

# Civilizational Decline or Intellectual Distortion? Interrogating Lewis's *What Went Wrong?*

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Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong?* promises an inquiry into how one of the earliest and supreme civilizations got eclipsed, fell low and failed in the course of history. Published in the aftermath of 9/11, Lewis's work is less a study of history than a rehearsal of well-worn clichés, wrapped in the authority of an eminent scholar. The question this review essay seeks to address is: How does the book reflect a reductionist, essentialist, and orientalist portrayal of the Islamic world, and to what extent does it overlook the impacts of colonialism, external interventions, and the complex histories of both the Islamic world and the West?

## The Context:

Though dubbed as the 'doyen' of the Middle Eastern Studies by reviewers on the right, it is undeniable that Lewis is a flagrant Orientalist, and his opinions on the Islam and Arab civilisations has not changed much since Edward Said christened his work as 'aggressively ideological', 25 years ago. The book, published in the wake of 9/11, followed by a media campaign that saw Lewis flaunting his love for Israel and consistent disdain for contemporary Islamic societies leaves no doubt as to his lack of objectivity when approaching his research subject.

Lewis's inquiry posits the Islamic world as a civilisational problem to be solved, divided into two sets of 'wrongs' that needed to be addressed, the first being the politico-economic issues of contemporary Islamic nations and the second being the deficiencies of the historical Islamic civilizations (Alam, 2002); it is the second that Lewis is primarily concerned with in his work. The framing of his question hence implies that something went right somewhere else, namely the West, and that the Islamic world has deviated from some presumed normative path of progress. Working in a contextual vacuum, Lewis fails to ask the more important question such as why the West saw a rise in more developed capitalist societies but not the East, and therefore

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implicitly placing the Islamic world in a posture of deficiency. This kind of framing evacuates nuance and fosters a narrative of civilizational decline without attending to the unevenness of historical processes or the role of external factors, such as colonialism and it would not be wrong to assume that such a framing is done deliberately to avoid asking questions which expose the constant exploitation that Eastern societies face at the hands of West even today by dubbing their misfortune as self-inflicted.

### **Orientalist Tropes and Essentialism**

Lewis relies thoroughly on orientalist and essentialist tropes. Even more troubling is his treatment of historical development within the Islamic world. No reform effort undertaken by Muslim societies are credited with sincerity or success. Instead he criticizes the Islamic world for lacking modern liberal institutions but makes no effort to contextualize the complexities of these processes or of the very real structural and external challenges that accompanied them. One of the more glaring omissions is Lewis's failure to acknowledge the comparatively greater degrees of civil tolerance and pluralism that existed in many parts of the Muslim world, particularly during the Ottoman era. While he fixates on the visibility of religious conservatism, most notably the veiling of women, as shorthand for cultural regression, he ignores the broader social realities of the time. When judged within their historical contexts, Islamic societies such as the Ottoman Empire often provided more religious and communal freedoms than their European counterparts. For example, the *millet* system allowed various religious communities, Christian, Jewish, and others, to govern themselves according to their own laws and customs, a level of institutionalized pluralism that had no equivalent in early modern Europe. By contrast, events like the Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834), where state machinery was deployed to persecute, forcibly convert, or expel Jews and Muslims reflect a far more draconian and intolerant social order. In choosing to overlook these comparative freedoms, Lewis not only distorts the historical record but also perpetuates a selective moral narrative.

In his portrayal of Western advancement, Lewis often romanticizes Europe, minimizing its own internal strife and contradictions while taking every chance to heighten any hint of instability in Islamic empires all the while framing their relative stability not as a strength but as stagnation. Lewis often draws a contrast between inquisitive Europeans who, he claims, made earnest efforts to understand the Islamic world, and what he portrays as complacent or inward-looking Muslims, uninterested in the wider world. Worse, he attributes the decline of curiosity solely to internal cultural failings, ignoring the impact of European imperial policies that curtailed Muslim access to knowledge and exchange. This flawed comparison ignores the fact that for much of early modern Europe, interest in Arabic stemmed less from a desire to understand Islam and more from internal Christian motivations, particularly the study of biblical Hebrew, where Arabic offered linguistic insights. Moreover, Lewis's portrayal overlooks the rich tradition of intellectual engagement within the Islamic world in the shape of scholars like al-Biruni, al-Shahrastani, and Qadi 'Abd al-Jabbar, all of whom passionately studied foreign cultures and religions.

