After Orientalism
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After Orientalism

Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and
Eastern Re-appropriations

Edited by

François Pouillon
Jean-Claude Vatin
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Foreword*

François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin

The debate concerning Orientalism began over half a century ago with decolonization. The scholarly turn that came in the wake of Edward Said’s landmark book *Orientalism* (published in 1978) was in fact part of a larger political critique of “colonial science” which had already made a significant impact on the humanities and the social sciences. Today, it is time for an historical evaluation of the assertion that the various forms of Orientalism (literary, artistic, linguistic, architectural, cultural)—as both fields of scholarly inquiry and styles of creative expression—were fundamentally subservient to an enterprise of Western domination whose ultimate incarnation was colonialism.

Although the field of Orientalism extends significantly beyond this relatively brief period and the specific territory of the colonial regime, we do not intend to provide an inventory of the criticisms that were levelled at this thesis. Nor do we claim that the link between Orientalism and Western imperialism is entirely false. Our goal here is instead to broaden the discussion. Until now, scholarship on Orientalism has focused on establishments located in the metropolis and on the agents of science and power that were involved in this enterprise of knowledge, representation, evocation or domination. This unilateral approach is inherently limited and should be corrected.

In the framework of the *Dictionnaire des orientalistes de langue française* (Paris: iismm & Karthala, 2008), we undertook a nearly comprehensive study of those in the francophone world who, in one way or another, were associated with Orientalism: their social and political affiliations, their itineraries, their motivations, as well as their *modus operandi*. This endeavor demonstrated the extraordinary diversity of situations and levels of involvement among so-called Orientalists. Moreover, the dictionary showed that the field of Orientalism is riddled by inherent contradictions and utterly devoid of the consensus, notably in ideological terms, with which it is most often portrayed. Moreover, we limited ourselves to the French-speaking world; far greater discrepancies would appear were we to extend the comparison to what took place in other regions, starting with the Anglo-Saxon world, and to an even greater extent with other western powers whose colonial histories were significantly different and followed their own specific chronologies (such as Germany).

* Translation by Jessica M. Marglin.
Much remains to be done to illustrate not just one but many histories, according to the languages used (Orientalism in German, Italian, English, Russian, etc.), fields of activity (in addition to more “classic” disciplines such as the study of languages and civilizations, artistic productions, religious sciences, travel literature and so on, greater attention should be paid to music and the arts), and cultural regions (beyond the Arabic, Turkish and Persian Islamic world, which has already been largely explored, more consideration should be given to India, China, Japan and other outlying regions). In order to be conclusive, these “regional” endeavors would have to adopt a rigorous comparative approach.

The present volume does not attempt impossibilities, i.e. on the one hand to refute Said’s statement or to discuss the pros and cons of his thesis nor, on the other, to survey all questions regarding stereotyped Orientalism. Rather, this is an attempt to broaden the scope of the debate by raising new issues through an innovative perspective: we propose to study these issues not from the center but from the peripheries.

One of the sharpest criticisms aimed at Edward Said’s thesis emphasized that it reduced Orientalism to a unilateral action on behalf of the West. As a result, Said’s understanding of Orientalism implies that the Orient, or rather Orient in the plural, did not have recourse to any agency or intervention in the global movement for the production of self-knowledge, not to mention power. They would remain eternal victims, a status which might suit them in certain ways but does not by any means capture the entirety of their experience. This point of view not only ignores the acculturation processes and group strategies employed by the people who lived in these Orient, but also fails to take into account the dynamic that notably led to the emergence of various fundamentalisms, from which the notorious theory of the “clash of civilizations” stems.

It is precisely this part of the story that we would like to examine by addressing the question of Orientalism from the point of view of those places called Oriental. Our aim is to analyze the effects on local societies of what was both an important intellectual and institutional movement—one which necessarily changed not only their world, but also how they represented their world. In 2010–2011 we began working on a significant project in various seminars at the Écoles des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and the Institut du Monde Arabe. This collaboration resulted in an international symposium entitled “L’orientalisme et après” (“Orientalism and afterwards”) that was held in Paris on 15–17 June 2011 and which has already resulted in several publications in Paris, Tunis and Rabat.1 This symposium was truly international, gathering

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1 Special issue, ‘L’Orient créé par l’Orient’, Qantara, 80, (July 2011); Après l’orientalisme: l’Orient
together not only Europeans but also scholars from the Middle East, North Africa, India, China and the United States. Nonetheless, the majority perspective was quite opposed to the tone of “subaltern” or “postcolonial” studies which helped make Orientalism a foundational text, and this perspective is evident in all the resulting publications. The contributions to the present volume are the outcome of this symposium.

What follows is an abridged version for an Anglophone audience of earlier publications. In order to offer a more detailed view of what we would like to demonstrate about Orientalism as we see it today, we will deal first with alternative historiography, before addressing the question of “other” forms of imperialism. Then we will turn to local chief actors, both to the ones able to recover non-indigenous heritage and to those literally inventing Orientalist traditions.

We begin with a series of historiographical analyses that are intended to elaborate on the thesis that the history of Orientalism is neither uniform nor unequivocal. Rather, this history demonstrates surprising twists and turns as well as paradoxical relationships between intellectual metropoles of the colonial period and new peripheries. Indeed, local debates and contexts took precedence over a supposedly global history in what were ultimately quite decentralized—and thus extremely dynamic—spaces.

The lessons of world history, which assumes a plurality of worlds, ask us to go beyond a notion of empire which is limited to metropolis and colony (or post-colony). A contemptuous and even objectifying attitude towards peripheral populations is generally characteristic of imperialisms—each of which has its “Orients” and its “Orientalisms.” Going beyond this binary should make us question the specific character we have imbued to Orientalism in the West.

Hence the opportunity to explore whether Said’s critique would also apply to empires other than those of Western European powers. The three cases that are analyzed in the present collection of essays—those of the Ottoman Empire, the Russian (and Soviet) empire, and the Chinese empire—demonstrate the characteristics these hegemonic powers shared in common and how they


The contributions were originally written in English or translated thanks to the support of the Transregional Institute of Princeton. They all offer condensed versions which aim to capture the main argument of each piece. Readers interested in longer and more detailed versions of these texts can find them in the above-mentioned French-language publications, especially in the edited volume published by Karthala (2011).
differed in their construction of knowledge about other, usually dependent, societies and cultures.

Another important aim of the book is to observe how post-independence states have made use of the knowledge accumulated under colonial rule. A number of contributions examine how these states appropriate the discourse of their former masters for the sake of national identity and the building of nation-states and how they reflect passages from “colonial” scholars to “post-colonials” who shift, adapt, and re-organize what was once the hegemonic discourse of the imperial powers for their own purposes.

The greatest contribution of these essays is to re-examine cultural creations born in the encounter (colonial or not) with foreigners—productions that mirror or echo the construction of the self by the other—and understand it as an indigenous production. This is more than a mere ruse; it is the result of a creative practice that belongs to all groups, and is a manifestation of their liberty.

What emerges from the essays in this book is nothing less than a new landscape in which to situate past, present and future research on cultures and societies of the non-Western world. Together they provide a guide that leads us beyond the restrictive dichotomy of a confrontation between West (which is usually limited to Europe) and East (normally meaning the Middle East).

All of these re-examinations have another point in common; they refuse to mount an antithesis to the thesis that has been critiqued and found problematic. Nonetheless, they are useful insofar as they bring to the fore the critical faculty encouraged by anthropology; no one is spared from the imperative to counter what is best seen as an “ideological lullaby” with a plausible historical narrative, concrete albeit uncertain; in other words, French empiricism instead of French theory.