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Orientalism and/as information: the indifference that makes a difference

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Extended Abstract

Orientalism and/as Information:

The Indifference That Makes a Difference

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Introduction

In a recent work inspired by Borgman's [1] approach to exploring issues at the intersection of information and reality, Chapman [2] outlined a framework for thinking about issues at the intersection of information and religion, viz. information *about* religion, information *for* religion, and information *as* religion. This framework might be complemented by another in which the same issues – that is, information and religion – are reflexively engaged, viz. religion *about* information, religion *for* information, and religion *as* information. However, irrespective of which framework is engaged, in attempting to consider such intersections there is a need to consider how terms should be framed – that is, what 'information' and 'religion' means in each framework.

In an earlier work [3] which introduced a reflexive hermeneutic framework wherein race is considered from an information-theoretical perspective and information is considered from a critical race-theoretical perspective, genealogical links between Bateson's [4] conceptualization of (a unit of) information as "a difference that makes a difference" and Kantian notions of difference were briefly explored. It was shown that a growing body of critical race philosophy scholarship has demonstrated, somewhat controversially, Kant's seminal contribution to what might be described as a modern 'scientific' concept of race. By way of reference to his writings on philosophical anthropology, which describe non-European 'races' in explicitly racist terms (as ontologically-inferior in some sense), it was argued that, insofar as Kant's thinking on race / racism might not be accidental but rather essential to his philosophy[1] – more specifically, his epistemology – it is possible that Kantian racism informs the

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[1] In this connection, Almond [6] refers to "the disputed status of anthropology within Kant's oeuvre" (p.45). In an attempt at resolving this dispute, Mills [23] provides a comprehensive and critical survey of the various positions on this issue, and makes a case for how Kant's racism impacts on his political and moral philosophy. However, insofar as Kant's racist philosophical anthropology inflects his aesthetics, which Mills concedes, and given that aesthetics arguably has at least some relation to, if not bearing on, epistemology, I want to argue for a stronger, albeit more controversial, position, viz. that Kantian epistemology is itself racially-inflected.

Batesonian concept of information. For example, it was noted that Bateson's concept of information, and Kant's concept of aesthetic judgement which inspired it, are fundamentally teleological (or goal-oriented) in that they appeal to selection which is a purposeful act; in addition, attention was drawn to Bateson's assertion that difference entails classification and that all classification is hierarchic. This is significant since, as stated previously, Kant, arguably the *primary* genealogical source of Bateson's conception of information as grounded in difference, is also committed to a hierarchical conception of difference and, in his work on philosophical anthropology, to one in which difference is understood as 'otherness' or 'alterity', rather than change or alteration.

Perhaps most significant for present purposes, however, is Bateson's distinction between what he calls 'Occidental Epistemology' (or OE) and cybernetic epistemology (CE). While it might be argued that Kant's epistemology with its connection to, if not grounding in, Eurocentric philosophical anthropology is a paradigmatic instance of the former, it was previously argued that this move is problematic on at least three counts: Firstly, Bateson nowhere explores the connections between Kant, epistemology, race and information, nor does he explicitly identify Kant's epistemology as an instance of OE; secondly, Kantian epistemology is often appealed to in formulating cybernetic conceptions of knowing (including that articulated by Bateson himself, at least with respect to its informational aspect), which means that identifying it as an instance of OE, as against CE, is questionable; thirdly, Bateson's distinction between OE and CE is itself contestable. In addition, the absence of explicit reference to the 'Orient' in framing the opposition between OE and CE is significant in that it points to what might be regarded as an 'indifference' or marginalization.

In this essay, and inspired by Chun's [5] "race and / as technology", I want to explore the Bateson-Kant – and thereby the information-race – connection further, but from a somewhat different perspective, viz. one in which 'race' and 'religion' are entangled[2]. Specifically, I want to consider the implications of what Almond [6] has referred to as Kant's Eurocentrically racialized marginalization of – or rather, his 'indifference' to – the (Islamic) Orient in his philosophical anthropology, and what this might mean for Bateson's conception of information. Extending the reflexive hermeneutic framework introduced in [3], I want to consider what it might mean to think about issues at the intersection of information and Orientalism, with the latter framed in terms of a race-religion entanglement; more precisely, I want to examine what it might mean to think about Orientalism from an information-theoretical perspective, and what it might mean to think about information in terms of Orientalism; in short, I want to engage with "Orientalism and / as information".

