

## Bridging The Invisible Cultural Gap

**Babel: A Guide to The East-West Encounter**

**By Ofer Grosbard. Beer Sheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University of The Negev Publishers, 2020. 474 pp. Paperback, \$19.90.**

“Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” This famous line, from Rudyard Kipling’s *The Ballad of East and West*, is often quoted to express Westerners’ resignation with the apparently insurmountable barrier between their worldview and that of people of the East. For Kipling and many of his contemporaries, the proverbial “East” is any, non-European, non-modern civilization, from Morocco to China; the “West” is its direct opposite: any modern European or North American culture.

This paradigm has persisted into our current era, albeit in different guises. When I lived in Israel, I often heard of the “Arab mentality,” as an explanation for actions of our Arab neighbors which made no sense to us Jewish Israelis. The exact nature of that “Arab mentality” remained a bit vague, and there were always dissenting voices who said that it was merely a convenient excuse to ignore the other side’s perspective, which might lead to admitting that “their” point of view had merit as well. Fictional or not, the “Arab mentality” was clearly a cognate of Kipling’s East. There are quite a few other designations for both sides of this cultural divide, each with its own overtones and insinuations. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the East and West terminology, despite its geographical inaccuracy and lack of important nuances.

The divergence between East and West, examined from the Eastern perspective, often led to the same conclusion as that of those dissenting voices in Israel: that the West was essentially refusing to understand the East, because that would bring into question some of its staunchly held convictions. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argued that Western, colonial prejudices pervaded much of the Western perception of the “Orient” (Said’s cognate for Kipling’s “East”) long after the political end of colonialism. According to Said, those prejudices were the reason that even “orientalists,” who dedicated their professional lives to the study of the East, failed to truly understand it. As might be expected, this opinion caused a considerable backlash, particularly from the academics whom Said accused of getting it all wrong. Regardless of whether it is asked in the East or the West, the question remains: does this cultural gap still exist today, and if it does, can it be bridged?

According to Ofer Grosbard’s aptly-named *Babel* (2020, original Hebrew edition – 2013), the cultural gap still exists, but we are usually oblivious to its presence. Therefore, we are often unaware of our failure to understand people of other cultures, and consequently, we attribute to them intentions and thoughts which never crossed their minds. This is not only a problem of the West; people of Eastern cultures have an equally hard time understanding the motivation and thought process of Westerners. *Babel* aims to bridge this gap by equipping people with a framework to understand the inherent issues and tools to help communicate effectively across the East-West divide.

The state of affairs described by Grosbard, may be a sign of remarkable progress—the stark cultural differences experienced by Kipling and his contemporaries have been dwarfed to hardly noticeable nuances. On the other hand, the subtleties dividing us may put us at an even greater disadvantage because we are no longer aware of the difficulties we face in cross-cultural exchanges. If we assume that

our interlocutors have the same mores and perspectives as us, we are much more likely to make a cultural *faux pas*, and for that misstep to be treated as an insult instead of a foreigner's social stumble.

My personal experience aligns with this insight from Grosbard. I spent much of my career as an engineer in research labs with colleagues from all over the world, where East and West met on a daily basis. Occasionally my colleagues' behavior baffled me, but it never crossed my mind that this was due to our different cultural backgrounds. Reading the book, I kept recalling past incidents and wondering whether the issue was rooted in fundamental cultural differences, and not in the individual personalities.

*Babel* is the fourth in the *Cultural Code* series by the same author (previous books: *Cracking The Cultural Code*; *Dialogue – 123 therapeutic tales from traditional societies and their resolution*; and *The Quran for Educating the Child*). The first three books stemmed directly from Grosbard's work in Haifa, Israel, as a teacher and mentor of university students studying to become elementary and high school teachers. Many of those students were of the Arab minority and were experiencing the gap between their culture of origin and that of the Jewish majority in two ways. On the one hand, higher education was often their first extended encounter with the Jewish Israeli culture. On the other hand, they realized that because of those cultural differences, the pedagogical tools with which they were being equipped were inadequate for use in their Arab hometowns and villages. The previous books in the series deal with the educational and child development aspects of these cross-cultural tensions.

