Introduction
The Future of Two Illusions

A whole world riding upon an illusion—
Upon an illusion their war and their peace,
Upon an illusion their pride and their shame—
Rumi, Masnavi (1258–1273)

In mid-November 2019, as the prospect of an impeachment inquiry was haunting Donald Trump’s presidency, of which he was later acquitted in the US Senate, yet another scandalous story broke out. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a highly reliable and widely respected civil rights and anti-racist stronghold, broke the news that Stephen Miller, a Trump White House speechwriter and trusted adviser to the US president, had been the author of hundreds of emails to the editors of Breitbart News, a white supremacist organ, exposing the man’s obsession with immigration from Latin America and Muslim-majority countries into the United States. He did not like the idea. “An analysis of more than 900 emails from Miller to editors at Breitbart News,” as Jamelle Bouie of the New York Times put it, citing the report, “shows Miller’s single-minded focus on nonwhite immigration and his immersion in an online ecosystem of virulent,
unapologetic racism. The Miller of these emails isn’t just an immigration restrictionist, he’s an ideological white nationalist.”

Mr. Miller was quite a powerful figure in Trump’s White House, as Jamelle Bouie put it:

The first travel ban, rolled out within days of President Trump’s inauguration? That was Miller. Family separation at the border? That was Miller too. The relentless effort to limit asylum, deport protected migrants and block refugees from entering the country? Also Miller. The president’s January address from the Oval Office, in which he spun gruesome tales of immigrant crime and violence (“In California, an Air Force veteran was raped, murdered and beaten to death with a hammer by an illegal alien with a long criminal history”)? Stephen Miller.

Among the revelations of this investigation was also the discovery of “a September 2015 email, in which Miller encouraged McHugh [his contact at the racist venue] “to show ‘the parallels’ between Pope Francis’s pro-refugee statements and ‘The Camp of the Saints,’” a 1973 novel by the French author Jean Raspail. In the book, an influx of Indian refugees—described as subhuman and led by a feces-eating demagogue—storm France, killing, stealing, and rampaging until they’ve completely occupied the country. Other migrants follow and eventually overrun Western Europe, turning white Europeans into a subject class.

Whence this animus, wherefor this hatred, to what purpose this xenophobia that is deeply rooted in an almost inexplicable fear of foreigners in general, and Muslims in particular?

Fear of Foreigners

In the actual report of the Southern Poverty Law Center, “Stephen Miller’s Affinity for White Nationalism Revealed in Leaked Emails,”
we read in far more details about Miller’s hatred of all sorts of non-white immigrants, chief among them Muslims. Miller himself is from a family that recently immigrated from Belarus. How is it that he has forgotten or repressed his own immigrant background and so viscerally hates other immigrants, especially if they are Muslim? Boasting of his contacts with Pamela Geller, a notorious Islamophobe, Miller writes to his like-minded comrades: “I suggested Pamela Gellar [sic] do this to illustrate the absurdity of the Left’s theory that you can’t do anything which violates the tenets of fundamentalist Islam. What is more important to the Left: their ‘gay rights’ agenda, or appeasing Islamist immigrants?”

The story of Stephen Miller and his visceral hatred of Muslims and other immigrants while sitting right in the White House was neither unique nor limited to the United States. Anti-Muslim hatred and violent extremism targeting Muslims had been on the rise throughout Europe, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand for decades. With Stephen Miller that hatred had officially entered the highest elected office of the United States government. But the Trump administration was tapping into a much more powerful repertoire of Islamophobia that traveled from one end of the political spectrum to the other. From the Oklahoma bombing of 1995 to the mass murder in Norway in 2011, both committed by white supremacist terrorists, Muslims were first to be blamed before any solid facts were known. Both liberal and conservative venues were quick to blame Muslims for any act of public violence, to the point that the term terrorist has become synonymous with Islam and being a Muslim. I have already written about the systematic manner in which Muslims have become the very metaphors for hatred, fanaticism, and violence. Other caring and competent scholars like Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg in their Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy (2007), Deepa Kumar in her Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire (2012), Khaled A. Beydoun in his American
Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear (2018), and Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin, and Alaya Forte in their edited volume, Contesting Islamophobia (2019) have written extensively on the fertile ground of hatred and prejudice targeting Muslim communities living in the United States or Europe. Whence this hatred, wherefore this bizarre fixation with making Muslims, just for the accident of being Muslims, the enemy of reason, sanity, and civilization?

