

THE INVENTION OF THE ORIENTAL 'OTHER' IN EUROPEAN MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT

The construction of 'Otherness' through the oriental world, continued in the west for centuries after the crusades. With time, the antagonism against the Oriental societies started to escape the geopolitical and religious domain, and displaced in western culture, knowledge, politics and history. In different periods of western civilization, this antagonism (or dualism) with the oriental 'Other' was manifested in new forms, depending mostly on the socio-political context in the western world. By means of this paper, I'll try to describe the process in which western cultural theory re-invented it's category of otherness (basically the orient), in a way in which contributed in the construction of a certain image of the western world. In other words: by inventing a certain category of 'Otherness', western cultural and political theory constructed and reproduced a certain image of the European 'self'. Through a constructivist approach, I'll try to explain what is the role of the oriental 'Other' in the development of western political theory and what kind of forces influenced the western perceptions on the oriental world. The main references of this approach are authors of theories of nationalism and politics of identity such as Gerard Delanty, Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner but also the paper will be focused on the discourse analysis of several authors of western political theory such as Tomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Marx and John Stuart Mill. My claim is that the perceptions, considerations and analysis of these authors gave an important influence in the invention of the oriental 'Other' in western political theory. It also has to be noted the role of western travelers, diplomats and scholars, which until the end of the 19th century had a very limited information about the orient, therefore the construction of the orient in the western world had to be through an imagined identity that fits in the symbolic coordinates of the western *common sense*; namely through western cultural theory.

Keywords: Politics of identity, Orientalism, Constructivism, Discourse analysis.

THE PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN SCHOLARS ON ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

Until the 18th century the antagonism between the Muslim orient and the Christian west was mostly based on the religious sphere because of the difference in religious beliefs. In times of European enlightenment, after the critiques against the catholic church during the French revolution, the perceptions on the Orientals changed drastically in a positive way. French philosophers of the revolution like Voltaire or Diderot had a positive impression on the Orient, in fact it seems like they admired the lack of religious hierarchies in Muslim religion and the way in which religious institutions function in Islamic societies. On the other side, due to the limited information on these societies, the western scholars failed to explain the differences that exist within the Oriental world. They often treated 'The Orient' as a monolithic concept, without considering for example that within the oriental world not all societies are Islamic (Hourani Albert: 1991,15). Despite the changes that experienced the western perceptions on Islamic societies, generally they were considered as part of a different world, uncivilized, dangerous and often hostile towards western values.

On 12th century, Peter de Montboissier who translated the Quran in latin, considered Islam a Christian misbelief, whereas Mohammed according to him was a killer and given to carnal desires. A century later, Thomas Aquinas in his book “Summa contra Gentiles” accused Mohammed for “The temptation he created in people for carnal desires” (Curtis: 2011, 31). Aquinas considered the disciples of Mohammed as “brutal, ignorant and desert travelers” (Ibid, 32). Centuries later, with the advance of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, while this time the Turks were identified with Islam, the western perceptions of the oriental world started to be reshaped. This time, they were not only religious rivals but above all they were perceived as a military and political threat. Meanwhile Islam continued to be conceived as cause for the Oriental despotism, the degradation of women in society, slavery and also Muslims were conceived as politically passive which obey unconditionally the rules of their master. In his book “Lost paradise”, John Milton compared the Ottoman ruler – whom the greatest ambition was to conquer Christian territories – with devil itself. He wrote about “The devil sitting on the throne of a loyal state and whose wealth surpasses his Persian predecessors or that of Indian Moguls, and also who ruled the oriental well-heeled territory by using barbaric methods” (Milton J, Macmillan Coll Div, Washington: 1992). In this context, the unsustainable conceptions of 17th century Europeans regarding the orient, often lead to misrepresentations by European commentators concerning the political figures in the Ottoman Empire. In a phrase written by Francis Bacon in the beginning of 17th century, he refers to the Turks as “Cruel people, immoral, deprived of any sort of art and science; people who can hardly measure a piece of land or an hour, in other words: they are a real shame for human society” (Bacon: 1985, p.39). The idea of the cruelty of Islamic people seems to be accepted even by the French writer of the renaissance Michel de Montaigne who in his essay on virtue explains that “According to the Mohammedans, the safest way to deserve going to paradise is to kill someone who belongs to a different religion” (Montaigne: 1978, p.29). It seems all these important figures of western civilization share the same idea concerning the Mohammedan ‘Other’. It has to be emphasized that as Dorothee Metlitzki put it “Generally, medieval romances and humanist writers had a critical trend in the portrayal of the orient” (Metlitzki D: 1977, p.42). Romances of the 17th century promoted the image of an ideal Europe with the incorporation of the myths of chivalry, which submitted images of brave Christian knights that fought against their Saracen enemy.

When the catholic priest Blaise Pascal compares Mohammed with Christ, he notes that the later chose the way to success, meanwhile the first chose eternity through death (Pascal: 1925, Paris, Hatchette, 240). It seems this perception still exists in the 21st century after the terrorist attacks on twin towers in 2001. Especially since then, Islam started to be associated with death, a civilization that in order to exist, from time to time needs martyrdom and sacrifices, which according to this point of view is the opposite of western values. Looks like from the 17th century, the semantics of western intellectuals have erased the original principle of Christian religion, which lead to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself in the name of humanity. On a certain way, by criticizing the oriental world, seems that European intellectuals of 17th century tempt to erase their own past in order to re-invent a new one. In other words: the oriental “other” is invented in the shape of the “self” of the European past, a past that can be overcome only be exteriorizing it. During this period in Europe, Catholics and Lutherans accused themselves for containing Islamic features, which have been adopted from Turkish infidels (Curtis: 2011, p.34). This is an interesting case to explain the symbolic relevance the Islamic ‘other’ had incorporated in the context of European wars of religion. Thus, as a consequence of

