BOOK REVIEW

Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India

By Michael Curtis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ix+382 pp. Price HB £37.20. EAN 978-0521749619.

Discussing what he calls 'The Postmodern Future' of 'Orientalism', Ziauddin Sardar concluded his critical study of this controversial concept by stressing that 'orientalism is very much alive in contemporary cultural practice': 'All of its main tropes have been seamlessly integrated into modernity. [...] Orientalism [...] has different stylistic moments, diversity of opinions, changing fashions and emphases. Nevertheless, it has reworked itself from one historical epoch to another, from the Middle Ages to the "Age of Discovery" to the Enlightenment to colonialism to modernity, maintaining conventional representations of "the Orient" at the forefront of the European mind' (Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism* [Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999], p. 107)

Michael Curtis' *Orientalism and Islam* is intended as a discussion of the European concept of Oriental despotism, as articulated by seven European political thinkers, namely Montesquieu (1689–1755), Edmund Burke (1729–97), James Mill (1773–1836), Alexis Tocqueville (1805–59), John Stuart Mill (1805–73), Karl Marx (1818–83) and Max Weber (1864–1920). It provides clear evidence of the persistence and deep-rootedness of the Orient in both the foreground and background of the European mind. It is not only a review of the latent Orientalist tendency, deeply rooted in the mentality of those thinkers. The book is also an apology for the Orientalist knowledge they produced, a knowledge which has contributed to the Western domination of the East, particularly during the period of colonialism, for 'Orientalism, as a discipline and discourse of power, perpetuated the dominance of the West over the non-West' (Sardar, *op. cit.*, p. 66).

The apology starts with the author's reference to Dr. Samuel Johnson's aphorism that 'a generous and elevated mind is distinguished by nothing more certainly than an eminent degree of curiosity; nor is this curiosity ever more agreeably or usefully employed than in examining the laws and customs of foreign nations'. Having selected areas of 'the Mahometan world' to which to apply their varying 'degrees of curiosity' about 'foreign nations', the seven thinkers (and other commentators, discussed by Curtis) came up with 'perceptions and conclusions about the particular style of politics in the past history' of states in various parts of the Muslim world (p. 1). 'That style has been characterized as Oriental despotism'. It is, to use Curtis's own words, the 'style of autocratic and absolute government', as distinguished from other, more moderate

forms of rule. This style is associated with Islam, whose precepts 'gave credibility to despotism' (p. 37). In short, 'Oriental despotism was not a fantasy but rather a style of politics and society embodying certain characteristics, such as arbitrary autocracy, opulence and lack of political and economic development' (p. 68). These perceptions and conclusions of those 'brilliant and celebrated figures' of Western political theories are so highly valued by Curtis as to 'implicitly refute the simplistic and reductionist argument that all European writing about the Muslim Orient is racist, imperialistic, or totally ethnocentric'. Although he concedes that their views might be considered controversial, they 'are not examples of historical partisanship' and remain relevant, even 'helpful in providing a background for understanding the nature of contemporary Muslim societies and the cultural identities of the people in the Orient, particularly at a moment when Western countries are being challenged by groups and organizations stemming from the Middle East, and when the number of Muslims resident in Western countries has been increasing' (p. 2).

To begin with, one wonders to what extent the seven thinkers, brilliant and celebrated figures that they are, were qualified to discuss the issue of despotism in the Orient: did they know the relevant languages and have extensive first-hand experience of the Orient? When and how far did they rely on the accounts of travellers and outsiders? And what is the measure of their support for colonization by Europeans on the basis of racial and cultural superiority?

The first three chapters of Curtis's book focus on 'the observers of Muslim societies', particularly early European travellers, on the ground that 'many of [them] had firsthand information and observation of Eastern countries they visited or wrote about' and because of 'their considerable influence on the six main writers considered' in his book (p. 6).

