Book Review Essay

The Enlightenment and Asia: Recent Historiographical Perspectives

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Leibniz Discovers Asia: Social Networking in the Republic of Letters. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. Pp. xviii + 324. Hb, \$64.95.

Jürgen Osterhammel

Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia. Translated by Robert Savage. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 676. Hb, \$35.00.

Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, the origins and development of Western views of Asia have attracted the attention of numerous scholars in different fields—from anthropology to sociology, from literature to art history, and from history to philosophy. Said's paradigmatic description of the West's representations of the East as patronizing, condescending, and inextricably entangled with Western imperialist societies is inevitably involved in subsequent discussions of this subject. Said's influence is still visible in some relatively recent studies on Western views of Asia in the Age of Enlightenment and beyond, such as the celebrated *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) by the late Srinivas Aravamudan. While highlighting the significance of the Enlightenment's use of Oriental tales in the critique of irrational European values and practices, Aravamudan's book indeed points out the impact of European imagination on the making and employment of Oriental stories, pseudo-ethnographies, sexual fantasies, and political satires.

On the other hand, Said's emphasis on the imperialist, ethnocentric attitude that he considered to be at the basis of Western views of the East has attracted harsh criticism from several scholars, most prominently from Robert Irwin. In *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Penguin,

2006), published in the United States under the title *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents*, Irwin criticizes Said's analysis as simplistic, generalizing, and ignoring the complexity of the origins and development of European views of Asia since at least the early modern period. Still other studies published in relatively recent years, such as Han F. Vermeulen's *Before Boas: The Genesis of Ethnography and Ethnology in the German Enlightenment* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015) and Alexander Bevilacqua's *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), question Said's interpretation by providing detailed examinations of some specific aspects of the Enlightenment's involvement with the Orient. Both Vermeulen and Bevilacqua reconstruct the intellectual (and also physical) efforts made by Enlightenment scholars to understand, and disseminate knowledge of, Asian cultures. In doing so, these authors call attention to the multifaceted motivations behind those efforts, which were not always conditioned by ethnocentric prejudices or imperialist aims.

Two other books published in recent years—*Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia* by Jürgen Osterhammel and *Leibniz Discovers Asia: Social Networking in the Republic of Letters* by Michael Carhart—share a critical attitude towards the discourse of Orientalism. These two volumes are obviously different in their focus, scope, and objectives. Osterhammel offers a comprehensive analysis of Enlightenment views of Asia in his monumental study, first published in German in 1998 and now available in a thoroughly revised and updated American edition, while Carhart concentrates on a previously neglected area of Leibniz's intellectual activity. However, both authors concur that the Enlightenment's engagement with Asian cultures was not univocal and, in fact, it benefited from several contributions, such as exploration travels, reports by Jesuit missionaries, and studies by scholars interested in different areas of inquiry, in a time when the natural as well as human sciences were becoming more and more specialized and, thus, fragmented. In this regard, it is worth noting that, as both Carhart and Osterhammel, too, point out, Europeans in the Age of Enlightenment studied Asia for different reasons. Jesuits and other missionaries were motivated by their attempts to convert Asian peoples to Christianity. Diplomats and merchants were mainly inspired by political and economic purposes. Some intellectuals aimed to expand the scope of their ideas and universalize and strengthen them, as was the case, for instance, with John Locke, who owned a large number of European reports on Asia and mentioned Asian values and traditions in his rejection of innatism. Others, like Montesquieu and d'Argens, referred to Eastern beliefs and customs in order to debunk the alleged universality of European ideas and

practices. And still others pursued knowledge of Asian cultures and languages when doing research on the origins of European peoples. This is the case of Leibniz, as Carhart's book explains.

Leibniz has been regarded as a founding figure of the linguistic method in ethnology since the German historian August Ludwig von Schlözer, around 250 years ago, called attention to his contributions to this field. However, only now, thanks to Michael Carhart's book, can we have a clear idea of the significance of Leibniz's role in the foundation of comparative linguistics, which Carhart places within Leibniz's extensive intellectual program. In the late 1680s—early 1690s, Leibniz was working on a history of the House of Guelf, which then ruled Lower Saxony. The purpose of this history was to elevate that noble family, which protected and employed Leibniz, to the status of elector. Starting in 1691, when Leibniz decided to complement his *Origines Guelficae* with two dissertations on the land and people of Lower Saxony, he “built a series of increasingly complex networks of correspondence in order to collect the linguistic data he sought” (3). He shared the widespread conviction that the Germanic peoples of Europe originated in a region of Central Eurasia commonly known as Scythia or Grand Tartary. Therefore, he embarked on explaining the origins and prehistoric migrations of Germanic peoples from their land of origin.