Methodology

Methodologically, I will proceed by augmenting the critical race theoretical component which informed the reflexive hermeneutic framework introduced earlier with a 'decolonial' perspective wherein issues of epistemology (and ontology) are engaged critically in terms of geo-political and

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[2] In this connection, Lloyd [15] is representative of a critical race theoretical tendency within an emerging body of scholarship associated with critical approaches to the study of religion. On his view, "writing on religion for centuries ignored race" (p.83); however, "race and religion are thoroughly entangled, perhaps starting with a shared point of origin in modernity, or in the colonial encounter. If this is the case, religion and race is not just another token of the type 'religion and,' not just one approach to the study of religion among many. Rather, every study of religion would need to be a study of religion and race." (p.80) What this means is that any reflexive hermeneutic consideration of issues at the intersection of information and religion must, of necessity, adopt a critical race theoretical approach; for this reason, (Islamic) Orientalism is framed as both a 'religious' and 'racial' phenomenon in this study.

body-political, but also ego-political and theo-political (in the sense of political theology) considerations; such an extension builds on previous work concerned with motivating the conceptualization of a 'decolonial computing' [7]. I want to suggest that Bateson's ostensibly neutral conception of information as "a difference that makes a difference", grounded as it is in Kantian epistemology, might be inflected not only by Kant's "colour-line" (or epidermally-marked) racism but also by what Medevoi [8] has referred to as "dogma-line" (or religiously-marked) racism – more specifically, by a Kantian Orientalism characterized by an indifference to an Islamic 'other' conceived as sensuous (that is, physical or materialistic), superficial (that is, outward, externalist or 'syntactic') and irrational (that is, chaotic or 'noisy'); crucially for Kant, these alleged characteristics of Islam pose a threat to (Eurocentric) rationality – specifically, "the communication of thought" [6, p.29] – the boundaries of which must be preserved through a process of marginalization (bracketing, footnoting), viz. an "indifference [to the Islamic Orient] that makes a difference [to Europe]".

Analysis

It is important to appreciate that Kant's ostensibly philosophical concerns about the 'threat' posed by the Islamic Orient are articulated against a background of much earlier theo-political anxiety about this perceived threat. As a European, Kant articulates his views from a geo-political site that historically emerged out of a prior political formation with a 'religious' orientation, viz. Western Christendom. Crucially, as Mastnak [9] has argued, "Europe as a unity that developed a 'collective identity' and the ability to orchestrate action … was, as a rule, articulated in relation to Muslims as the enemy"[3]; in short, "European identity was formed not *by Islam* but, predominantly, *in the relationship … to Islam*" (p.3). This is significant from an information-theoretical perspective since it points to a relational – that is, systemic – conception of difference such as that proposed by Bateson, yet, given Kant's concern with 'indifference' vis-à-vis the Islamic Orient, one in which the difference that is constituted is characterized by absence – that is, a 'background' position – and 'alterity' (or 'otherness') rather than presence and change[4].

Mastnak [9][10][11][12] has argued that the issue is not so much about Islam as a religion in the sense of a doctrine or theology – although such concerns do feature in pre-European discourses within Western Christendom – as it is about Islam as a socio-political order, that is, as what Hodgson [13] has referred to, somewhat problematically since based on a projection from a Western Christian context onto a non-Western Islamic context, as 'Islamdom'. However, Mastnak's position is somewhat problematic: on the one hand, he is correct insofar as European political identity is framed in terms of

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[3] It is crucial to point out that the opposition / antagonism at work here between Christendom and Islamdom is not 'religious' in a confessional sense nor trans-geographical in nature. On this point, consider a recent study by Penn [24] establishing that the first Christians to encounter Muslims were not Latin-speaking Christians from the Western Mediterranean or Greek-speaking Christians from Constantinople, but rather Christians from Northern Mesopotamia. Crucially, these Syriac Christians, who lived under Muslim rule from the seventh century to the present, wrote the first and most extensive accounts of Islam, describing a complicated set of religious and cultural exchanges not reducible to the solely antagonistic.