Further proof of Lewis's reductionist approach can be seen from his treatment of history as a linear and monolithic narrative which repeatedly portrays the Islamic world and the West as cohesive, unified entities, a view that ignores the rich internal diversity and constant contestations within both. This kind of binary, totalizing thinking is precisely what theorists like Antonio Gramsci (2011) warned against when

discussing social classes or political entities. For instance, to speak of “Islamic armies” or “Muslim war departments” (Lewis 2002, p.17) as if they were unified organs enacting a singular civilizational will overlooks the fragmentary, often internally conflicted nature of empires and societies, and collapses centuries of diversity into a monolithic identity. A narrative of simultaneous conquests by Islamic armies across the globe conjures a phantom entity: a ‘unified Islamic military complex’ that never existed, nor does it today. For Lewis these armies had only one motive: spreading Islam, a historical fallacy that overlooks the importance of other motives like political, economic, and pastoral concerns and the role of Sufi missions (Bulleet, 2004). The erasure of these peaceful modes of expansion in favour of militaristic imagery speaks to the book’s ideological slant.

In collapsing the Islamic world and the West into opposing civilizational blocs, Lewis flattens out the complexity of historical alliances and enmities. The reality of a British-Ottoman alliance is inconvenient to Lewis’s binary framing and so is downplayed. The actual record is one of shifting allegiances that frequently crossed religious lines, undermining the book’s foundational dichotomy. Indeed, the very period Lewis seeks to explain is marked more by intra-civilizational complexity than inter-civilizational antagonism.

This Manichean lens becomes particularly dangerous in the post-9/11 context in which the book gained popularity entrenching the West/Islam dichotomy in the cultural imagination, reinforcing a narrative that has justified wars, surveillance, and discrimination. By emphasizing confrontation/ difference, Lewis contributes to a worldview in which violence between civilizations seems not only inevitable but natural. Lewis’s Darwinian analysis vindicates Western dominance because they did something in the course of their growth that was ‘right’: hence making them the fittest candidate and hence justifying the cleansing of the ‘inferior race’ through racist and colonial policies.

Compounding the problem is Lewis’s neglect of other civilizations and geopolitical actors. India, China, sub-Saharan Africa, and even Central Asia are treated as marginal or irrelevant to the broader story. By focusing almost exclusively on the Ottoman Empire and a few select Arab regions, Lewis gives the impression that the Islamic world is geographically and culturally narrow, and that its trajectory can be analysed in isolation from global dynamics.

Even when Lewis addresses military history, his analysis is selective and misleading. He skips over the military brilliance of the fifteenth and sixteenth-century Ottomans, who innovated with artillery and firearm infantry well before their European counterparts. Instead, Lewis begins his narrative at a point of decline, retroactively projecting a sense of inevitable failure.

His take on industrialization is equally one-sided. He treats its failure in the Middle East as the result of cultural incapacity rather than structural constraints. The role of European-imposed trade policies, resource limitations, and geopolitical pressures are barely addressed.

Even when Lewis does acknowledge colonialism, he does so only to minimize it. He describes European rule in the Middle East as ‘comparatively brief,’ ignoring the depth of its economic, political, and social impacts. From the expropriation of land in Algeria to the partition of Palestine, European powers reshaped the region in ways that reverberate to this day.

There is a persistent tone of smug condescension that runs through the book, a kind of sly, dismissive rhetoric dressed up as wit. At one point Lewis comment that

it is ‘sadly appropriate’ that the first telegraph message sent from the Middle East to the outside world reported a military event: the fall of Sebastopol something he quickly follows with the punchline that the report was wrong, as the city had not yet fallen. This type of rhetorical flourish posing neutrality implies not only that the most notable events from the Middle East tend to be wars, but also that even these are reported inaccurately. And yet it leaves the question as to just how peaceful Europe has been with its staggering war casualties and imperial bloodshed over the past two centuries. Moreover, it is hypocritical of Lewis to criticise the so-called inaccuracy in the telegraph which was but a premature announcement, a common enough occurrence in any war when the US and allies have themselves been guilty of the sensationalism of the events immediately before US invasion of Iraq 2003, and the way the media was used to justify wanton military aggression with lies and propaganda.