Underlying all such antipathy is the unexamined presumption of an innate hostility between “Islam” and “the West”—two vast abstractions with frightening powers of persuasion. The constitution of this binary is predicated on a false but powerful presumption perhaps most effectively articulated by Samuel Huntington in his idea of the “clash of civilizations.” This presumed opposition between “Islam” and “the West” corresponds to a particular period of globalized capital when its innate and debilitating contradictions are in need of a fictive center and a global periphery cast as culturally inferior to “the West”—ready for abuse, plunder, and domination. Islam, as the inferior of these two ends, was systematically cast as a deranged culture destined to be ruled by white Christians. At this point, however, we need to overcome this binary. The simple fact is we have transcended it; the condition of empire is no longer bipolar but entirely amorphous. Yet a false consciousness, rooted in the nineteenth-century concept of Europe as the epicenter of civilization, continues to rely on its authenticity, especially after 9/11, which is given outsized importance at the expense of far more immediate, mundane, and political reasons. The works of Huntington, together with those of Francis Fukuyama, Bernard Lewis, and Alan Bloom, demonstrate a collective fear of losing the stronghold of white Christian supremacy. The power of this false consciousness is politically manufactured and was intensified after the election of Donald Trump. But the fact is the patterns of migration around the world are rendering these fictive frontiers between “the West” and “the
Rest” entirely obsolete, and thus Islamophobia provides a fodder for the vacuous but dangerous ideologies of white supremacy.

The objective of Islamophobic leaders in the United States and Europe, as well as Australia and New Zealand, is to end all Muslim migration to their lands. With the outbreak of COVID-19, Islamophobia has exposed its deeper xenophobic roots. “Muslim immigration is tied directly to Islamic terror”: that is the mantra of leading Islamophobes like Pamela Geller and Stephen Miller. It is precisely the fear and loathing embedded in that phrase that is in dire need of dismantling. But how exactly is that dismantling to be done?

Ghosts of Terrors Past

The Arab and Muslim identity of the assailants in the attacks against the United States on 9/11 and the subsequent US military campaigns against Afghanistan in the fall 2001 and Iraq in the spring of 2003, followed by an open-ended “war on terrorism,” once again gave new life to the tired cliché of hostility between “Islam” and “the West.” The underlying assumption was that this war represented yet another example of the irreconcilable differences between two civilizations: between the European Enlightenment and Islamic fundamentalism. Professional warmongers (Samuel Huntington) and born-again Orientalists (Bernard Lewis) who have built careers on this flawed assumption went on a rampage, solidifying the illusion of irreconcilable and transcendental hostility. This assumption is wrong; this binary opposition is fictitious, and a very recent colonial invention; as such, it has wreaked havoc in modern history. It has now exhausted its destructive course. This book is a nail in its coffin.

What I propose in this book may seem entirely counterintuitive. Precisely at a time when the whole world testifies to a rise in Islamic militancy, I propose the end of Islamism as one of the most potent
political ideologies of the last two hundred years. And exactly at a moment when there is a militant crescendo in defense of “Western civilization,” I suggest the final collapse of that colonial fabrication. What today is referred to with iconic certitude as 9/11 was the cataclysmic culmination of a colonially construed binary opposition between “Islam” and “the West.” The planes that were crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center also collapsed the twin towers of “Islam” and “the West” as a representation of enduring hostility.

The US campaign against Iraq and the military operation in Afghanistan that immediately preceded and then accompanied it, as well as the illusory battle against terrorism, are not wars targeted against Muslims as Muslims. They are ideological wars against an abstraction code-named “Islam” launched from the premise of an even more vacuous abstraction called “the West.” Many Muslim countries are effectively in the camp of the United States. Pakistan, Kuwait, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia are its military bases of operation. Jordan provides active and Turkey opportunistic support to US military campaigns. It is true that the populations of these Muslim countries overwhelmingly oppose such aggressions against their fellow Muslims, yet their unelected officials are completely incorporated into the US imperial project. Not even all Muslims oppose the US invasion of Iraq, as the active collaboration of the Muslim Kurdish population of Iraq with the invading army clearly testifies. This is a battle of abstractions with a deeply rooted material basis and benefits to it.

To understand the rising contours of the US empire—the geopolitics of its operation and the formative forces of its hegemony—it is imperative to begin to cultivate an accurate conception of the war against Iraq, of the previous wars in Afghanistan and Kuwait, and of the potential future wars in Iran, perhaps also with North Korea or even Russia and China. But no such accurate conception of the
cumulative effects of these real and potential wars will emerge unless and until we discard the clichés and the assumption of a modern-day crusade against Islam, which is still predominant in both camps and predicated on a presumed binary opposition between “Islam” and “the West.” This battle of abstractions has assumed a life of its own, overriding the far more urgent tasks the world faces. We need to dismantle, theorize, and overcome the delusional predicates of this battle.

