

AS THEY SEE US ARAB REACTION TO ORIENTALISM

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The development of Arab attitude to Western Oriental scholarship has to be seen against the background of the changing political relations between the Arabs and the West on one side and within the Arab societies on the other. The critique of Orientalism is a widely discussed theme among the Arab intellectual diaspora as well.

More than two decades have passed since Professor Said's work *Orientalism* appeared (1978), a book that caused a major uproar not only among Orientalists, but among specialists in other disciplines as well. The work was so influential that "Orientalism" has become a generic term for a particularly suspect type of anthropological thought. As Said predominantly criticizes Western (especially British and French) scholarly works on Islam, it is especially Middle Eastern and Islamic-affairs specialists that have been made to ask the basic questions posed by Said's book, questions concerning representations of other cultures. How do we represent other cultures? What is another culture? It seems that the issue of "otherness" becomes prominent in times of crisis. In Bryan S. Turner's opinion in the twentieth century the problem of otherness, taken up first of all by feminism, black studies and later by postmodernism, has been also associated with the necessity to understand Islam (Turner 1994: 95). The author mentions the oil crisis, the Iranian revolution, the war in Afghanistan, the Gulf war and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as decisive factors contributing to the feeling of the precariousness of inter-societal stability. Turner believes it is here the origins of the intellectual debate over Orientalism are to be found. Otherness, however, can be perceived differently in different situations. The colonizers, believing themselves to be bearers of a universal civilization, saw in the otherness of the colonized only a deformation of their own identity; their relation to otherness did not influence their view of the world. It was the colonized who thoroughly and painfully experienced the existence of the other. They were probably the first to experience what we are experiencing

now: speeding up of history, shrinking of space and individuation of human fate (Augé 1999: 102).

By the time Said's book was published, a dispute over Orientalism and its past and future roles had been going on for some time, for example, in the *Review of Middle East Studies*. As a result the term "Orientalism", once synonymous with any scholarly study of Asia, began to be used to refer to older European scholars who combined an old-style methodology with what was perceived as a prejudiced attitude towards the peoples of the East, namely the Near East (Malti-Douglas 1979: 724). The dispute showed the need for new beginnings and different frameworks.

Said's publication is still the subject of debate among scholars in the West and the soul-searching is going on. There have been considerable efforts to articulate new approaches, avoiding the defects identified by Said. It is not the intent of this article to follow the Western developments, but rather to specify the position of Said's vision of Orientalism in the context of Arab thinking related to the subject.

In the seventies and eighties Western critics of Orientalism and colonialism lived in a world where there seemed to be a viable alternative to Western capitalism, namely communism. There was a well established tradition of scholarship which sought to explain both the origins of capitalist exploitation and colonialism and the historical stages by which the hegemony of Western capitalism would be brought to a final end (Turner 1994: 11). Marxism provided a critique of many assumptions of a liberal, individualistic social science. Marxists, like Louis Althusser, seemed to offer an alternative to the legacy of positivistic sociology associated with a value-free individualistic approach.

Marxist ideas found fertile soil in the Arab world as well. Some members of the elite educated mostly at Western universities saw in the Soviet Union and the socialist countries an alternative to the imperialist West. For them, the socialist revolution brought about the end of Eurocentrism. These intellectuals, mostly of North African and Egyptian origin, were influenced by western critical philosophy (Sartre, Garaudy) as well as some Orientalists, such as J. Berque, M. Rodinson (Rudolph 1991: 46).

In 1963 one of the most prominent representatives of the Egyptian Left, Anwar Abdel-Malek, published an essay "Orientalism in Crisis", a deeply critical and penetrating analysis of the views of the Orient presented by European scholars. As Nicholas B. Dirks remarks in 1993, "Anwar Abdel-Malek was perhaps the first to notice that Orientalism appropriated history from the Oriental in two related senses. Orientalism took history away by claiming the exclusive authority of history in making its claims; and Orientalism denied history to the Oriental by asserting the essential – both metahistorical and nonhistorical – character of the Orient and its people" (Nicholas B. Dirks 1993: 179).

The novelty of Abdel-Malek's critique of Orientalism was its focus on conceptual and methodological shortcomings and failures of Orientalist scholarship.

