the economy only to succumb to the essentialism of ideology, it would not add much. Bulliet does have a series of citations from the tradition in which Muslim men are forbidden to wear silk, but he places the efficacy of these injunctions in context. The context is the conversion of Zoroastrians into Muslims. Here Bulliet, building on his previous path-breaking work on conversion to Islam, shows how the prohibition on the wearing of silk had a significant impact not because it was believed to be a canonical injunction but because in the context of a growing Muslim minority silk was articulated as a signifier of the aristocratic luxury and corruption associated with those who continued to support the Sassanids and whose embrace of Islam was at best hesitant or opportunistic. Bulliet sees the prohibition of silk as an aspect of “competitive aesthetics” by which a Muslim identity was being forged in the aftermath of the conquest of Sassanid domains (51). This means that the significance of the prohibition of silk and its

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 278.

effective mobilization and de-mobilization reflect the transformation of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims rather than permanent sumptuary commandments (52).

Bulliet does not spend much effort in telling us about the relationship between politics and the formation of collective identities, rather he shows this process at work to account for the cotton boom that transformed the Iranian plateau and, by extension, the Islamicate venture. He does this by focusing on the process by which women and men take actions in circumstances in which there are no sound guidelines or clear precedents. These actions are expressions of who they are, who they want to be, and who they are becoming. Bulliet draws attention to this process of decision-making by democratizing Hegel's world-historical figures or Hodgson's creative acts (viii-x), which he does by describing the entwined process by which more and more people in what had been the Sassanid Empire become Muslims. This structural dislocation is not, however, the preserve of "great men and women" but of ordinary people who also have to make decisions as the world around them spins to different rhythm.

The idea of Muslims making decisions and expressing their agency—that is Muslims not determined by theology, ecology, or ideology—is rarer than we have the right to expect. The issue at stake, as Hamid Dabashi's provocative new book might put it, is: can Muslims think?<sup>15</sup> Muslims and other peoples of the South (which of course is not a geographical but a political designation) are forever a people without history.

### *History Making as Agency*

The idea of Muslim agency is one of the main factors which brings forth the decolonial impulse of Bulliet's account. The context of this discussion can be seen by the speculation around how to position these Muslim conquests and the degree of social and cultural transformation they brought about in relation to other rapid conquests associated with Alexander and his successors, or Genghis Khan and his successors. The degree and duration of the consequences of Muslim conquest remain the subject of much debate, some of which is academic and serious while much of it is polemical and deeply partisan. The significance of these debates goes beyond the academy and raises two major questions.

First is the question concerning the legitimacy of Muslim presence in the contemporary world. If it can be shown that Muslims and Islam are illegitimate, then it is easier to dismiss their demands for autonomy. This explains the extent to which so much polemical effort has been invested in the systematic discrediting of the figure of the Prophet—ranging from the recycling of medieval Christian polemics to the application of asymmetric anachronistic standards to the actions of early Muslim leaders, to attempts to displace the violence of the European colonial enterprise onto the venture of Islam. Secondly, if the venture of Islam can be relegated to an iteration of "barbarian-nomadic" invasions, then the constitutive role of Islamicate civilization/culture in the formation of an enduring and in many ways progressive order, as compared to its contemporaries, can be discredited, and thus the teleological view of world history, a simple, "progressive" unfolding of Plato-to-NATO, can be preserved.

One of the main achievements of *Cotton, Climate and Camels* is the extent to which it presents a coherent argument in which Muslims are neither governed by theological or economic injunctions or compulsions, nor the whims of great conquerors or great sages. Bulliet paints a canvas in which the tension between contingency and necessity is fully played

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<sup>15</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

out. This is further emphasized when Bulliet argues that a change in environmental conditions (see Chapter Three: The Big Chill) made a huge contribution to ending the cotton boom.

This cotton boom came to an end as result of a change in climate, which pushed Turkic-speaking nomads southwards and in doing so displaced the literate Persian-speakers and transformed them into a diaspora. The effect of this trade diaspora was to spread Persian cultural memes throughout the Islamopshere.<sup>16</sup> While environment and the economy have a role to play in Bulliet's account, what is radically different about it is its refusal of determinism of the ecological, theological, or economic variety.

A decolonial reading requires a recognition of contingency in the affairs of mice, men, and women. Contingency is not possible in accounts dominated by essentialism. If Persians are always Persians, then there is little scope for contingency. This makes Persian identity as somehow outside the process of historical formation. In other words, 300 years of Muslim rule, it is imagined, has had almost no effect on what it means to be Persian, so much so that if you can scratch a Muslim of the Iranian plateau you find the Persian lurking beneath.

It is unfortunate that Bulliet follows convention and refers to the Muslim conquest of the Sassanid Empire as an Arab conquest.<sup>17</sup> This has the effect of ethnicizing the Muslim enterprise. Bulliet is aware of the difficulties of arriving at a meaningful designation of collective formations, as he and his co-authors of *The Earth and Its Peoples* point out in relation to the vexed problem of what to call the peoples who were present in the Western Hemisphere before 1492. It was the antagonism against Europeans produced by the invasions and occupations of their lands after 1492 that imposed a pan-continental collective identity on these peoples, and common labels such as "Indians," "Native Americans," "First Peoples," and "Indigenous Peoples" reflect that history.<sup>18</sup> Thus, to resort to ethnic labels risks essentializing these collective formations and de-historicizing the contingency of their formations and the discontinuity of their connotations.

