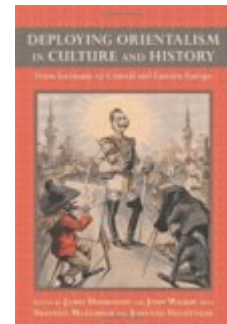


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Orientalism in Comparative Perspectives

Throughout Edward Said's eponymous study of 1978, orientalism acted as the starting point of postcolonial theory and research, but the study of orientalism has a much longer tradition in German and European cultural studies across the arts and humanities than is often acknowledged in postcolonial studies. One example is the one-thousand-page catalogue (*Europa und der Orient 800-1900*, edited by Gereon Sievernich and Hendrik Budde [1989]) of the seminal exhibition *Europa und der Orient* (Europe and the Orient) 800-1900 held in Berlin in 1989, which covers art, popular and material culture, music, theater, and literature. By contrast, the volume under review here focuses on literature and critical discourse from the eighteenth century to current German film and political philosophy, with most essays concentrating on the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, on fascinations with the diverse worlds of the "orient" in the emergence and development of modernism, regardless whether the "orient" in question is northern Africa, the Middle East, eastern Europe, Persia, India, or China and eastern Asia. As indicated in the subtitle, the essays move beyond the established field of British, American, and French orientalism discussed by Said to explore orientalist discourses in German, Austrian, Hungarian, Russian, and Czech literature, and in German exile writing in and about India. The editors and authors argue convincingly that there is a need to distinguish between overlapping but distinct orientalisms (in the plural) in different cultural and linguistic contexts, and in different historical periods.

This is particularly true with regard to the continental empires of Habsburg Austria and Russia (and the territories once affected by Austrian and Russian rule), since the "orient" in question—eastern Europe in general, Bosnia, the Ottoman Empire, the Tatars of the Crimean Peninsula, the Islamic territories of the northern Caucasus, or the Khanates of central Asia—is much closer to home than the "orient" of British or French literature. In central and eastern Europe, the borders between "orient" and "occident" are shifting and subject to cultural negotiation and political change, and the interplay between "self" and "other" is therefore more intricate than in Said's analysis of British and French orientalism—to the point of making neat distinctions between "orient" and "occident" impossible. Cultural identities conceived as hovering "in between" the West and the East (such as Hungary), or defined by productive hybridizations of both (such as in certain Russian territories), also undercut neat distinctions between the "colonizers" and the "colonized," even though the colonial discourse of Western superiority and Europe's civilizing mission nonetheless defined perceptions and politics across Europe. In addition, the essays' critical rereading of (mostly German) philosophers, writers, and critics, from Johann Gottfried Herder and the late eighteenth century onward, highlights forms of cultural engagement with the "orient" that do not follow the patterns mapped out by Said.

As a result, this book is at one level a highly critical and immensely productive dialogue with Said and

with postcolonial studies of orientalism in his tradition. At another level, it makes a welcome and original contribution to developing comparative postcolonial studies across the full range of European countries and language areas. The editors never make this potential explicit, treating the study of orientalism(s) as a field in its own right, but they do point in the direction of comparative postcolonial studies when they claim quite rightly that “a key innovation of this collection” is “to draw into debate other, relatively neglected forms of European orientalism from the disciplines of Central and Eastern European studies” and to demonstrate “how the geographical locus of the Orient varied across a range of European cultures,” highlighting “the differing *uses* and *functions* of constructions of the Orient within those shifting settings” (pp. 1, 2). This is an ambitious volume based on an Anglo-Indian-Austrian research network whose results will be relevant well beyond German and eastern European studies, and also beyond literary studies, as the findings affect the theoretical basis of postcolonial inquiry across the disciplines, along with the European history of imperialism and Europe’s relationship with Asia and northern Africa.

The essays presented move from a discussion of fairly canonical German sources through case studies on less-prominent German-language material to specifically eastern European perspectives. John Walker discusses continuities in the German history of ideas that link Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Jürgen Habermas’s later work in terms of a tradition of critique that conceives of “the other” “not as an a priori philosophical construct, but a reality encountered in human dialogue” (p. 25). Humboldt’s concept of translation in particular informs an understanding of intercultural dialogue that is central to much German orientalist thought and builds on hermeneutics and the hermeneutic awareness of the limitations of understanding, although the significance of hermeneutics could have been highlighted more clearly. In terms of the history of orientalism in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this contrasts with the approaches outlined by Todd Kontje, Michael Dusche, and Jon Keune. Kontje, like Walker highlighting long-durée continuities, considers Fatih Akin’s film *Gegen die Wand* (2004) alongside Franz Kafka’s and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s orientalist works arguing that they all share “an oscillation between a sense of rootedness or entrapment in the local and a desire for physical or imaginary flight to somewhere liberating, exotic, or just different, that in turn mobilizes reflections on contrasting national cultures and traditions” (p. 72).

