Anti-, non-, or post-Saidian?: The challenge of discussing German Orientalism

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Suzanne L. Marchand. *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 526 pages.

Ursula Wokoeck. *German Orientalism: The Study of the Middle East and Islam from 1800 to 1945*. London: Routledge, 2009, 333 pages.

When Edward Said published his *Orientalism*,[1] precipitating an epistemological turn, he focused on French and English language writings on the East to underline his thesis of the intrinsically entangled nature of rule over and knowledge of the Middle East, especially in the age of imperialism. Yet with only a casual remark, he excluded all of German orientalism from his study.[2] This left a lacuna and dilemma in the critical revision of writings on the East: how could possibly the largest and most in-depth body of writing on Asian matters produced by a European country in the nineteenth century have stemmed from a country with hardly any occupied Asian territories? Does this disqualify Said's overall argument, or do we have to think in more roundabout ways to accommodate German orientalism within his thesis? A number of scholars have addressed this problem.[3] The two publications under review

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1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

2 Ibid., 1-4.

3 Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1996); Ali Osman Öztürk, *Alman Oryantalizmi: 19. Yüzyıl Alman Kültüründe Türk Motifi* (Ankara: Vadi, 2000); Jennifer Jenkins (ed.), "German Orientalism," special issue, *Comparative Studies on Africa, South Asia and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004); Todd Curtis Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

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here, however, are the most comprehensive analyses of German Oriental studies to date. Ironically, it seems they evolved in isolation, without knowledge of one another, and were published simultaneously.

Suzanne Marchand acknowledges the accomplishments of Said-inspired inquiries, but declares that she does not want to limit herself to collecting evidence for or against German academics' complicity in imperialism. Instead, she aims for a critical reading of the practice of Oriental studies, defined as the scholarly engagement with the languages, literature, and history of Asia (p. xx). Marchand stresses that Oriental studies in the German-speaking world developed out of an auxiliary science to Protestant theology, which had, since the early modern era, tried to engage with the bible on the basis of a critical reading of the original sources (p. 1). Parallel to this, German orientalism had roots in a Neoplatonic search for a common base of all religions focusing on common origins (p. 4), and in a tendency to ward off criticism by more dogmatic ecclesiastical institutions by focusing on an allegedly disinterested study of sources (p. 31). All three tendencies led the emerging discipline to prioritize exploration of the ancient world, to the detriment of medieval and contemporary issues.

Biblical interest was joined in the late eighteenth century by a renewed fascination with Greek antiquity, seen as a model for a German society that was struggling to adapt to the modern age. Yet at the beginning of the nineteenth century, interest in non- or pre-European cultures was not linguistically or regionally diversified; some scholars engaged simultaneously with Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Greek sources. This led Friedrich Schlegel—and more drastically Friedrich Creuzer—to appeal to their colleagues not to interpret Greek culture as one of unprecedented genius, but to contextualize it within a continuity of ancient Western and South Asian civilizations. This debate raged for much of the 1820s, but ended with Creuzer's thorough defeat and the canonization of the thesis of Greek original genius (pp. 58-71). As a consequence, the era of the "lonely orientalists" set in (1820-1870): often in isolated, marginal positions within theology departments or libraries, specialists focused on a positivist analysis of sources, gradually developing separate fields, such as *Judaistik*, *Arabistik*, and *Indogermanistik*, while abstaining from mainstream political debates (pp. 102-156).

The first two decades of the *Kaiserreich* (1871-1891) witnessed a stronger stance for Oriental studies. At this time, due to European expansion, ever more non-European sources became accessible, and a limited number of university chairs were established. Furthermore, the anticlerical atmosphere prompted some representatives of this "Second Oriental

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Renaissance" to readdress wider questions raised by Schlegel, daring to mount more open attacks on a worldview centered on Christianity and Greek classicism (pp. 157-162). Marchand characterizes the last decades before World War I as the time of "*Furor Orientalis*," when the young generation of orientalists revolted openly against the positivism, liberalism, and philhellenism that had for a long time dominated both their field and German academia in general. They pleaded for neo-romantic inquiries and were ready to do away with a Eurocentric worldview, but their revolt was only partially successful. Other characteristics of this era were specialization and racialization. Specialist linguistic borders had become so embedded that communication between area studies came to a standstill. This and openly anti-Semitic criticisms of the basis of Christianity, as well as racial interpretations of the continuity between the Indian and Germanic branches on the Indo-European language family tree, contributed to the destruction of a universalist worldview (pp. 212-227).