While studying these issues, Grosbard developed a theory to describe the cultural gaps between the Arab and Jewish societies in Israel. *Babel* is an attempt to generalize the insights obtained in the earlier works and apply them to any East-West interaction. Indeed, other studies that compare Eastern and Western cultures have also found profound differences that are often too subtle to notice through casual observation (see, for example, a comparison of Japanese and American college students in R. Nesbitt, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*, 2004). *Babel* distinguishes itself from previous literature on the subject with a rigorous theoretical explanation to the underlying causes of the cultural differences. It then proceeds to show how the various aspects of the cultural differences emanate from those causes. Once understood, this theoretical foundation can be put to immediate practical use.

According to Grosbard, the difference between Western and Eastern societies was caused by the rapid changes of the modern era, which took place in Western Europe and North America in the last five centuries, with no parallel developments in the East. Eastern societies preserve many of the rigid social structures of pre-modern societies. In this paradigm, individual decisions—such as whom and when to marry, what profession to choose, where to live, and what one should believe—are constrained by hallowed customs and guided by figures of authority such as parents, elders and leaders. Achieving any personal goal requires the support of the social group and personal success is often predicated on the group's success. Putting forward one's individuality, talking about one's personal views and feelings, or singling out other members of the group, even for praise, is frowned upon, as it threatens the cohesiveness of the group. People who grow up in such societies view themselves as members of the society, first and foremost, rather than as separate, independent individuals. Their *locus of control* is outside, which means that in interaction with others they are much more attuned to the other's needs and expectations. They often expect the people they deal with to show similar interest and care for their own need. In Eastern societies the inter-personal relationship is an essential prerequisite for any

collaboration, and Easterners often presume that the same is true for interactions with Westerners as well.

In the West, Grosbard maintains the individual's *locus of control* has shifted from the outside to the inside, and individuals are allowed, and in fact expected, to make decisions for themselves and to use their "inner self" to make judgements. Collaboration among individuals relies less on interpersonal relationships and more on external rules which define the role of each side. An individual maintains a level of separateness from the group, which legitimizes some egocentric or narcissistic behavior and allows for disagreement to exist without damaging relationships between group members. If the bridges are occasionally burnt, the Western familiarity with separateness allows the individual to survive outside the group and perhaps to join another reference group. In the East, the stance of separateness, which is natural for Westerners, is unfamiliar and often perceived as threatening or offensive.

While these East-West differences are deep, their presence may be revealed only by slight nuances of speech or behavior. For example, a Westerner's may open a sentence with "I am sure that...", putting the individual speaker front and center, while an Easterner would start a similar sentence with "Everyone knows that...", hiding their individuality and showing deference to the group ("everyone").

According to Grosbard, the shift of the locus of control and the emergence of separateness in the West resulted in a significant change in some basic mental processes. (I prefer "mental processes" over "thinking principles"—the term used in *Babel*, because of their important emotional and interpersonal aspects). For example, respect and shame are expressions of the way an individual is viewed by one's group of reference; accordingly, in Eastern societies, gaining respect and avoiding shame are of critical importance. Those primal drives have been internalized in the West and evolved into self-satisfaction and guilt, respectively, which reflect one's assessment of oneself. Thus, living up to the group's expectations is replaced by living up to the standards one's own inner self.