[4] In this connection, it is significant to note that Deacon [17], whose bio-systemic semiotic conception of information draws upon contributions from Shannon (communication theory, syntactics), Boltzmann (thermodynamics, semantics) and Darwin (evolution, pragmatics), insists that information is fundamentally concerned with *absence* rather than presence.

difference from an Islamicate[5] order that is not purely theological in the sense of doctrinal – identify and difference being "the same" in the sense of belonging-together [14] as mutually co-constitutive structures; on the other hand, both Mastnak (and Hodgson) are incorrect insofar as the Islam – Islamdom distinction implies a partitioning of the religious as doctrinal from the political as socially- and bodily-practiced that is an artefact of European secular modernity[6]. Such a partitioning arguably serves to conceal the operation of racializing logics that function along the "dogma-line", a position which draws support from Lloyd's [15] insistence that "religion and race both name social practices, and bodily practices" (p.80). In the contemporary Western *cum* global context, "the supremacy of post-Protestant religiosity is maintained by the secularist strategy that marks other groups as having a religion – and so needing special study or accommodation. Secularism is the obverse of religious pluralism: it chooses which religions to recognize and so determines their parameters. Just as the origins of religion and race are intertwined, perhaps these means of controlling religion and race are intertwined: perhaps multiculturalism and secularism go hand in hand, jointly working to distort. The robustness of religious and racial ideas and practices is reduced to one box to check among several – a belief or a skin colour – either way subject to the hegemony of the unmarked: the white post-Protestant." (p.83)

Crucially, Lloyd maintains that in a post-Protestant / secular world, "at most individuals can have personal preferences or desires, *countable and quantifiable*, so race and religion are disfigured into these terms [emphasis added]." (p.83) In terms of a reflexive hermeneutic framework exploring issues at the intersection of information and religion / race, it is interesting to consider how such a disfigurement – a deformation involving contraction (compression?[7]) – might be framed in informational terms. For example, is there a correlation between the shift from pre-Protestant 'religion' as socially-embedded and embodied practice (or discursive tradition) to post-Protestant religion as "personal preference or desires" (worldview, grand narrative, ethical framework) and the shift from a contextualized, systemic and semantic conception of information (such as that formulated by Bateson) to a decontextualised, non-systemic and syntactic conception of information (such as that proposed by Shannon) that Malik [16] claims can be and has been instrumentalised in the service of (racialized) capitalism?

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[5] By 'Islamicate', I refer to a term coined by historian Marshall Hodgson [13], viz. something that "would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." (p.59). In short, the Islamicate refers to that which is associated with the 'civilizational complex' grounded in and emerging from Islam, yet not necessarily characterised by fidelity to Islam in any doctrinal or 'confessional' sense. Although Hodgson's characterization of Islam as a 'religion' is problematic, his distinction between Islam and the Islamicate is useful insofar as it might function as a differences that makes a difference in terms of problematizing what 'religion' means in relation to Islam, and the implications of this for European identity formation.

[6] According to Lloyd [15], "a focus on religious beliefs and ideas was a product of a very specific religious background, namely, Protestantism … Scholarship had unthinkingly accepted the Reformation dismissal of ritual, practice, objects, bodies, and media as magical (Catholic) non-sense, not a proper part of Christianity." (p.81) As an alternative to thinking about religion in private and 'doctrinal' terms, Lloyd follows Asad [22] and others in "turning to tradition as a frame for analysis", whereby tradition is meant "a set of practices, including styles of reasoning, that grows out of a shared history, has shared values implicit within it, and is supported by institutions. Traditions in this sense are dynamic and contested, having among their components practices for contestation and transformation." (p.82)

[7] On this point, consider Almond's [6] characterisation of Kant as "a central figure in the Enlightenment footnoting of Islam, a pivotal stage in the rationalist *reduction* of the Muslim Orient to a curious appendage [emphasis added]." (p.29)

Conclusions

Persisting with the theme of *concealment*, that is, bracketing, indifference or 'absenting' – which can be related to information as a difference that is an absence [17] – and building on earlier arguments presented in [3] which point to a persistent and pervasive "epistemology of ignorance" [18][19] – that is, an occlusion, silencing, and violent erasure of racial 'otherness' that is both foundational to, and provides the tacit contextual background of, contemporary Eurocentric discourses on information and its meaning – I maintain that the "indifference that makes a difference" examined herein has a number of implications in terms of current proposals for information-based political, social and ethical initiatives. Some of these implications will be explored through a critical race / religion theoretical analysis of positions articulated from information-centric perspectives including those due to Malik [16], Deacon [17], Floridi [20][21] and others.

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