In Chapter 7, Marchand explicitly addresses the link between orientalism and empire. Overall, the insistence of academia on scientific standards (*Wissenschaftlichkeit*) stood in opposition to the demands of utility (*Nützlichkeit*) and possibly prevented a deeper involvement by orientalists in the *Kaiserreich's* urge for colonial and semi-colonial acquisitions. Marchand's sample of orientalists had very mixed relationships with colonialism: while Max von Oppenheim practiced freelance espionage in Egypt and Arabia for the *Kaiser*, Erwin Baelz openly criticized German imperial policy towards Japan.

After an excursion into art history, the final chapter "Orientalists and 'Others'" addresses the question of to what degree German orientalism, whether as a pro-active imperialist agency or as a vehicle for emancipation from Western domination, managed to reach out to Asian educated elites. This chapter is in fact dominated by the question of the Orientalists' involvement in Germany's jihad strategy in World War I. There are some weaknesses in drafting the overall picture here, as Marchand relies heavily on secondary literature. She states, for example, that only three academics were directly involved in jihad policies, none of whom were recognized by their peers (p. 441). However, one would also have to take into account Friedrich Sarre, who acted as consul to the Persian rogue government in Kirmanshah (a German puppet), where his duties included the coordination of agitation against the Tehran government (p. 449).[4] That said, Marchand rightfully states that orientalists

4 See for example Sarre's expertise on German and Ottoman jihadi agitation on the Iraqi-Persian front: Federal Archives – Military Archive, Freiburg i. Br., Imperial Navy Series; BA-MA RM 40/214, 100.

at home supported the jihad policy with propagandist publications (pp. 439-446).

Marchand comes to the conclusion that, before German orientalism finally lost its relevance with the removal of many university staff by the Nazis and the explicit or tacit complicity of the remainder in the racial order, it had indeed involved itself in racism and imperialism, but its inherited scholarliness and the idiosyncratic individual stances of its proponents had prevented it from the sweeping compliance suggested by Said's thesis. It had accomplished much through intense work, grappling with exotic languages and difficult sources and challenging contemporary conventions, and had, by the 1920s, laid the intellectual preconditions for creating a multicultural and truly universalist perspective. However, German orientalists failed to develop this perspective themselves, bogged down as they were by the legacies of biblical criticism, philhellenism, the romantic quest for anthropological origins and religious purity, and partiality for one Oriental people over the others.

One cannot help but be dazzled by this 500 page study on nearly a dozen sub-disciplines which hardly ever becomes tiring. Based on a broad reading of scholarly works, letters, and archival material, the author manages to skip lightly from biographical to institutional to meta-political aspects of the field's evolution without being weighed down by the mass of facts she touches on. Marchand manages to demonstrate both an understanding of the personal developments of the discipline's agents and at the same time a sure eye for identifying where its problematic tendencies evolved, to be later exploited by imperialism and fascism. The fact that she does not hail from one of the sub-disciplines under discussion but is a professor of European intellectual history might be detrimental when contextualizing certain intellectual developments; but it is useful in maintaining the distance to focus on the meta-politics, rather than on the development of the disciplines themselves. *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire* can therefore serve both as a standard and as a reference work on German scholarly knowledge of Asia.

Ulrike Wokoeck focuses on a similar object in more or less the same period, but her point of departure is rather different. She focuses on Oriental studies, and in particular Middle Eastern studies at German universities, highlighting the emergence of the disciplines pertaining to the Middle East—*Arabistik* and *Islamwissenschaft*—and aims to recreate the field's research tradition by focusing on the researchers themselves (pp. 18-19). She first draws a general picture of the evolution of German universities from rather esoteric and empty institutions at the end of the eighteenth century to much larger, more crowded, and more regulated

ones by the eve of the twentieth century. Her claim is that this evolution was not due to the inevitable progress of Humboldtian reforms, but rather the state's growing role in education (pp. 39-41).

