

APOLOGY FOR ORIENTALISM

Until a few decades ago the study of the peoples and civilizations of the Orient did not appear to require any apology, since it was considered one of the most uncontroversial and innocuous branches of the science. The orientalist was, and still is in some of the less up-to-date sectors of European *communis opinio*, a scholar who chooses as the object of his research one of the most remote fields of knowledge, far removed in space or time, or both, barred from access by incomprehensible languages and writings, whose religions, philosophies and literatures are quite apart from the main stream of classical and Western tradition. This was the conception of orientalism among the Bouvards or Pecuchets of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In reality, the interest in oriental civilizations itself constitutes a brilliant chapter in contemporary European culture and civilization, developing from this modest level of estimation to a more important historical concern. This is illustrated in certain respects, if not yet in its entirety, by works that are at the same time a history of ideas and a balance sheet of the

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results achieved.¹ Orientalism has been respectively an aspect of Enlightenment and of Romanticism, of Positivism and of European historicism, and to sketch its complete history would be tantamount to going through the entire evolution of Western culture. It was precisely in this latter field that it had projected itself outside of itself, toward something other than itself, and by this very act (this should appear obvious and should not be the object of polemics or raised eyebrows) establishing its own view of civilization and history, politics and religion, society and poetry.

Alongside this internal evolution, tied to the development of the entire historiographical, philosophical and religious thought of the nineteenth century, orientalism had another external evolution, a consequence of its own growth, differentiation and deepening. From a discipline originally considered as unitary, it was articulated in many other branches which became increasingly autonomous, and which corresponded to the various civilizations of the Afro-Asian East. Sinology and Indology, Iranistics and Turcology, Semitistics and Islamistics, Aegyptology and Africanistics, and other groupings that are convenient or that correspond to well-delimited linguistic, historical and ethnological divisions of civilization, have been substituted for the generic term orientalism, which has remained a fairly vague common denominator and common matrix. Specialization has headed gradually toward isolating and subdividing further these fields, perhaps even more than would lead to a correct historical view. Hence, to the ancient scientific associations and organs, generically called "orientalistic" (the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft*, the British *Royal Asiatic Society*, the French *Société Asiatique*, all with their respective well-known reviews), have been added more modern and more

¹ The book by R. Schvab, *La Renaissance orientale*, Paris 1950, should be mentioned here. Many other studies on this subject are mentioned in the recent article in *Diogenes*, No. 44, "Orientalism in Crisis," by Anouar Abdel-Malek, an article with whose thesis we for the most part differ, as the reader may gather, but which we do not deny contains broad information, sincere feeling and singularly acute observations. For an overall historical perspective we refer to our article "Oriente e Occidente, e la loro conoscenza reciproca," in *La comunità internazionale*, XVII [1962], No. 2.

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specific denominations of study and publications in the various specialized fields. The traditional "orientalist congresses," which up to now have gathered every three years an indiscriminate crowd of scholars in oriental studies, tend to be joined by specialized meetings and congresses on Arabistics and Islamistics, Indology and Sinology, and so on for the different sectors. From this standpoint, it seemed that the old generic term of orientalism was destined to disappear.

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But what the *gnosis* inclined to distinguish, articulate and finally almost dissolve, the *eris* of our time, paradoxically, turns about to reunite. The orientalism that was purely scientific was on the point of vanishing, or rather subdividing into too narrow, single disciplines. Today it is reunified and reconceived in a precise, even if in our opinion not entirely authentic and legitimate, ideological, sociological and political personality; and as such it is in the dock of the accused, on trial for its origins, intentions, methods and results.² The accuser in this trial, needless to say, is now the East itself, which from a passive object of history and study has revived as a subject, which seeks with profound travail its own soul and does not recognize it in its past or present in the mirror of European orientalist investigation. Nor does it recognize the accuracy of the vision nor the honesty of the statements of this European and Western science, which for three centuries has been concerned with it. It tends precipitately to make of European orientalism a scapegoat for its own problems, anxieties and pains.

The most ancient and general accusation in this indictment of orientalism is that of having been the instrument, or at least the collaborator and ally, of European colonial penetration

² The process is extended to the concept of orientalism itself, which the East no longer accepts, sensing a note of condescension in it. And in fact the words Orient and orientalism tend to disappear from the Soviet scientific and propagandistic terminology, which is most sensitive to these moods. For example, the former *Institut Vostokovedenja* in the Academy of Sciences of the USSR has become the *Institut Narodov Asii*, and the official line is precisely "to disorientalize the study of Asia."