### ***What Went Wrong in Contemporary Context***

In light of today’s global political climate, *What Went Wrong?* functions less as a historical analysis and more as an ideological lens through which Islamic civilization is persistently portrayed as deficient. One of Lewis’s most insistent claims is that the Ottomans, and by extension the broader Muslim world, were ‘stuck in the past’, unable / unwilling to adapt to the modern world. But this very notion deserves deeper scrutiny, especially when we consider contemporary examples. The very question which Lewis sets to answer is being posed in the Middle East today also and is among a plethora of questions that Lewis himself differentiates between: those who asked the question ‘who did this to us?’, put blame on others for their problems and those who ask, ‘what did we do wrong?’ are the reformists like Kamal Ata Turk. In modern day Turkey revivalists like President Tayyip Erdoğan have consciously reasserted Ottoman symbolism and religious rhetoric as part of a broader political project to reassert Turkey’s Islamic identity and lost grandeur. Meanwhile remedies have also been suggested and adopted today as well in the past by the modernizers, ranging from military to economic and political reforms with mixed results.

The question lingers: Is the attempt to return towards the lost and fictitious golden era ‘being stuck in the past,’ or is it a strategic use of historical memory to shape modern national identity? And if this constitutes civilizational regression, why is it not read as such when similar phenomena unfold elsewhere in the US, in the shape of the MAGA movement, in India, the Hindu nationalist rhetoric under Modi or in Europe, the far-right movements. Everyone is stuck in the past, because the past is a political tool. All modern states manipulate historical memory to justify their present and secure their future. To single out the Islamic civilization for this impulse is to exoticize and pathologize the Muslim world while ignoring the fact that all civilizations wrestle with the burdens of history and the anxieties of modern life. The real question, then, is not ‘what went wrong?’ but why we insist on imagining that it only went wrong with the ‘Other’ or somewhere else?

### **Scholarly Alternatives:**

One cannot read *What Went Wrong?* without sensing the force of what Michel Foucault (1995) might call a ‘regime of truth’—a system of knowledge that presents itself as neutral and objective, while in fact reflecting the operations of power. Lewis’s text is structured as if it were offering a dispassionate historical diagnosis, yet it traffics in binaries, West/East, modernity/tradition, rationality/fatalism, that echo the very colonial discourses Foucault (1995) and Said (1978) warned us about. In *Discipline*

and *Punish*, Foucault shows how knowledge systems are deeply embedded in mechanisms of control and normalization. Lewis, knowingly or not, contributes to such a system: the Muslim world is rendered as a passive object of study, always lagging behind, always failing to live up to the Enlightenment ideals of the West. The historical specificity of different regions, reform movements such as *Nadha* (Deuchar, 2017), and intellectual traditions within the Muslim world are flattened into a single narrative of decline. In doing so, Lewis doesn't just misrepresent the past, he participates in the production of a discourse that legitimizes geopolitical hierarchies in the present.

Talal Asad's (2003) work adds further depth to this critique challenging the assumption that secularism and Western modernity are neutral or universally desirable 'end(s) of history' (Fukuyama, 1992). In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal shows how secularism itself is a culturally and historically contingent formation, one that has been deeply entangled with colonialism and imperialist modes of governance. This is crucial for reading Lewis, who treats the West's secular, liberal order as the benchmark against which Islamic societies must be measured and inevitably found wanting.

To conclude, *What Went Wrong?* is less a work of history than a polemical tract masquerading as scholarship. Its reductive binaries, ideological framing, and disregard for complexity do a disservice to the very questions it claims to explore. For readers seeking to understand the modern history of the Islamic world, it offers not clarity but confusion, not insight but invective. That it comes from one of the twentieth century's most influential Middle East historians only deepens the disappointment.

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