Abdel-Malek's argument was later developed and extended by Edward Said. Said brings an extensive quotation from Abdel-Malek:

"According to the traditional orientalists, an essence should exist – sometimes even clearly described in metaphysical terms – which constitutes the inalienable and common basis of all the beings considered; this essence is both "historical", since it goes back to the dawn of history, and fundamentally a-historical, since it transfixes the being, "the object" of study within its inalienable and nonevolutive specificity, instead of defining it as all other beings, states, nations, peoples, and cultures – as a product, a resultant of the vention of forces operating in the field of historical evolution.

Thus one ends with a typology – based on a real specificity, but detached from history, and, consequently, conceived as being intangible, essential – which makes the studied "object" another being with regard to whom the studying object is transcendent; we will have a homo Sinicus, a homo Arabicus (and why not a homo Aegypticus, etc.), a homo Africanus, the man – the "normal man," it is understood – being the European man of the historical period, that is, since Greek antiquity. One sees how much, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, the hegemonism of possessing minorities, unveiled by Marx and Engels, and the anthropocentrism dismantled by Freud, are accompanied by Eurocentrism in the area of human and social sciences, and more particularly in those in direct relationship with non-European peoples" (Abdel-Malek 1963: 10).

Another representative of the Left, Abdallah Laroui (al-^cArawī), a philosopher and historian of Moroccan origin, analyses orientalism as based on the way the West and Islam perceive each other, the way he calls "structural complementarity". The Arab is by definition "the other" and can only be understood by means of this otherness. The interpretations produced by Western scholars generally reflect the prejudices of their own society. Orientalism presents Arab history as repetitious, thus sticking to an anti-evolutionary concept of history (Rudolph 1991: 182). Besides, says Laroui, the objectivity of Western science is a fiction, since it is based on the ideological foundations of liberalism and rationalism.

The criticism of Abdel-Malek and Laroui has little in common with that of those Arab intellectuals whose understanding of scholarly work stays deeply rooted in the Islamic ideal of scholarship. Its methods consist predominantly in ordering and describing its subject matter. This approach is valid especially for the religious sources of Islam. Here the scholarly method does not exclude metaphysical aspects and religious contents as it normally would in the West.

This methodological discrepancy results in the formation of two opposing camps, that of Western orientalists and that of Muslim scholars. The Orientalism controversy, however, cannot be reduced to this factor as its single cause. Both the origins and aims of the Arab anti-orientalist writings are very complex. Much of this production is destined for home consumption, the actual addressees being members of opposing ideological groups — liberals, leftists etc. that are being indi-

rectly attacked. In this way the orientalist seem to be not so much objects of criticism as its tools (Rudolph 1991: 9).

The first information on the work of European scholars in the field of oriental languages and history was brought to Egypt by stipendists and travellers in the time of Muhammad Ali. In this respect an important contemporary document, the travel book by Rifā'a al-Taḥṭāwī describing his stay in Paris represents a valuable source. The European efforts were generally admired although language deficiencies were noticed. Later many Muslim intellectuals saw themselves flattered by such works as A. Sedillot's "*Histoire générale des Arabes*" (1872) and Gustave Le Bons' "*Civilisation des Arabes*" (1884), which, in their opinion, confirmed the importance of the Arab contribution to Western civilization and the Arabs' glorious past.

The development of Muslim attitudes to the West including the attitude to Western knowledge must be seen against the background of growing Western aggression, resulting in major political and economic shifts. Colonialism broke down the Ottoman Empire into relatively separate nation states which in turn became subordinated by the world capitalist system. In Egypt this process culminated in the occupation of the country in 1882.

One response to colonialism on the side of Muslims was adopting a policy of modernization, legitimized as a return to classical Islam liberated from its superstitious folk traditions. In the eyes of the leaders of the liberal reform movement, Ḡamāl ad-Dīn al-Afḡānī and Muḥammad 'Abduh, Islam was capable of becoming a dynamic and progressive component of the reform of society. Islam contained in itself the foundations of a progressive society.

Afḡānī's stay in Paris was marked by an event which is seen by most Arab critics as the turning point in the attitude of Muslims to Western scholarship. The event was a lecture of the well known French philosopher and orientalist Ernest Renan on Islam and science. Renan's racist arguments claiming Semites are not capable of rational thinking produced a statement by Afḡānī published in "*Journal des Débats*". The opinion that Muslim intellectuals later repeated again and again, namely that orientalism not only accompanied colonialist expansion, but actually prepared it, can be traced back to this controversy.