*Babel* lists a few other mental processes in which the Western locus of control shifted from the outside inwards. Some of the most interesting ones relate to the handling of disagreement and the perception of agreement. In a dispute in an Eastern society, one side may resort to assertiveness, "You should do X", or invoke a sense of identifying with the other "Your concern is my concern, so don't worry, together we will take care of it". Both techniques assume a preexisting relationship and a shared code of conduct which binds both sides, or a bond of mutual care and loyalty. The parallel Western behavior are assertiveness and empathy, rather than assertiveness and identification, respectively. "I insist on X", or "I am absolutely certain that", are assertive statements which focus on the "I" and show indifference to the opinion of the other side. "I understand your concerns, but..." shows empathy, which validates the other side's feeling without accepting his position. Both assertiveness and empathy demonstrate the Western separateness, which allows and tolerates open disagreements within the group, while perhaps paying a price in reduced loyalty and comradery.

While digesting these ideas I recalled some exasperating conversations with a former manager of mine. At the time, I felt that I could not get any straight answer from him. I remember saying to a colleague: "There are two words which will never pass this man's lips: 'Yes' and 'No'." Reflecting on it in light of Grosbard's book, I realize that this might have been an East-West culture gap. That manager hailed from an Eastern country. Although he had spent many years in the West, his circular replies to my questions may have been a technique to subtly disagree with me while avoiding an open confrontation within the

team. At the time I thought that his behavior was nothing more than a reflection of that manager's personality, but after reading *Babel*, the cultural barrier explanation seems highly plausible.

The last of these psychological differences between East and West that Grosbard explores is in the priority given to social skills versus critical thinking. An Eastern individual is not only more attuned to the minute details of others' feelings, and more adept at manipulating others; that individual also expects the same social attention and interpersonal sophistication from others. Not showing it may be perceived as a deliberate affront. Westerners, on the other hand, tend to rely on logical, impersonal "rules of engagement" and expect others to accept their ideas on their own merits, regardless of personal relationships. They often do not realize that to get their message across to Easterners, they need first and foremost to create a strong personal relationship with the other party.

Attempting to present Grosbard's theory here in full would not do it justice. However, it is surprisingly concise. Its principles are fully explained in about 8 pages of the Introduction. The rest of the book consists of numerous examples and test cases that flesh out these ideas and show the reader how they play out in real human interaction. Each example is followed by an analysis and a short "textbook solution," which explains how a different wording or attitude would get the message across the cultural gap. Roughly equal amounts of test cases are dedicated to each direction— West to East and East to West. I found that reading through the test cases is essential for getting a real grasp of Grosbard's theoretical principles.

Before getting biased by exposure to the theory and the examples, the reader of *Babel* is asked to take a "thinking vector direction" test, which determines where one stands in the range between "extremely Western" to "extremely Eastern" (i.e., internal vs. external locus of control, respectively). This should let the reader find where her or his locus of control is vis-à-vis the characters in the test cases. An appendix in *Babel* presents the considerations used in developing this test as a reliable measure of individualism vs. collectivism, robust to the various biases which plagued previous tests, which were based on self-assessment. The test was validated on Arab and Jewish Israeli students attending high school and college and the results were highly correlated to the ethnic origin (Arab Israelis tended to be more collectivists than Jewish Israelis), with a small but statistically significant correlation to age (individualism increases with age). As expected, the tests show significant variation within each group, but the inter-group differences between Jewish and Arab Israelis are obvious and significant. The test on its own is an important contribution to the research of inter-cultural differences. However, while the rationale behind it seems plausible and the experimental results are impressive, much more validation work is needed, in different cultures and languages, before it may be considered as reliable outside the Israeli context.

My thinking vector direction test showed that I am far on the Western end of the scale. Not surprisingly then, when I read through the test cases and their analyses, the behavior of the Western characters was easy for me to understand; even if I would not act in the same way, I could easily understand their reasoning and motivations. On the other hand, I had difficulty making sense of the behavior of the Eastern characters, despite Grosbard's lucid explanations. Reflecting on it, I realize that my problem was not intellectual; I could see the premises which underlie the Eastern points of view and the way they led to specific behaviors. My difficulty lay in my internal resistance to the notion that intelligent, well-intentioned people might accept such premises.