and exploitation. The orientalist, according to this view, is now the forerunner, now the associate and the technical advisor, of the merchant, the politician, the Western exploiter, and the co-responsible if not directly the primary cause of the evil that European domination brought to the Eastern peoples. Without intending in the least to raise again the general historical problem of the nature and function of colonialism, we would like merely to observe that *this* specific claim—that orientalism was its accomplice in its proclaimed misdeeds—, if it is not entirely unfounded, is unjustly exaggerated, generalized and embittered. That the discovery and the scientific exploration of oriental civilizations in the past (where, incidentally, the highest values appear that the East has contributed to the history of humanity), was *at times* accompanied with the economic and political penetration of the modern East by Europe, for its subjection and exploitation, is a fact that may honestly not be denied; but it would be as just and honest not to generalize specific cases and episodes in an indiscriminate act of accusation which, insofar as it aims at laying the blame on orientalist studies in their entirety, is born of a misunderstanding and an untruth. It is mistaken and untrue that the exclusive or main motive for the historical and linguistic, the literary and religious interest of Europe in the East was in function of its plans for political and economic penetration of the area. If there were, and there definitely were, orientalists who were at the same time agents and instruments of this penetration (consuls and ambassadors, businessmen and missionaries, military or technical personnel, whose trial will take place eventually in “another sphere”, innumerable other important and outstanding investigators of the East held their scientific interests entirely distinct from the practices, if such there were, of their countries, and at times even opposed these practices. The oriental critics of orientalism are free, if they are so persuaded, to reserve their appreciation and gratitude for Soviet orientalism, which officially hoists the anti-colonialist banner. But it is not correct to regard every orientalist of the non-Soviet world as an agent of colonialism, and to forget for example the names of Edward Browne, who gave his life fighting for the independence and freedom of Persia, of Louis Massignon who was beaten by

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fascists and police for keeping faith in the word given to the Arab world, of Leone Caetani who was scoffed at in Italy as the "Turk" for having opposed the conquest of Libya. And how surprised the finest among them, from Theodor Neoldeke to Ignaz Goldziher and Julius Wellhausen, from Sylvestre de Sacy to Sylvain Levy, Oldenberg and Pischel, from Amary to Dozy, from Pelliot and Le Coq to Bartold, would be in the Elysian fields to see the pure scientific passion that animated their lives and works debased to the level of low services to a nascent or triumphant colonialism. Colonialism has risen, it has celebrated its misdeeds and its splendors (and not only misdeeds, friends from the East, with or without your permission). It is dead and buried as, everything considered, it deserved to die. But this fact has no bearing whatever on the work of the greatest and most important European scholars who did not see their work as a contribution to political or commercial interest, but as a disinterested and impassioned search for the truth. This is an affirmation worthy of a "verité de M. de La Palice," if it is recalled (as it is moreover well recalled in the anti-orientalistic indictment, to the point of making of it, as we will see, one of the summary points of the accusation) that most, in fact the major part, of European orientalistic work on the civilizations and peoples of the Orient was directed toward illuminating the events of the past. It was concerned with the history of civilizations now buried, and of others that still continue, some as stubborn survivals but whose original and vital motives are all or almost all to be sought in a distant past, beyond any modern polemics. The suspicion and hostility of some Eastern milieu toward certain scholars of the ancient East have no more justification than if analogous feelings were to be entertained by modern Greeks or Italians toward the great investigators and reconstructors of the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome.

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But, continues the accusation of the modern East, let us admit that there are merits to your study of our past. It is our present that poses your crisis, you and your science and its antiquated

or reactionary methods. It is this Orient, very much alive, which today rises to confront you with its problems, its needs, it as yet unsatisfied yearning for a just share of the goods of the earth. What interest do you have in it, what measure will you use to judge it, and to aid it, once your hateful world of subjection and exploitation has fallen to pieces? How will you pretend still to write our history, to analyze our feelings and aspirations with your old west-centered vision, which made Europe, the present-day, degraded Europe, the axis and the center of world history?

These are passionate words, whose sincere feeling cannot and should not be ignored, but which, we believe, should be answered not emotionally but with calm reason. First of all, the right of the modern peoples of the Orient to feel themselves again a subject of history and to demand that their present be given dignity as an object of study is incontestable. This the "classical" conception of orientalism was inclined to ignore. Today, that disproportion between the past and the present as material for investigation has been largely counterbalanced by the work of the truest and best prepared scholars and writers of the East itself, and of European scholars, among whom the new generations of Soviet orientalists are emerging in greater number if not always higher quality. Also the invitation to consider the history of oriental peoples and civilizations not from a west-centered point of view is fully justified, if one intends to take care not to judge this history merely as complementary to that of the West, almost as a prelude, a counterpoint and epilogue of the "great history," the history par excellence, which evolved precisely in Europe. If from this viewpoint the condemnation of historiography and of orientalism as west-centered reaches the point of contending the right of the West to apply, in considering the East, the concepts which the West has elaborated in its modern history, of what precisely is history, civilization, philosophy and poetry—the demand, in other words, that it renounce the results of its secular study on the evolution of humanity and the correlative interpretation in order to look at the Orient *with oriental eyes and mentality*—, this the West could never accept without repudiating itself and its self knowledge, its own *raison d'être*. For at least four centuries modern