In the next generation of reformists the anti-colonial feelings grew stronger accompanied by the conviction that cultural and spiritual confrontation with Europe was inevitable. The foreign powers seemed not only to determine the political, military and economic spheres of the Muslim countries, but, through the scholarly activities of its members, dared sit in judgement over their history, culture and even religion. The relationship between the political and economic power of the West and the growth and scope of Orientalism could not remain unnoticed. It is only natural that in the eyes of many Arab intellectuals of the time Western oriental scholarship was seen as part and parcel of Western imperialism.

The situation seemed the more dangerous as many Muslim students studied in the West or became influenced by orientalist teaching at the Cairo University. Thus

an atmosphere of uncertainty was created leading to polarization and fixation of standpoints (Rudolph 1991: 190). The first scholarly works written by Arab authors using Western critical methods and backed by the views of European orientalists met with massive opposition on the side of the traditionalist conservative circles around *al-Manāẓir* and the Azhar University. The most prominent object of attacks was the well known Egyptian writer and scholar Ṭāhā Ḥusain. The real targets of this criticism, however, were the European orientalists now recognized as true enemies of Islam and the Arabs. Orientalism was considered a global challenge on the same level as Christian mission and Western secularism. Some representatives of the Reform movement, however, although critical of the extreme positions of some Western interpretations, did not condemn Western scholarship as a whole (Muḥammad Kurd ʿAlī, Aḥmad Amīn), believing it can provide stimuli for indigenous developments. Similar attitude was taken by some Arab historians of the fifties, standing under the influence of pan-Islamic ideas (Farrūḥ, al-Ġarbūṭlī). Their point of view was backed more by nationalistic than religious feeling.

The general atmosphere of this period in Egypt was deeply influenced by the militant fundamentalist organization of the Muslim Brothers, founded in 1928. The targets of their attacks were not only colonialism and communism, but also secularization and Westernization of culture and science in the Arab world in general. The ideologists of the movement, such as Sayyid Quṭb and Muḥammad al-Ġazzālī, believed in the alliance of Western politics, ideology and science and called for the radical fight against this evil. It was especially the highly sensitive areas of Islamic studies – the Koran, the Tradition, the Prophet Muḥammad, the Law, which became the main objects of critical attention on the side of those who considered themselves defenders of Islam. The best known case is that of Ignaz Goldziher and his theses on the origin of Hadith (*ḥadīṭ*) which remained a centre of attention for more than half a century.

As the Arab states achieved their independence, the need to define their new identities became intensively felt. In the atmosphere of continuing critique of Western civilization the controversy over Orientalism got new psychological impulses (Rudolph 1991: 30). It does not seem necessary to follow all the peripeties of the development of the Arab responses to the work of Western orientalists in detail. Except for some positive voices the reaction was generally highly critical. The protective attitude of this critique in its many forms and with religious or nationalistic accents, has survived to this day. As mentioned above, the authors' argumentation was usually closely connected with the causes they were supporting and their localization of the respective enemies as well as their cultural background and education. Some of them graduated from prestigious Western universities where they became well acquainted with the methods of the orientalists. In the opinion of probably the most prominent among them, aṭ-Ṭībāwī, Orientalism has still preserved the doctrinary theological attitude towards Islam it had in the Middle Ages (*ibid.* 70). In general, the attack on the imperialist bias of Western scholarship and missionary distortions of Islamic studies did not meet with adequate re-

sponse on the part of the criticized. When one culture gives the impression of sneering from a position of assumed superiority, the other can only protest loudly, but the protests are usually not listened to. Muslim voices are rarely heard in the West. When Edward Said expressed his protest in English and in an academic idiom, many in the West started listening for the first time (Daniel 1982: 212).

It can be assumed that Said's *Orientalism* is largely known among those working in the field that mostly continues to be called Oriental studies, but it may be worth recapitulating what he means by Orientalism.

The first designation is an academic one, including "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient". In more general meaning Orientalism, for Said, is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident". The third meaning of Orientalism is "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978: 2-3).