The embeddedness of Goethe’s orientalism in cosmopolitanism, in particular, contrasts sharply with Friedrich Schlegel’s reimagining of Germany as “Europe’s true oriental self,” which emerges from the historical context of anti-Napoleonic resistance and the “search for a countermodel to modern—that is, French—society” (pp. 31, 36). Dusche shows how Schlegel’s contribution to the emerging field of indology is linked to the rise of German nationalism in the early nineteenth century. Setting the framework for later nineteenth-century orientalism and its involvement with colonial imperialism, Romantic orientalism thus swept away the potential counter-legacy of Enlightenment scholarship represented here by Matthias Christian Sprengel’s numerous but largely forgotten publications about India, which Keune reads as instances of a “disenchanted orientalism” (p. 126). Sprengel’s more pragmatic, non-Romantic, and non-nationalist look at Asian history and societies defies the now-conventional hierarchical opposition of West and East and is therefore of renewed interest for scholars of global history today, such as German historian Jürgen Osterhammel.

Alongside the chapters that map out different and competing forms of orientalism, others focus on little-known historical and cultural material from the German context. James Hodkinson discusses two German accounts from the 1840s, by an Alsatian priest and an Austrian officer in the French army, of France’s colonial conquest of Algiers, which represent early German colonial discourse within a French orientalist framework. Shaswati Mazumdar draws attention to the forgotten resonance, in German journalism and popular novel writing, of the Damascus affair of 1840, the Crimean war, and the revolt of 1857 in India, which involved the representation of Jews, Turks, and Indians as different guises of “the figure of the oriental” (p. 99). Jyoti Sabharwal considers the interesting case of the Prague-born German-Jewish writer and critic Willy Haas, who fled Nazi Germany for India, where he “scripted some of the most successful films of the 1940s for the Bhavnani Studio in Bombay” (p. 135). This is a striking example of German-Indian cross-cultural exchange, which involves the legacy of German nineteenth-century indology as well as intercultural experience on site. The final chapter of the volume complements these case studies with Ulrike Stamm’s fresh look at the various uses of oriental sexuality in nineteenth-century travelogues, which, at the very least, indicate the fuzzy edges around the notion of one singular orientalist discourse.

The other essays in the second half of the volume turn to central and eastern Europe. Johann Heiss and

Johannes Feichtinger continue the now-established tradition of rereading Habsburg history in a postcolonial perspective. This study focuses on the complications of orientalist discourse in the Habsburg Empire, with particular regard to Bosnia-Herzegovina. The deployment of orientalism is marked here by the distinction between the “distant orient” of the Ottoman Empire and the “Orient ‘close to home’” of Muslims within the Habsburg Empire, who were subject to the “civilizing mission” of Austrian-Hungarian politics (pp. 158, 159). The authors illustrate how the Habsburg Empire used the inherent ambivalence of the “orient” “as both a threat and an opportunity” to establish a mode of “colonial rule” that “could demonstrate the superiority of the conservative idea of inclusive state nationalism [the Habsburg doctrine of unity in diversity] over the language-based idea of exclusive, though progressive, cultural nationalism” (p. 159). Homing in on the history of orientalism in Hungary since the mid-nineteenth century, Margit Köves provides a historical overview of the changing uses of orientalist thought in Hungarian identity discourses, which undercut “a simple dualistic opposition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (p. 174). Sarah Lemmen’s look at Czech travel writing on Africa and Asia around 1900 similarly differentiates the landscape of literary orientalism by showing how pan-European orientalist tropes are inflected by travels from a country

not directly involved in imperial rule. Finally, Kerstin S. Jobst’s analysis of Russian orientalism and its role in Russian and Soviet imperialism focuses on a particularly important subfield of study that warrants more research and attention in international postcolonial studies. In the case of this continental empire, the borders between the “self” and the “oriental other” are particularly fluid both in territorial and in cultural terms. They are further complicated by the fact that in a pan-European perspective Russia itself represents the East. Jobst argues that the “seemingly special features of Russian orientalism resulted from” this in-between position: “Russian orientalism is an attempt at the collective self-positioning of the Russian elites between an essentialized East and an equally essentialized West” (p. 202).

Individual readers will necessarily find some chapters more interesting than others, but all essays are marked by a high standard of research and argument. The volume is carefully edited (except for errors in German word separation) and includes an index of names, regions, and themes. Several authors make very good use of Osterhammel’s analysis of cross-continental relations in pre-modern and modern times; some more recent German research on orientalism appears sadly to have come too late to be acknowledged in the argument of this volume.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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