the difference emphasized in the 'other' (being this Lutheran or Catholic), it was politicized and afterwards this difference was labelled with the symbolic coordinates of 'otherness' in the shape of the "Islamic enemy". Given that Islam was a well-known enemy for both sides – Catholics and Lutherans – labeling the other as "Islamic" was an identity filled with political meaning that serves to separate and dissociate a certain community from another. Thereby, it could be said that the dissociation between the 'self' and the 'other' (like Christian/Muslim) begins with an exterior 'other' and culminates with interiorizing it within the 'self'. As Slavoj Žižek points out when he analyzes the basis of anti-Semitism in political identity, "the anti-Semitic formula – as revealed by one of Hitler's statements – was: we have to kill the Jew within us. In this statement – explains Žižek – Hitler says more than he wants to say. It confirms that the Gentiles need the anti-Semitic figure of the "Jew" in order to maintain their identity." (Žižek S: 2012, 253). In the same way, to continue Žižek's argument: by trying to extract the Islamic 'other' from themselves, it implies that Europeans invented the category of *Orientalism* from an initial duplication of the self. In other words: The Islamic 'other' not only is invented from the Western-European, but in a paradoxical way: he is the Western-European. At the end of the 17th century – as Said and Curtis argue – in Europe we have a rise of the information about the Ottoman Empire and Islam in general, nonetheless the majority of the publications maintained a critical view on their regard. The English version of the French translation of the Quran, appeared in 1650, year in which was published "Political reflections on Turkish governance" by Francis Osborne, while a few years later was published "The present state of the Ottoman Empire" by Paul Rycout (Curtis: 2011, p.34). This demonstrates an augmentation of European interest and curiosity to study the oriental 'other'. This marks an important shift on the western perceptions of Islam. If in the previous centuries, Islam represented the greatest and most dangerous threat, in the 17th century western studies on Islam produced new discourses of truth. This time, the Ottoman Empire wasn't that fearful (especially after the defeat of their troops in Vienna), it was mostly considered as despotic, barbaric and uncivilized. Nonetheless it can't be said that all the publications of the time had a critical approach, for example in 1674 Henry Stubbe criticized *The holy trinity* and affirmed that "Mohammed was the best legislator that ever existed" (Stubbe G: 1911). As a consequence we can say – on the contrary of Said – that in fact Western perceptions, analysis and descriptions not always contained a hegemonic essence against the Orient. As Albert Hourani puts it "To say that Western analysis and studies on the eastern societies had a hegemonic approach, that this studies are always fuelled with doctrinal purposes, or that their trend is to represent Muslim societies and culture in terms of an immutable Islam, is clearly an essentialist argument (Hourani: Islam in European Thought, Cambridge University Press, New York 1991, p.57-58). Thus, according to this approach it should be overcome the positivist viewpoint which considers that it's impossible for Western Europeans to discover the real essence of Islamic societies. The analysis and discourses of European authors of the 17th century demonstrate a high level of curiosity towards Islamic societies. Often they have provided detailed information – even though the majority of them were mis-interpreted – about the orient. To understand these perceptions and the pejorative connotations that often portrayed the orient in the eyes of European cultural theory, it would be important to emphasize the context in which these authors wrote. In this regard, the historic reality has a crucial importance that shouldn't be neglected, as sometimes happens from contemporary authors of post-colonial studies or oriental cultural studies. Post-colonial studies seem less interested to describe and analyze the different forms of manifestation of the cultural interaction between the west and the orient in the last centuries, than demonstrating the power relations and imperialist attitudes of the

west towards the orient. Even though imperialism and European influence in the orient installed through the so called *orientalist knowledge* constitutes an important aspect on the way in which Orientals are perceived, on the other hand this can't be defined as the determinant factor of oriental identity. In this regard, two aspects should be mentioned: Firstly, the orient wasn't a passive actor during the European aggression in the east. Secondly, it was only in the period of European modernity (XVII-XVIII century) that the orient was no longer considered a threat, or a rival civilization. At least until 18th and 19th century, European approach towards the orient wasn't imperialistic, because until 18th century the Ottoman Empire was a powerful state and its power in the orient couldn't be threatened by any European state. Up to 16th century, Ottomans were viewed with fear in western Europe, which can be demonstrated by a phrase used in Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, wrote in the beginning of 16th century: A widow asked the priest: "Do you think the Turks will land in Italy this year?" and the priest answered: "Yes, if you don't pray" (Machiavelli: 2006, p.18).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I was focused mostly on western perceptions regarding the orient in 17th century. I focused on this period because it's exactly in this period that European interest towards Islamic societies – especially the Ottoman Empire – starts to increase. In European countries the information on oriental societies grew enormously, while at the same time European misconceptions on this topic took a new form. Discourses of the authors of European cultural and political theory regarding the orient show that perceptions and relations between European and the Oriental civilization have changed and varied with the passing of the time, and at this point it would be hard to say - as Said does – that the notion of "Orient" was invented by western intellectuals. As I tried to explain in this paper, it's not true that the orient was always conceived in a pejorative sense, for example in times of absolute Monarchy in France, Voltaire wrote about the orient with admiration. As I mentioned above, according to Voltaire, the political power of the sultan couldn't be compared with the unlimited power of Louis in France. To describe the perceptions of Europe towards the oriental world, first of all we have to emphasize the importance of the European context in the time when these perceptions take place. Europe and the Orient are not monolithic units, but they are fragmented concepts that shift from time to time.

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