Defining the aim of the book, Said says: "In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. This is not to say that Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when the peculiar entity, "the Orient" is in question. How this happens is what this book tries to demonstrate" (Said 1978: 3). Further in the book he explains he will limit his questions to the Anglo – French – American experience of the Arabs and Islam.

Professor Said's work is a polemical and angry one so that some of its flaws are not difficult to detect. Many of those directly or indirectly concerned expressed their reservations, criticizing the author's choice of countries and personalities examined, the ahistoric conception of continuity of the West's attitude to the Orient, the shortcomings of his overall conception based on Michel Foucault, etc.

On the part of the Arab conservative intellectuals the reaction to Said's *Orientalism* was minimal at first, probably caused by the character of the translation (Rudolph 1991: 51). The first reviews were more or less descriptive and cursory. Then the opportunity of using the critique of Orientalism for defending the cause of Islam was realized in full. The argument goes like this: if the critique of Orientalism is true, then all Western observations are distortion of the real nature of Islam. Therefore, our own version of ourselves is true. What we have here is an exchange of an outdated Orientalism for an equally prejudicial Occidentalism (Turner 1994: 104). In the Afterword to 1995 edition of his work, Said leaves no doubts about his position: . . . "the very existence of Orientalism and Orientalists is seized upon as a pretext for arguing . . . that Islam is perfect, that it is the only way (al-hall al-wahid) and so on and so on. To criticize Orientalism, as I did in my book, is in effect to be a supporter of Islamism or Muslim fundamentalism. . . *Orientalism* has

in fact been read and written about in the Arab world as a systematic defense of Islam and the Arabs, even though I say explicitly that I have no interest in, much less capacity for, showing what the true Orient or Islam really are."

Some aspects of "Occidentalism", rejection of everything to do with the West as a consequence of the debate about Orientalism seem justifiable in connection with the indigenization of knowledge which has occupied much anthropological debate about fostering of the social sciences in third-world societies. The authenticity of tradition over inherited or imported knowledge is claimed here (Turner 1994: 7). It is true that much of the work of Marx and Durkheim presupposed a feudal society and therefore much of the legacy of Western sociology cannot be applied to the analysis of Asian societies. On the other hand it is difficult to imagine something like indigenization of methodology or Islamic social science (ibid.). The cultural authority of universal categories may be questioned, but, on the whole we can say that although all societies in the world do not live under the same conditions, they begin to be interpreted by means of the same notions (Augé 1999: 105).

"Orientalism in Reverse" (*al-istiṣrāq maʿkūṣan*) is one of the most serious concerns of Arab secularist thinkers. This major cultural phenomenon of the seventies and eighties in the Arab world consists of the affirmation of the authentic and unchanging Islamic and Arab values, intrinsically spiritual, as opposed to the materialistic West (Sivan 1985: 19). Even many secularists and modernists, disillusioned by failures of modernization and pan-Arabism, came to see in Islam the only way out (ibid.). It is first of all this tendency Arab secularist thinkers as Ṣādiq al-ʿAzm, a Syrian philosopher and a Lebanese Muslim sociologist Nadīm al-Biṭār have in mind when they criticize Said, whose book, endowed with the academic prestige of its author, lends itself easily to smearing the West and glorifying the East, that is Islam. The principal danger these critics see here is that Arab receptivity to modernity may be reduced, even lost. For them, modernity and modernization is the major goal to be achieved. "In the Arab and Islamic case, modernization has always been a deformed superimposition; it had appeared as an attack or a repercussion of a previous attack. Modernity has to be nationalized, it must be acclimatized and wedded to our deep personality....The truth is that modernity has sprung free from its country of origin and is now in universal orbit. To grasp it in its universal dimension, to integrate it and make it ours, to add to it and express it in the language of our own particularity, this is our primary goal: it is the dialectic of perpetuity in renovation" (Djait 1994: 152).

The secularist reviewers of *Orientalism* are bothered by its essentialist mode. Al-Azm, who fought the essentialist tendencies in religious thought, and Bitar, who struggled with similar tendencies within Arab nationalism (the eternal Arab nation), had the unpleasant surprise of seeing these notions revived by somebody they considered their "progressive" ally (Sivan 1985: 14). Besides, they cannot agree with Said in his minimizing the relevance of the past for the contemporary Arab soci-

ety. They know very well what powerful hold the past still has upon the Middle East. Indeed, an impressive body of writings produced in Arabic over the last decades tried to come to terms with the Arab past.