I suppose that Easterners have similar issues with the Western point of view, and I wonder which of the Western premises is hardest for Easterners to accept. For me, the point which invoked the strongest

resistance was the Eastern lax attitude to the truth—the willingness, or even the expectation, to bend the truth in service of social cohesion. Of course, Westerners also spin, misrepresent, fabricate facts, and sometimes outright lie, but there is a general sense that being caught lying is highly undesirable. Therefore, lying while knowing full well that the listener is aware of the lie is rare. In the East, however, one might make a statement that is patently false just to reduce social tension, and the fact that everybody present is aware of the falsehood does not make any difference. For example, one may say “everyone knows that the accident was caused by the heavy rain yesterday”, even though yesterday was a clear, sunny day. It took me a long time to realize that whereas for the Westerner the ultimate criterion for “truth” is individual judgment, based on critical analysis of observations, an Easterner would prioritize the social impact of the conclusion, and his or her ultimate criterion for truth would be the opinion of the group. When the group reaches a consensus, this becomes the truth, and it is as compelling as the factual analysis is for the Westerner. As Grosbard, emphasizes, in an Eastern society, the absolute truth has a much lower survival value than the social relations in the group, and therefore it is much less compelling.

In addition to their didactic purpose, the test cases in *Babel* are intended to demonstrate the validity of Grosbard’s theory. As such, they must depict real-life interactions among actual Westerners and Easterners. This methodological challenge is addressed in *Babel* in an interesting way: all the examples are taken from political negotiations among Israel, its Arabic neighbors, and Palestinian organizations, often with American or European mediation. The descriptions of the test cases are based on meeting protocols and memoirs of the participants. The Israelis, Americans, and Europeans are generally considered to be the Westerners, while the Arab delegates represent the “East”. From an anthropological point of view, this is a refreshing change: *Babel* examines interactions that are of extreme importance to all sides, and where everyone tries to use his or her mental and emotional skills as best as they can to achieve the desired outcome.

However, unlike classical anthropological studies, in the case of *Babel*, there is a serious difficulty in the correct labeling of the subjects. The empirical basis for it are the results of the Thinking Vector Direction test, which showed significant differences between Jewish and Arab Israelis. Generalizing these results to Arabs from other countries on one hand, and to European and Americans on the other hand, is a hypothesis which may be plausible, but is not confirmed. Furthermore, one wonders whether those seasoned statesmen and diplomats are good representatives for their respective populations. Most of the participants had significant experience in negotiating with people from all over the world; many of the Arab participants were educated in leading Western institutions, and since nearly half of Israeli Jews descended from immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa (which are East, in Grosbard’s classification), the Israelis may not have similar Thinking Vector Direction Scores as the American and European participants.

Despite these caveats, Grosbard made a compelling case that the negotiators’ behavior was profoundly influenced by their culture of origin, and that they often they made the mistake of assuming that the people across the table thought and acted in a similar way to them. Grosbard points out the many shades of gray in this picture—there were notable differences among the members of each delegation, which is consistent with the intra-culture differences in the Thinking Vector Direction Test, and some participants learned over time what they might expect from their colleagues on the other side and how to interpret their behaviors. Being a fly on the wall in those negotiations can be riveting, and it makes the wading through dozens and dozens of test cases an enjoyable experience. However, at a first

reading one can easily miss the difference between a person's inherent locus of control and one's ability to adjust one's behavior to match the locus of control of another person. For example, Jimmy Carter, the president of the United States, was a clear Westerner, described by Z. Brzezinski, his national security advisor as "highly controlled, precise... with a computer-like mind". Nonetheless, Carter cultivated a close, familial relationship with Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt, and when necessary, he leveraged that relationship to manipulate Sadat emotionally to his advantage, in a typical Eastern style. This distinction between personality traits and learned behavior is at the heart of *Babel*, since the goal of the book is not to change the reader's personality, but to make the reader capable of understanding and interacting with people from different cultures on their terms.