The increasingly globalized migrations of labor, the amorphous nature of the capital it engenders, and the predatory militarism with which US imperialism is seeking to control and dominate these processes are entirely color-blind and faithless. The presence of Colin Powel and Condoleezza Rice among George W. Bush’s top advisers and the inclusion of mercenary functionaries like Fouad Ajami, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Kanan Makiya among his less illustrious entourage bespeak more than just the equal-opportunity credentials of the Republican president who took Affirmative Action to the US Supreme Court. The emerging silhouette of the US empire needs a very careful reading, and there is no time to waste on outmoded clichés and superseded concepts. Now more than ever it is imperative to understand when and how the illusion of this binary opposition between “Islam” and “the West” emerged, and how and why it has now reached its last gasp of air. Then we can clear the air and move on to decipher and diagnose the real catastrophe we face: the rise of a predatory empire whose terms of hegemony are yet to be uttered and read.

My principal argument in this book is that the binary opposition “Islam and the West” is a very recent historical construct, born of a particular colonial project, and that with its political function concluded it is now entirely obsolete—having vacated the space it once occupied for a yet-to-be articulated set of alternatively dangerous configurations. To demonstrate this argument, I will first offer
a perspective on Islam prior to its fateful encounter with European colonial modernity. Here I will begin with the charismatic tension that is constitutional to this faith in its historical conception and origin. I will then give an account of the composition of its premodern intellectual and discursive proclivities, before I demonstrate how with the rise of capitalist modernity it was transformed into a singular and exclusive site of ideological resistance to colonialism and thus lost the diversified texture of its multifaceted heritage, as it was mutated by Muslim ideologues into the mirror image of the paramount power they faced, which they called “the West.”

Using this premise, I will then proceed to do a similar act of historical archeology, this time to provide the genealogy of what today we call “the West,” and give an outline of the discursive process by which the historical emergence of capitalist modernity was narrated into the categorical conception of “the West.” Here I will demonstrate how “the West” was constituted as a viable civilizational category covering and disguising the economic relation of power between globalized capital and abused labor. “The West” is a very recent conceptual invention, not earlier than the European bourgeois revolution, the concomitant emergence of the New Class, the collapse of dynastic and ecclesiastical orders, and the active formation of European national economies, polities, and cultures—all of which were brought under the generic rubric of “the West” and contrapuntally contrasted with the rest of humanity, now divided by mercenary Orientalists into various non-Western (Chinese, Indian, or Islamic) civilizations.

Once I historicize and locate “Islam” and “the West,” I will then turn to the opposition that historically emerged between them. Here I will first give a detailed account of how both classical Orientalism and neo-Orientalism have been instrumental in fabricating, perpetuating, and authenticating this binary opposition; I will also demonstrate that when Orientalism was exposed as a colonial project—by
Edward Said in his magisterial achievement *Orientalism*—it was in fact paradoxically further ossified, fetishized, rarified, and consolidated. The cross-categorization of “Islam and the West” thus survived Said’s intervention, first and foremost because the material basis of its continued validity persisted; second because Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and company dropped all pretensions to scholarship and went for an all-out assault, documenting the continued illusion of Manichean opposition of “Islam and the West”; and third because Said, due to his own invested interest in Enlightenment humanism, fell short of fully exposing the barbarity that European capitalist modernity has perpetrated upon the world. The dialectical fetishization of “Islam and the West”—not just “Islam” and “the West” but “Islam and the West” as a unit—survived the work of Said and his followers and continued undetected as the single most potent falsifying binary of our time. My contention in this book is not just that “the West” is a potent illusion, a subterfuge for the brutalities of capitalist modernity, but that anything it touches it turns into an illusion, rarifying it and gutting it of all historical complexity.

The power of the binary that persisted through Said’s insights was picked up by subsequent seminal works such as Abdul R. Jan-Mohamed’s *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983), as well as in the essays collected in Paul Gifford and Tessa Hauswedell’s edited volume, *Europe and Its Others: Essays on Interperception and Identity* (2010), based on the proceedings of a conference held at St. Andrews University in 2007. More poignantly, in his brilliant essay “The Fetish of ‘the West’ in Postcolonial Theory,” Neil Lazarus rightly took the whole postcolonial project coagulating around the concept of “the West” to task:

One of the anchors of the postcolonialist critique, latent in the very term “Eurocentrism,” has been the fetish of “Europe” or “the West.” . . . The concept of “the West” as it is used in postcolonial
theory, I want to argue, has no coherent or credible referent. It is an ideological category masquerading as a geographic one, just as—in the context of modern Orientalist discourse—“Islam” is an ideological category masquerading as a religious one.