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concepts of history, science, evolution, and of all that makes up the spiritual heritage of man, have been elaborated in the West. *During this same period* the East contributed nothing in any way to this labor. Hence the "unjustified" pride of the West in its own cultural superiority, which has been recently candidly thrown in its face.³ It would be strange to say the least to expect that the West renounce the use of such concepts in considering the history of the East, through a sense of *fair play* toward the object of its study, adapting to it relevant concepts that doubtless have had a high and sometimes the highest historical value, but which are by now implied in and surpassed by the further development of human thought. Because, so far as *modern* conceptions, master-ideas, interpretations of history or of life that have been developed in the East are concerned, we confess that we are still waiting to know of them. We know of only one of major importance, which however is an isolated instance, that does not seem to be followed any more in its own country of origin: we refer to the doctrine and work of Gandhi, a lofty personal formulation, grafted onto the traditional influences of the East, from which the West itself would still have a great deal to learn. Other than this, the East is theoretically a desert, if the obvious historical fact is borne in mind that Marxism to which it seems to cling in search of a new philosophy of life, in opposition to the repudiated myths of the West, is also itself a fruit of the West, since Hegel, Marx and Lenin do not belong to the history of oriental thought but properly to Western thought, which has thus demonstrated itself to be fertile with implications and applications in the troubled contemporary history of the Afro-Asiatic peoples. When they now preach hatred and contempt of the West in dogmatic Marxist formulas, they are adopting a weapon that the West itself forged and applied

³ In the above-mentioned article by Anouar Abdel-Malek, which is presumed to be familiar to the reader. Of a considerably more measured tone, but not any less instructive in this regard are the observations of M. Arkoun, "L'Islam moderne vu par le professeur G. E. Grunebaum" in *Arabica*, XI [1964], 113-124, which contest the legitimacy of the Western islamist's diagnosis of Islam, by taking as its point of departure an explicit or implicit consciousness of the superiority of the West.

to itself, for its own revival or decline and impoverishment, according to the point of view. Certainly, there is no question here indeed of a genuine product of the East, even if the East has accepted it with such ingenuous and avid enthusiasm.

Our friends from the East should therefore not come to ask us to start studying their past and present in the light of a modern Eastern historiography, philosophy, aesthetics and economics, inasmuch as these are today nonexistent. They should indicate, if they are themselves sure of them, the relevant Marxist doctrines as correct canons of interpretation, but they should not delude themselves that with this they have counterposed something to Western thought that the latter does not already have, indeed that it did not itself generate. And as far as the "systematic denigration" of the contribution of the orientals themselves to orientalism—another subject of complaint and recrimination—, we take the liberty of considering this question too in the same terms that we have just specified. The original contributions of some oriental civilizations to the study of their own languages and literature, their philosophy and history, were great in the past, while the West was arrogantly and candidly ignored by them. Today, while maintaining contact with this past and pertinent technique, the way to scientific progress and intellectual maturation in the study of these same civilizations still passes through Western orientalism, that is, European historical, philological and sociological thought. And this is the way that intelligent and courageous orientals have taken, and in some cases they have achieved full parity with their Western colleagues. The names, to remain in the field more familiar to those who write, of Abd al-Wahhab Qazvini, Abbas Iqbal and Taqizade in Persia, Faud Koprulu in Turkey, Taha Husein and Ibrahim Madkur in Egypt, Munaggid in Syria, Tangi in Morocco, and many others, are considered by every European orientalist to be on a footing of perfect equality, united by the assimilation of a common mentality, technique and method of work, in which really "there is no more oriental nor occidental" with opposite programs, but one scientific ideal only, and one sole modern method of work. If many others in the East have not risen to this level, the affirmation does not imply any absurd kind of

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exclusivism of culture or race, but a simple, verified statement of fact which the future could well modify.

More and more scholars have arrived at an *historical* and not a polemical conception of their great heritage, they have gained a capacity to interpret it and relive it, which includes in itself and surpasses if possible the interpretation of Western orientalism; and a further deepening and progress of this sort would be happily conceded to the most vital forces of the modern East. But so long as the East does not succeed in overcoming this complex of suspicion and ill-feeling that also prejudices friendly cooperation with the West, it should not speak with so much presumption of an "orientalism in crisis," blaming it for what is its own agonizing crisis.

This writer has spent what one could call by now a lifetime in dedicated, impassioned study of at least one among the oriental civilizations, the Arabic-Islamic, precisely from which come the most inflammatory and for the most part unjust accusations and recriminations against the *istishraq*. As a son of the West, and tied to its civilization with the most intimate fiber, I have always recognized the dignity and the greatness of the oriental component in history and in humanity. Rectifying and rejecting, where it has been possible and necessary, an inequitable appraisal of the disinterested work of generations in the knowledge of the East, I can but voice one wish: that the East express new, original values that may serve to enrich the common viaticum on earth, or that, welcoming with the necessary adaptations those that have matured in the West, it be able to choose among them only the most generous, the richest in critical ferments, and (to use the words of a great Italian poet) "the most compassionate of themselves and of others," rather than the most corrosive and destructive. But if necessity of free choice lead it to prefer the latter, it should at least be able to recognize and not falsify the origin.