Grosbard does not explore the reasons for the deep change in people's locus of control in the West. However, a reflection on the history of modernity brings to mind an array of movements in philosophy, religion, art, science, politics, and economy, which all drew the attention to the individual and his (or her) rights, experiences, thoughts and uniqueness. In fact, many of those movements idealized individual initiatives and adopted individuals who stood against commonly held views as role models. It is easy to see how those sweeping changes made individuality acceptable and even desirable in the West. *Babel* suggests, based on anecdotal evidence, that the developmental differentiation between East and West begins at a very young age and is continuously reinforced by parents and other influential figures throughout childhood and adolescence. This process is intriguing because a thorough understanding of it might suggest ways to bring up children who are better equipped to communicate across the East-West gap while keeping their native cultural affinity (Grosbard addresses these issues in his earlier books).

In *Babel*, Grosbard has a very clear purpose: helping people successfully communicate and interact across the East-West gap, and he stays within the confines of this goal. Almost incidentally, however, he introduces a novel theory of personality structure that might have ramifications beyond the book's original scope. For example, in the explanation of how the locus of control shifts from the outside inward, transforming respect and shame into self-appreciation and guilt, respectively, the book conjectures that the child internalizes the influence of figures of importance and represents them by mental abstractions – general impersonal rules which guide one's thinking and attitude. This model is quite similar to the Freudian explanation of the development of the superego, by generating internal representations of figures of authority, which take lives of their own, independent of the real persons which inspired their creation. This similarity raises the question: is the Freudian personality model, or any more modern theory which aims to replace it, truly universal, or perhaps it is also culture-specific? And, if personality models are culture-specific, how should the therapeutic practices based on them be modified when applied at different cultural contexts?

Accepting Grosbard's theory may have a sobering effect on the hopes for progress in various fields in both the East and the West. Establishing democracies in "highly Eastern" countries may take much more than deposing dictators and holding free elections—it may require a change of the personality structure of the citizens, to enable them to openly disagree without destroying the social bonds which hold them together. On the other, alienation and loneliness, even in densely populated cities, are known maladies of the West, which are often explained by sociological causes such as migration, economical gaps, or fear of crime. However, if as *Babel* suggests, Westerners have under-developed social skills and less inclination to develop deep social connections, then an important reason for modern loneliness may be psychological, having to do with Western personality traits.

It is fascinating to see how the perception of the East-West chasm evolved with the changing political reality. At the peak of the colonial era, Kipling viewed that gap as unbridgeable (actually, the *Ballad* suggests that it might be bridged if the East gave up its unique identity and became “westernized” ...). T.E. Lawrence (popularly known as Lawrence of Arabia), who lived at the verge of the crumbling of the colonial system, rightfully believed that he had found a way to effectively communicate with the East – in his case the Bedu of Hejaz (*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and *Revolt in The Desert*). Lawrence is fully aware of the vast distance between the European and the Bedu way of thinking, but he explains that: “their minds work just as ours do, but on different premises. There is nothing unreasonable, incomprehensible, or inscrutable in the Arab” (*Twenty-Seven Articles*). When political colonialism had ended but was still fresh in memory, Said argued that those differences between East and West were essentially a fiction, resulting from Western prejudices. These days, we have reached the opposite pole, with people like Grosbard and Nesbitt finding that the differences between East and West, while often hardly perceptible, are very real and consequential.

Is *Babel* useful in our day and age? Would it be helpful to a businessman who tries to close an international deal, or to a scholar who wishes to establish a collaboration with overseas colleagues? Judging by the insights I gained from it, these readers and many others would find *Babel* invaluable for recognizing, understanding, and avoiding the hidden pitfalls of cultural differences.

**Raziel Haimi-Cohen,**  
**Bell-Labs (retired)**  
[RaziHC@gmail.com](mailto:RaziHC@gmail.com)  
2 Layng Terrace, Springfield, NJ 07081 USA