Most these studies have been preoccupied, and correctly so, with the false binaries produced by and through the dominant colonial thinking that these thinkers have sought to articulate and map out. Predicated on my much earlier work, in my own most recent books, such as *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (2012), *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (2015), *Europe and Its Shadows: Coloniality after Empire* (2019), and *The Emperor Is Naked: On the Inevitable Demise of the Nation-State* (2020), I have extended these arguments to the brink of detecting emancipatory avenues out of the cul-de-sac of such inherited binaries. It is this latter state that is my point of departure in this book, to no longer be reactive and plaintive about such binaries but to be proactive and altogether overcome them. This is where my argument of the epistemic exhaustion of “Islam and the West” as two confounding illusions finds its potent relevance. I make this argument not based on just epistemological grounds, but entirely on the material fact of a stage of capitalist postmodernity that has devoured its own ideological foregrounding and metaphoric repertoires. Critical thinkers like Lazarus have rightly underlined the fetishized commodity that calls itself “the West” and correctly criticized those postcolonial theorists who have further contributed to this fetishization. Here in this book, however, I examine the contagious disposition of that fetishized commodity, by virtue of its ideological hegemony, when it pairs itself with “the Rest” or “the East” or more specifically “Islam.” It is this pairing that is of immediate interest to me in this book. The transmutation of Islam into a metaphor is the by-product of the fetishized commodity that calls itself “the West.”
While appreciative of much that post-Saidian postcolonialists have done, Lazarus rightly points out:

It seems to me that the way in which “Europe” has been conceptualized by the “provincializers” fatally undermines the efficacy of their critique. For in their hypostatization of “modernity” and “the West”—their dematerialization of capitalism, their misrecognition of its world-historical significance, their construal of it in civilizational terms, as “modernity”—these theorists . . . seem to me to render the structurality of the global system either arbitrary or unintelligible.⁸

But what Lazarus disregards, and I underline, is that the fetishization of “the West” did not begin with Said or his followers. It began with “the West” itself—with the ideologues of its own capitalist modernity. Neither Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918) nor Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (2012) nor countless other similar titles in between these two samples are exactly the highlights of postcolonial thinking! Said was not a Marxist and had no such claims either. He was a literary critic through and through, with ingrained liberal proclivities dominant on North American campuses, of which he was an illustrious product. His problem was to take the self-fetishization of “the West” on face value and set upon himself the task of mapping out the contours of its catalytic effect, and he did that task marvelously, but never turning to the material foregrounding of this “Western” self-fetishization as its most potent ideological commodity. This was not his project. It is my project in this book—exposing “the West” itself as the fetishized ideological commodity, an illusion that turned anything it touched into a fetishized commodity too, in this case what it called “Islam.” Said clearly and repeatedly saw “the West” as a myth, but he never thought of unearthing the commodified fetishism at the roots of that
myth. I do. People and their dominant cultures do not just invent things. Things are invented in their collective consciousness or subconsciousness for a material reason—in this case, the fetishized commodification of relations of production and domination. It was the ideologues of “the West” itself, not Said and his followers, who fell into this trap of the false assumption of a “Western” center for the operation of capital and its colonial peripheries. The factual relation of power and production had implicated a fictitious center-periphery binary that Said never cared to dismantle. I do—and once we do that, a globalized pattern of the abuse of labor by capital emerges that is identical in its central European theater as it is at its falsely peripheralized domains in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The result is the collapse of the center-periphery binary altogether. Colonialism, as I always tell my students at Columbia, is not something that happens “over there,” and capital something that is accumulated “over here.” Colonialism is something that happens here, there, and everywhere. Sweatshops in a Manhattan garment industry neighborhood are as abusive of cheap labor as they are in Guatemala or Honduras. The beneficiaries of the capital are as much in New York, London, and Paris as they are in Cairo, Buenos Aires, or Delhi. Capitalism works like a quilt, not a solar system. Said was after exposing the relation of knowledge production between a fictitious center and its equally fictitious periphery. He did not invent that fiction. He took it for granted—and critically dismantled its aura of authenticity. Without Said’s work I would not be able to expose the very fictitious disposition of that binary, which was rooted in the material interests of the transnational capital (not “the West”), and at the heavy cost of transnational labor (not the “Rest”).