Changing collective identities in a sustained manner so much so that the changes become capable of trans-generational reproduction, and so deep-rooted that it becomes almost impossible for individuals and communities to recover what they were before the transformations took place, is difficult to accomplish. At stake is the ability to form collective identities. This ability is the function of politics and the political.<sup>19</sup> A people without history are those collective formations that cannot exercise the constitutive role of politics.<sup>20</sup> Thus they experience struggle and conflict as pre-political and timeless (i.e., outside history) terms. Unlike the conflict between France and Britain or Germany and Britain which are deemed to be about something (contending claims for supremacy arising out of the King of England also being the vassal of the King of France, or the bid for world power status and refusal of Britain to permit such a challenge to its own world power status),

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<sup>16</sup> "Memes" are being used here *sous rature*. I have no truck with those accounts that draw tight analogies between memes and genes. My understanding of memes is to see them as linguistic and non-linguistic elements that constitute a discourse and are capable of re-articulation across different discursive formations.

<sup>17</sup> Contrast this with Fred Donner's argument that the designation of the conquest as being carried out by Arabs projects back into time notions of ethnicity and nationality which did not have the same connotations or salience as they do now. See Fred McGraw Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2012), 88, 218-219.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Bulliet, et al., *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), xxix.

<sup>19</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 15-19.

<sup>20</sup> S. Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate* (London: Hurst, 2015), 2-3.

conflicts between people without history are instinctive rather than the expression of antagonisms arising from the process of identity formation and contestation. For example, the way in which the Iraq-Iran War was presented as being motivated by the essential animosity between Arabs and Persians, or the way in which conflicts in former Yugoslavia were presented as a consequence of ancient hatreds, and so forth.

Bulliet himself makes two sets of claims for his book. The first claim outlines five major effects of Iran's efflorescence: the shift from Iraq to Iran as the center of economic and cultural production; the relative decline in significance of the Egypto-Syrian region and the attendant neglect of the West; the transformation of life on the Iranian plateau from that of a displaced warrior-aristocracy to an urban centered social and political landscape; the establishment of New Persian as the lingua franca of the Iranian plateau and adjacent regions; and the establishment of pre-conditions for Iran becoming a Shi'a country as the Sunni scholarly elite was dispersed by effects of the big chill and Mongol invasions (136-142). The second set of claims Bulliet makes revolve around the innovative approach of his book. Firstly, he argues that no one has put together these fragments to produce a coherent and cogent account. Although the argument that he presents is based on marshaling elements from studies already conducted, its originality is primarily found in its synthesis. Secondly, Bulliet points out that his mixed methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis to forge a coherent account from often flimsy evidence, is very rare in the study of Islamic history, and thus *Cotton, Climate and Camels* makes an original contribution to establishing a template for further research (2). There is a third claim that I would make on the behalf of *Cotton, Climate and Camels*: the book opens up the possibility of a decolonial reading of the Islamic past. Such a reading sees in the venture of Islam an alternative history. It is based on rejecting the epistemological mooring provided by the hierarchy of the West and non-West. It does this by seeing a large-scale change in world history as being caused by the interplay of capillary actions in which small and large decisions are made by Muslims, and being Muslim is understood as an expression of political agency.

### *Doing What Comes Naturally*

The critique of Orientalism has not (so far) led to a revolutionary breakthrough into a new paradigm. For the most part such critiques have been confined to offering rebuttals of Orientalism rather than imagining an alternative. In the process of linking cotton booms, camel herding, and the big chill of climate change, Bulliet suggests a path for imagining a different kind of history of the Islamic order. When Deng Xiaoping praised good cats for catching mice, what he did not ask is what the purpose of cats is, he simply assumed it. This was an assumption that was widely shared and thus did not require elaboration only a reaffirmation. Whether a cat is good or bad does, however, not depend on whether it catches mice or not but rather on what is assumed to be its purpose. This assumption of purpose may change in line with altered contexts—e.g., a cat's color might hold more value than its ability to catch mice if it is a contestant in a cat show. We live in a world where the space for shared assumptions has in many ways shrunk. In particular, the decentering of the West has made it increasingly difficult to see Eurocentrism as simply being a neutral description of the world. Eurocentrism is not just manifested by unduly obsessive focus on the Western peninsula of the Afro-Asian landmass, but more importantly it an epistemological and cultural category that determines what counts as knowledge. The nexus between knowledge/power becomes clearer as the conditions that underpin the status of Orientalism as a normal science have become frayed. The most productive critique of Orientalism is one

that helps us get away from Eurocentrism inscribed in the master narrative of Plato-to-NATO. A history of the world that challenges the teleology of Westernese has a decolonial potential. This challenge however has to be more than just an attempt to refute the claims of Orientalism; it has to be able offer an alternative. The attempt to provide an alternative to Orientalism is what I would describe as Critical Muslim Studies. It is for this reason that I would include *Cotton, Climate and Camels* within the emerging field of Critical Muslim Studies.

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