However, to rely on so-called first-hand travellers' accounts for their discourse on Muslim and Oriental societies was not necessarily a safe strategy for these major Western thinkers. As shown in *Veiled Half-Truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women* (selected and introduced by Judy Mabro; I. B. Tauris, 1991, p. 51) 'the writings of travellers recorded more about their state of mind than anything else'. The French scholar and traveler C. F. Volney held that, for a real understanding of the population of a country, it was necessary to live there, learn their language and practise their customs:

> Not only must [travellers] contend with all the prejudices that they will encounter, but they must overcome those they bring with them: the heart is partial, habits are strong, facts are insidious and illusion is easy. The observer must therefore be cautious but not faint-hearted, and the reader who can only see through the eyes of the intermediary, must keep an eye on both the judgment of the guide and their own judgment.' (Volney, *Voyage en Égypt et en Syrie*: Mouton & Co., 1959, first published in 1787, cited by Mabro, p. 27).

Curtis himself acknowledges that Montesquieu's work, for example, is open to criticism on the grounds of his reliance on travellers' accounts of Oriental societies. Thus Macaulay is cited (p. 101) as saying that Montesquieu 'had ransacked history, carelessly collected material, and was indifferent to truth in his

eagerness to build a system'. Voltaire recognized that 'Montesquieu's generalizations sometimes rested on misquotations and on faulty or selective information', while 'Anquetil-Duperron the great Orientalist scholar [...] devoted most of his 1778 book *Législation Orientale* to Montesquien's factual inaccuracies and argued that Montesquieu's analysis lacked clarity in organization, was sometimes imprecise, and was occasionally contradictory' (p. 78). Indeed, there is a general agreement among 'all specialists in Middle Eastern affairs' that Montesquieu 'had somewhat imperfect knowledge of the Middle East, Persia or India' (p. 101). He 'knew none of the languages of the "Orient" or of "Asia," and little of the real history of the region' (p. 86).

Evidently, in analysing Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Curtis forgets that what Montesquieu was discussing was France and French society, not the Orient which he claimed to know and understand: 'Montesquieu never understood some aspects of the reality of the Ottoman Empire as well as did the French Ambassador, Count de Choiseul-Gouffier, quoted in Chapter 3, reporting from his post in Istanbul in a letter in 1786 that "things here are not as in France where the king is sole master; here it is necessary to persuade people" ' (p. 101).

Count de Choiseul-Gouffier's letter (cited by Curtis, p. 64) goes on to detail the difference between Turkey and France: 'here it is necessary to persuade the ulema, the men of law, the holders of high offices, and those who no longer hold them'. The editor and translator of Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters: A New Translation* (New York: Meridian Books 1961), J. Robert Loy, writes in his introduction (p. 11):

> Persia has relatively little to do with these letters; the regency that followed upon Louis XIV's death has much to do with them; the intellectual climate of subsequent years has very much to do with them. Few moments of French history have combined political, moral, and economic confusion to the same degree as those years between 1715 and the publication of the *Persian Letters*.

As Loy points out (ibid, p.14), 'The Regency under its philosophical, political, religious, and social aspects, form the actual Persia, or at least one of the Persias of the *Letters*'. Montesquieu's knowledge of Persia came from the accounts of travellers and other observers that he had read. Indeed, the sources for all the ideas he acquired on Oriental despotism have been identified:

> [Montesquieu] knew the *Voyages en Perse et aux Indes orientales* of the French traveler Jean Chardin, published first in 1686 (a later edition in 1711, was near a probable genesis of the *Letters*), which reinforced the vogue of Orientalism in France; he knew Jean-Baptiste Tavernier's earlier work, *Six voyages en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes* (1676), as well as François Bernier's *Voyages* (1699); and he borrowed copiously from them – from Chardin perhaps more for firsthand knowledge of harem life, from Tavernier for geography. The Galland translation (1704–17) of *The Thousand and One Nights* provided him with a stylistic flavor as did, very probably, the works of the father–son Orientalists, François and Alexander Pétis de la Croix, of whom he speaks. (ibid, pp. 14–15).