To this purpose, he concentrated on the comparison between languages spoken in the regions around the Black and Caspian Seas, since he believed that comprehending the relationships between languages would enable him to understand the relationships between peoples. As he declared in his *New Essays on Human Understanding* of 1704, published posthumously in 1765, he regarded languages as repositories of cultural richness and tradition. His research on this subject benefited from an intellectual network consisting of Italian bibliographers and mathematicians, German and Scandinavian antiquarians, Jesuit scholars based in Europe, and Jesuit missionaries in Iran, India, and China. The Jesuits of China were particularly important sources of linguistic knowledge for Leibniz. It was an Italian Jesuit missionary, Claudio Filippo Grimaldi, to trigger Leibniz's interest in Asian languages during a series of meetings the two had in Rome in 1689. Moreover, the French Jesuit mission in China provided invaluable help to Leibniz, mainly thanks to Philippe Avril's geographic observations, Jean-François Gerbillon's ethnological inquiries, and Ferdinand Verbiest's philological work. Nevertheless, receiving linguistic samples proved more difficult than Leibniz had expected, and he eventually accepted to rely on fragmentary evidence—for instance, on translations of the Lord's Prayer—to find the relics of the ancient peoples of Grand Tartary in modern Asian languages.

Investigating Leibniz's ambitious ethnological project, Carhart provides the reader with a detailed, in-depth overview of European knowledge of, and interest in, Asian languages and cultures in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Carhart's essay is very important for yet another reason, in that it draws on a large number of primary sources and archival materials previously neglected by historiography. In this respect, Carhart's book considers texts against the background of the socio-cultural and intellectual contexts in which they were written. This book also presents the first English translation ever of two writings by Leibniz—*Desiderata circa linguas quorundam populorum* (1695) and *Plan for a Moscow Academy of Sciences and Arts* (1697). In the former text, Leibniz articulated his two-part methodology, which revolved around the analysis of the Lord's Prayer translated into various Asian languages and of a series of words concerning numerals, relationships, bodily parts, necessities, natural things, and actions. The *Plan for a Moscow Academy* is, in Carhart's words, a "think piece on debarbarizing the Muscovite Empire" (259) through the import of European sciences and technologies and the enlightening of the native peoples of Central Asia and Siberia. Leibniz's ethno-linguistic studies actually attracted some interest in the Russian Empire. Carhart's book can indeed be considered as a sort of prequel to Vermeulen's aforesaid *Before Boas*, which examines the legacy and impact of Leibniz's ethno-linguistic project in Peter the Great's Russia and, subsequently, among the German-speaking scholars who took part in the Second Kamchatka Expedition in the 1730s and continued and expanded Leibniz's project.

A methodological approach concentrating on texts and their contexts also informs Jürgen Osterhammel's extremely erudite book, in which texts are considered as "the product of individual activity set against a societal framework" and as "deeply rooted in human praxis" (16). Osterhammel clarifies his point with the following explanation: "Each individual text emerges from a field of experience and intention, perception and imagination, seeing and hearing, convention and innovation. The text itself is a relatively late product of complex processes" (16).

The first part of Osterhammel's book is devoted to these processes or pathways of knowledge—specifically to the political relations between European and Asian powers, cultural transfers between Europe and Asia, and travels, encounters, experiences, and reports by European missionaries, scholars, and diplomats traveling in Asia in the Age of Enlightenment. It is in this respect that the Jesuits of Asia offered significant contributions to European knowledge of Eastern cultures, languages, and peoples, in their capacities as interpreters and philologists, cultural as well as political intermediaries, and valuable epistolary partners of many European intellectuals. Osterhammel attaches great

importance to the Jesuit mission in China, and particularly to the aforesaid French Jesuit missionaries and scholars, and he also pays attention to the Jesuits' experiences in other regions, such as Mongolia and Vietnam. Moreover, he observes that the Jesuits of China were often the target of hostility by other travelers and writers, especially after the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773. In that year, the Dutch geographer and natural philosopher Cornelius de Pauw questioned the credibility of Jesuit accounts of China. A few years later, other critics, such as the French naturalist Pierre Sonnerat and the British statesman John Barrow, accused the Jesuits of China of intellectual dishonesty. However, Osterhammel points out that later reports and studies, starting with the Macartney mission in the 1790s, demonstrated that the Jesuits' reports on China were largely reliable, although not always unbiased.

Osterhammel's attention to textual evidence and to the socio-cultural processes that produced such evidence is only one of the numerous merits of *Unfabling the East*. As the English title of this book indicates, Osterhammel's analysis concentrates on intellectual as well as cultural dynamics that eventually led to the end of the long-cherished construct of the *fabled East* among Europeans during the long eighteenth century—namely, in the period between the 1680s and the 1830s. Osterhammel connects the fabling, and unfabbling, of the East with the fact that Asia was essentially a European idea. In the eighteenth century, the peoples inhabiting the Asian Continent actually did not identify themselves as Asians and did not have much in common, given the remarkable linguistic, cultural, political, and religious differences between those peoples.