The main concern of Arab secularists is the intellectual health of the Arab world. The externalization of guilt – seeing the explanation of the problems facing Arab societies in outside factors alone – still characterizes many Arab intellectuals. In the eyes of al-Azm and Bitar it is this kind of thinking Said's book provides arguments for.

Not all Arab scholars accept the essentializing position of Edward Said or the negative attitude of the traditionalists. Some adopt what the Syrian literary scholar ʿAbd an-Nabī Iṣṭāif characterizes as “positive confrontation”. In response to the challenge of Western interpretations, the Arabs have to develop their own intellectual tradition, making at the same time use of the results of the orientalist knowledge. The Iraqi expert in Koranic studies Muḥammad Ḥusain ʿAlī aṣ-Ṣaḡīr examines carefully Western studies of the Koran and, putting possible motives behind the works aside, judges them according their scholarly merit. In most cases his judgement is quite positive which is the more significant as the subject matter of those studies is the Koran, the very core of Islam. The author suggests the Arab countries should find financial means to support translations of Western production into Arabic to make it accessible to an interested Arab reader.

There are other positive developments signalling some movement towards a matter-of-fact discussion, which should replace the debate where stereotypes and myths on one side are answered by the same on the other. An example of such an attempt was a special issue in 1983 of the Beirut revue “*al-Fikr al-ʿarabī*” devoted to this topic, where besides Arab authors many Western orientalist and historians participated. Removal of rigid stereotypes, produced by generations of orientalist and repeated by politicians and the media was postulated as well as greater engagement of social sciences in the field.

Another encouraging development is the fact that in the discussion on Orientalism many Arab intellectuals living in the West take part. While the attitudes of some of them are very critical, others joined the ranks of orientalist and even occupy leading positions. At least two of these must be mentioned.

Muhammad Arkoun (born 1928) from Algiers, professor of Islamic studies in Paris, is the author of many rather provocative essays dealing with different forms of classical and modern thinking. The main theme of these essays is demythologizing classical Islam and rationalization of modern Islamic discourse (Arkoun 1994: 35). In his opinion non-Muslim scholars should take some responsibility for the demontage of mythological and ideological elements of the Islamic tradition and for creating new models of interpretation of the Koran (Rudolph 1991:185). These ideas, although highly questionable and unrealistic, can open new paths for further investigation.

Aziz al-Azmeh from Syria (born 1948) graduated from Oxford and teaches at the University in Exeter, U.K. Professor Azmeh shows very little respect for the work of the orientalist, both classical and contemporary.

As the historical foundation of academic Orientalism from the days of John of Damascus is polemic, polemic being a discourse of an essence addressing its own privation, it is little wonder that Orientalism generates its units of discourse by means of inverting the inner sense of categories by which things Western are apprehended (Azmeah 1981: 389).

In his essay Azmeah deals mainly with the analytics of Orientalism, "the set of rules by which the Orient is conjured" (ibid. 390). Orientalists reduce the facts they use under the name of Islam. The organization of the mass of details is undertaken with view to confirming appurtenance to Islamism. "The disassociation of particulars from the context of history – sociological, cultural etc. is a necessary condition for confirming their Islamism... and facilitates diverting their conceptual orientation from that required by the real world to that required by the fiction of the Orient" (ibid. 391). The facts are neither analysed nor elevated beyond their sensuous materiality. Orientalism is a mode of apprehension and of perception, not one of knowledge. It is incapable of truly synthetic studies. The search for influences and the establishment of lineages of fecundation is the only structure of consequence in Orientalist discourse.

Beginnings are often significant and Professor Azmeah rightly points to the origin of Orientalism in polemic. Orientalist discourse was based upon the problem of difference. Bryan Turner (1994: 102) believes one component of an alternative to Orientalism can be a discourse of sameness which would emphasize the continuities between various cultures rather than their antagonisms. In the case of Islam we may regard Islamic cultures as part of a wider cultural complex embracing both Judaism and Christianity. What is needed is a kind of secular ecumenicalism. However, since the debate over Orientalism has besides cultural aspects also its ideological and political dimensions, it would be unrealistic to expect much in the foreseeable future.

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