The same basic flaw in the approach and discourse of the major thinkers is evident in Karl Marx's notion of the Asian Mode of Production (AMP). AMP has been criticized alike by Marxists and non-Marxists. Among its strongest critics was Edward Said who pointed out that, in his analysis of conditions in India under British rule, Marx was embracing a type of Romantic Orientalism—a remark that caused the rift between Said and his close friend Sadik Jalal Al-'Azem, and generated a widespread controversy in the Arab world (see: Sadik Jalal Al-'Azem, 'Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse', *Khamsin*, 8 (1981): 5–26, and his book (in Arabic) *The Tabooing Mentality: Salman Rushdie and Truth of Literature* [Nicosia: F. K. A. Publishing Co. Ltd., 2nd edn., 1994], particularly its first part titled 'The Question of Orientalism', pp. 11–106). However, Curtis is happy simply to ignore Said's statement, or Al-'Azem's criticism for that matter. Indeed, he is happy to present his review of the perceptions of the Western theorists without direct reference to Said, even though he is continually answering his views on Western Orientalism in almost every chapter. Furthermore, he does not bother to document citations from Said's book (see for example p. 1, where Curtis quotes the statement [*Orientalism*, p. 204] that 'every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric', without referring to Said or to the book). However, to be fair to Curtis, he does not overlook the criticism directed against Marx's AMP. In answer to the question 'To what extent does the Marxian analysis correspond to the realities of Oriental societies, economies, and politics?', he writes:

> Partly because the AMP differs from the mainstream of Marx's writings it has occasioned considerable critical comment from Marxists and less ideologically oriented analysts. Some of the criticism is justifiable but the extent of it is somewhat surprising. Ernest Gellner wittily pointed out that commentary on classical antiquity or primitive tribalism is hardly crucial testing grounds for appraisal of Marxism.

Yet, he adds:

> Experts in the field of Oriental societies have pointed out the factual mistakes or too strong generalizations that cannot bear the freight of the empirical statements in the writings on the AMP, though they often stemmed from the works of British administrators in India, government documents, and the general reading by Marx and Engels. Thorner, in particular, listed factual errors, and pointed out that Marx was mistaken in saying that communal property had never existed in either Mughal or post-Mughal India. Others have remarked that there is no necessary relationship between elements of the AMP, such as absence of private land ownership and need for state control of irrigation and Oriental despotism. Anderson went even further by arguing that the whole Marxist picture of the Indian villages was inaccurate except for the union of agriculture and crafts, which was common to all preindustrial rural communities. Moreover, the villages were not egalitarian communities but rather were based on caste differences, a topic Marx mentioned but ignored for the most part. (pp. 256–7)

Concluding his consideration of the notion of Oriental despotism and Islam in the writings of the seven Western political theorists, Curtis claims (p. 299) that their perceptions help us 'understand the complex relationship between European and Oriental nations and societies, a relationship that has been distorted or simplified in some contemporary writing for polemical purposes, often anti-Western rhetoric [...]. The perceptions of our writers are not expressions of imperialist hubris nor are they manifestations of colonial humiliation of the Orient'.

Reading this claim, in the light of the previous two examples of the distorted knowledge produced by those writers, and Curtis' own sweeping generalizations—particularly his emphasis (p. 305) that 'Islamic religion with its fatalistic doctrine of predestination and the resulting passive nature of the population in Oriental societies' is behind the despotism and stagnation that existed in the Orient; his exaggerated references to the so-called 'Islamic threat', his Eurocentric view of the ancient and medieval history of the Arab world—one wonders what possible basis there could be for Curtis' hope that this kind of Western 'knowledge' of the Orient can help to bring about better mutual understanding between Islam and the West.

Commenting on Erich Auerbach's magisterial *Mimesis*, Edward Said wrote:

> The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily too does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance. (Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, [London: Penguin Books, 2003], p. 259)

For sure, Professor Curtis—who never refers explicitly to Said's *Orientalism*, while in almost every chapter, responding to and refuting Said's views of Orientalist knowledge—in glorifying the objectivity of this sort of Western knowledge of the Orient, in judging his own and the Oriental culture, has not shown the intimacy, nor observed the distance, he should. To have a better understanding of ourselves and others is a legitimate aspiration; but, to be worthy of it, we need a better quality of knowledge, a better class of scholarship.

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