However, Osterhammel's findings challenge the *model of autistic discourse* developed by Said and other postmodernists, who have portrayed the European engagement with other cultures as inexorably informed by ethnocentric and imperialist attitudes. Osterhammel's consideration of both textual evidence and historical conditions shows that this *autistic* attitude was, in fact, largely absent among eighteenth-century European missionaries, scholars, and diplomats who traveled and lived in Asia, and also among European-based intellectuals interested in Asian cultures and societies. Osterhammel's study reveals that, in the eighteenth century, there was actually a political and intellectual equilibrium between Europe and Asian countries and cultures. But this equilibrium broke down in the first half of the nineteenth century, mainly due to two reasons. First, industrialization facilitated the European powers' colonial and imperialist expansion in Asia. Second, the fragmentation of the sciences, with the subsequent professionalization of knowledge about Asia, provoked the marginalization of Asian history and languages in the European systems of education and the relegation of "the world-historical importance of Asian

civilizations to their distant past" (27)—a relegation exemplified by Hegel's philosophy of history. It is therefore no accident that, whereas the aforementioned Schlözer, in the late eighteenth century, was thoroughly informed about the history of Asian peoples, around one hundred years later the internationally renowned historian Ludwig von Ranke paid virtually no attention to Asian cultures in his attempt at reconstructing the history of the world, despite his interest in Ottoman history.

Nevertheless, Ostelhammer also rejects the *model of disillusioned humanism*. This interpretive model describes European approaches to other cultures as motivated by a genuine intention to understand others' beliefs, values, and practices, but concludes that Western attempts at comprehending otherness are inevitably frustrated by unavoidable prejudices and a deep-rooted self-referential attitude. Therefore, this interpretive model, although starting from different premises, reaches the same conclusion as the autistic discourse model – namely, that Europeans and, more generally, Westerners essentially tend to assimilate, reduce, and eventually eliminate the otherness of different cultures. As Osterhammel convincingly argues, both models are one-dimensional and oversimplifying. In fact, the extant sources testifying to Enlightenment views of Asian cultures denote a much more complex and multifaceted scenario, which unfolded in debates about civilization and barbarism, freedom and despotism, the wealth and poverty of nations, women's rights and their denial, and religious truth and falsehood. These debates are the subject of the second part of Osterhammel's history of Enlightenment conceptualizations of Asia and their instruments, or languages, which are indeed a crucial component of conceptualizations.

Despite their different aims, focus, and scope, these two volumes have much in common, particularly in the methodology they employ. Both Carhart and Osterhammel recognize the complexity of Enlightenment views of Asia—views conditioned by different motivations and experiences. These two authors reject, more or less explicitly, generalizing interpretive models and, instead, pay due attention to both textual evidence and intellectual and socio-cultural contexts. Thus, they utilize and consider primary sources against the background of the processes from which these sources emerged. This methodological approach, along with the numerous, original findings based on Carhart's and Osterhammel's analysis of voluminous amounts of texts from the period, is a remarkable strength of the two volumes examined in this article.

The only weakness of these two volumes is the lack of an in-depth discussion of the categories of *Europe* and *Enlightenment*, which both Carhart and Osterhammel seem to take for granted, whereas these two notions are quite unstable and are, actually, still subjects for debate. In this regard, Osterhammel

openly admits that his book “does not have the ambition to propose yet another overall interpretation of the Enlightenment” (519). However, a concise critical analysis of this concept, drawing on recent and often divergent interpretations—by Jonathan Israel, J. G. A. Pocock, David Sorkin, Anthony Pagden, Vincenzo Ferrone, John Robertson, and still others—would have made both Osterhammel’s and Carhart’s opposition to simplistic, generalizing interpretive models even more convincing. Such an analysis would have shown that not only the Enlightenment’s encounter with Asia, but also the Enlightenment itself was a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Likewise, a brief examination of the making of the idea of Europe in the Age of Enlightenment and of the outcomes of this process—a process that, as Osterhammel himself acknowledges, involved the European relation to what Europeans conceived of as Asia—would have been helpful to both authors. Such an examination would have supported the thesis that we cannot infer a general, univocal, unambiguous European attitude to Asia, but we need to consider this issue in its multifacetedness and historical development, as both Carhart and Osterhammel indeed do in their books.

This said, both Carhart’s *Leibniz Discovers Asia* and Osterhammel’s *Unfolding the East* are commendable for their many merits, which this article has highlighted. In relatively recent years, the investigation of Western attitudes to the East has benefited from various other studies, including the aforementioned books by Vermeulen and Bevilacqua and the works of Todd Kontje, Rolando Minuti, Nicholas Germana, Sunil Agnani, and still others who have challenged Said’s and his followers’ postmodernist critique of Western Orientalism. Carhart’s and Osterhammel’s well-researched, intelligently written, compelling books provide significant contributions to the reassessment of this controversial subject and are thus likely to add new fuel to the relevant historiographical debate.

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