In the following chapter, she presents a statistical survey to identify who wrote most prolifically on the Middle East. The results show that many of the more prolific writers were either not properly employed within the university or were often from other disciplines entirely. She also claims that no clear cohesion existed between state colonial activity and academic interest, even though publications were on the whole not so obsessed with the past and often dealt directly with the modern Middle East (pp. 71-78).

In Chapter 4, she addresses the question of why Oriental studies evolved in the first half of the nineteenth century, at a relatively early stage of academic specialization. Her claim is that when the evolving master discipline of philology was constructing its research object—the Indo-European languages—it needed an other to contrast it with. The most convenient others constructed at the time were Oriental and specifically Semitic languages. Thus the study of Oriental languages (but not necessarily of the Orient) mattered, and theology provided the necessary infrastructure for it (p. 108).

Between 1850 and 1870, university studies in general stagnated, leading to envious attacks by Indo-European philologists, while theologists had grown wary of anti-dogmatic opinions among Oriental language specialists, and sought to relegate them to philosophy departments. As a result, Orientalists needed to come up with alternatives to situate both themselves as individuals in the job market and their discipline as a field within academia. They studied theology to have the possibility of becoming a priest or pastor, took the exam to become a school teacher, or worked in libraries with Oriental collections. They had also already banded together in the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* in 1845, a move that was possibly inspired by the first spark of Prussian colonial interest in the Levant, but soon served rather to enact Oriental studies as an integral part of the mother discipline, philology (pp. 127-142). Likewise, the rise of the sub-discipline of Assyriology was due to an endeavor to expand job opportunities, reflecting the restructuring of classical philology to the study of antiquity. Through Assyriology, new positions could be gained in excavation and museum work, fields that grew considerably after the founding of the *Reich* (p. 162).

The general trend away from language study as a master discipline to a more historical and regional study of the ancient world and Asia also had an impact on the founding of *Islamwissenschaft*. As Wokoeck notes,

the term "Islamic" first appeared as a corrective, renaming "Semitic philology" as "Semitic and Islamic philology," as for practical reasons the field also included Turkish and Farsi (p. 166). The discipline later tried to copy the trend of converting philology departments into area and period studies, but as the Middle East was already compartmentalized by disciplines focusing on its various parts in the pre-Christian era (Egyptology, Assyriology, the study of Greek antiquity etc.), Islam was chosen as the thread to the study of the wider region after antiquity (p. 181).

In the Fascist era, Wokoeck sees no comprehensive Nazi strategy towards Oriental studies at the university. Nazi policies were driven by eliminating real or imagined racial or political enemies in academia and promoting fellow party members into positions, but did not develop much cohesive policy beyond that. Some of the damage to the field in this period also stems from universities' spending cuts (p. 199). Orientalists explicitly offering their expertise to the new order were rather to be found within the framework of the SS research organization *Ahnenerbe*, the *Wehrmacht*-led *Mullahschule* for the indoctrination of Central Asian Muslims, or involved in the occupation of North Africa (p. 204).

Wokoeck rejects the general proximity of the field to imperialism. In general, she does not see much agency within the fields of Oriental studies or Middle Eastern studies themselves, as they were too small to determine the circumstances of their production, but were determined by trends in larger disciplines or internal to the German states. This is certainly an interesting and legitimate claim, but does not really correspond to her stated intention to describe the field through its researchers; rather she is describing the circumstances in which they worked. Also, for pragmatic reasons, she had intended to limit her study, which is based on her PhD thesis, to the university field. Nevertheless, she often realizes the limitations of this, and leaps over her self-imposed boundary to include the evolution of the field in museums, semi-academic institutions such as the *Seminar für orientalische Sprachen*, and in the work of scholars outside the immediate discipline, all so important for any minor discipline. Finally, she develops her arguments in critical dialogue with related publications, especially those of Baber Johansen, Ludmila Hanisch, and Sabine Mangold, often reading their findings against the grain. While this certainly adds to the originality of her arguments, a stronger recourse to close reading of original texts would have been helpful in substantiating them.

Marchand and Wokoeck rarely come to contrary findings, except in questions of detail; it is rather their approaches that differ considerably. Ideally, Marchand's broader study should be read first to get an overall

perspective. With this background, the reader can more easily engage with the discussions and alternative viewpoints Wokoeck has to offer on the subject.

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