“The West” was the single most potent, the single most fetishized, ideological by-product of capitalist modernity. The Marxist idea of fetishized commodity was encapsulated in the very delusion of “the West,” its crowning ideological achievement. The ideological
commodification of “Islam,” when placed right next to this commodified “West,” was not the work of Orientalists alone. Muslim ideologues themselves, from Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, through Muhammad Abduh, down to Ali Shari’ati, were integral to this project, as I map out in detail in my *Theology of Discontent* (1993). Neither Said nor any of his followers were even slightly interested in this contrapuntal (Said’s own term) commodification of “Islamic Ideology”—fixated as they have been, and rightly so, with the “Western” side of the dangerous delusion. I have been and I remain as much concerned with this commodification of “Islam” by the colonized minds of Muslims themselves as I am with the “West,” and thus my simultaneous attention to the commodified binary of “Islam and the West.”

It is crucial here to recall Marx’s original theorization of commodity fetishism:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labor. It is as clear as noon day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table turning” ever was.⁹
This is precisely what has happened to “the West” too, as the most powerful ideological commodity, sustaining the course of commodity fetishization as Marx originally formulated it. “The West” too at first sight appears a very trivial thing, and “easily understood.” It is from Marx in fact that I have learned that the analysis of “the West” “shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” It is in precisely Marxist terms that we can see the origin of “the West” as a metaphysical and theological proposition—that when Marx was theorizing “religion” he was in fact theorizing “the West,” unbeknownst to himself. As a fetishized totem, “the West” fetishizes everything else it touches, guts it out of its historical complexities and by the power of its hegemony turns it into an illusion too.

Said himself and his epoch-making book *Orientalism* should not be fetishized either. This seminal text must be placed in its own proper context. It is imperative to keep in mind that long before the publication of Said’s book in 1978, the colonial and epistemological problems of Orientalism, of the relation between power and knowledge, had been raised from within specific disciplines, such as by Anouar Abdel-Malek in his *Orientalism in Crisis* (1963) and by Talal Assaad in his *Anthropology and Colonial Encounter* (1973), as well as even earlier by Raymond Schwab in his *Oriental Renaissance* (1950). An even longer philosophical and sociological lineage that extends from Nietzsche to Gramsci, Max Scheler, Karl Mannheim, George Herbert Mead, and Michel Foucault, among others, has exposed the roots of the way people have produced knowledge to twist uncomfortable facts to comforting fictions. Long after Said, too, certain liberal and even left branches of Arab and Islamic studies continued with the thematic explorations of Orientalism and the mystique of Islam in the European context. In his *Europe and the Mystique of Islam* (1988) Maxime Rodinson historicized the rise of Orientalism as a discipline against the background of earlier encounters.
and interfaces. Particularly important in this book is what Rodinson called “theologocentricism in scholarship,” as he sought to rescue the field of Islamic studies from the bondage of Orientalism, and yet still remained rooted in his own critique in that Eurocentric imagination. In the collection of essays that Albert Hourani gathered in his *Islam in European Thought* (1991), he gave his perspective as a professor of history at Oxford of how a sustained course of imagining “Islam” had formed what he called, in a bit of Arabism, *Silsila*, at the root of Orientalism. Ivan Kelmar’s *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and the Notion of Sublime Power* (2012) was an equally important attempt at distinguishing between what he called the “soft Orientalism” of Bishop Lowth and the “hard Orientalism” of Hegel, through which Kelmar sought to give a deeper theological explanation for the idea of “Oriental despotism” as a primarily Western Christian theological issue. By the time Bernard Cohn published his *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (1996), we had already evidence of the expansion of the issue far beyond Islamic domains. Even before Cohen, Enrique Dussel in his *Liberation Philosophy* (1972) and Y. V. Mudimbe in his magisterial book *The Invention of Africa* (1988) had revolutionized the epistemological revolt against the colonial disposition of Orientalism. I could not have brought my Marxist historiography to bear on the global circulation of knowledge and power in my own *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (2015) were it not for these pathbreaking and pioneering works. In other words, a Marxist historiography can remain solid in its historical materialism but still learn from the spectrum of postcolonial theories without falling into the trap of their (perhaps inadvertent) cross-essentialism, which was only the reactive conjugation of the essentialism that had crafted the illusion of “the West” much earlier.

That brings us to the future (which is the present) of these twin illusions—in where and what they have now concluded as their