The Ottoman Empire and Orientalism:
An Awkward Relationship*

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It may seem like an exaggeration to claim that Turkey and the Turks—a loose definition of a notion encompassing the last period of the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey—were spared much of the weight of the Orientalist discourse so strongly criticized by Edward Said. Indeed, there is little doubt that most of the Orientalist tropes were used over and over again to describe the culture, the history, the society, and the political environment of this region of the globe. Yet there are a number of reasons that can be invoked to suggest that Turkey, as defined above, was better—or perhaps more accurately, less—treated by Orientalist scholarship, literature or art. For one thing, the greater familiarity of the West with the Ottomans, compared to some more remote, ‘exotic,’ and later discovered peoples of the East, made them less likely to attract the attention of essentialist discourses. The gradual shift of European interest, from the eighteenth century on, towards newer horizons, especially India, China and Japan, combined with the fact that this shift would be accompanied by the creation of the first western colonial dominions in the East, was essential in pulling the gaze of Westerners away from Ottoman lands. Not that the Ottoman Empire would ever disappear from European visions of the Orient; but its survival as an old, familiar and still independent polity on the fringes of Europe made it much less a target of the kind of Orientalist enquiry that would characterize the treatment of subject peoples in colonial India¹ and Egypt, in the French colonies of North Africa, and of the peoples of far-away (and semi-colonized) China or of exotic Japan.² As for the European-dominated territories of sub-Saharan Africa—the lands and peoples ‘without history’—they were almost exclusively relegated to ethnographic and anthropological study.

* Like its French original version, but much shorter, this text is to a large extent taken from our Consuming the Orient (Istanbul, 2009), pp. 218–226.
If its ability to preserve some degree of independence and autonomy set
the Ottoman Empire apart from the rest of the vaguely defined Orient, so
did the fact that the vast imperial domains could never be associated with a
single ethnic and/or religious identity. The great variety of races and creeds
that characterized the Ottoman population did not lend itself easily to all-
encompassing generalizations, especially given the large variety and numbers
of non-Muslim populations that were blended into the social fabric of the
Empire. True, this lack of homogeneity was often compensated for by a lump-
ing together of all such populations under a single ‘oriental’ label—sometimes
through the pre-modern use of the term ‘Levantine’—that comprised all inhab-
itants of the empire regardless of ethnicity or creed. Yet, generally speaking, a
vague and heterogeneous taxonomy was used that consisted of a number of
pragmatic definitions: ‘Turks,’ narrowly defined as the power-holding elite, as
in the use of ‘Grand Turk’ to describe the sultan, and broadly defined as the
Muslim inhabitants of the realm; ‘rayas,’ the tribute-paying non-Muslims of the
Empire; ‘oriental Christians,’ into which were lumped Armenian, Orthodox,
Nestorian, Chaldean, Maronite, and other Christian populations; ‘Armenians’
and ‘Greeks,’ often quoted separately for their prominent position within non-
Muslim groups; ‘Jews,’ a self-evident and familiar label by European standards;
and, occasionally, ethnic or regional terms describing a wide array of popu-
lations throughout the imperial domains: ‘Serbs,’ ‘Albanians,’ ‘Kurds,’ ‘Arabs,’
‘Barbaresques,’ etc.

It would not be before the nineteenth century that European scholarship
would truly start a dichotomous treatment of Ottoman populations accord-
ing to their creed, dividing them systematically into the (Muslim) Turks and
the (Christian) Rayas—Jews were generally left in limbo between the two—,
with a potential antagonism to the former and a growing sympathy for the lat-
ter. In earlier times, the doctrinal and cultural distance between Westerners
and oriental Christians was too great to make such sympathies possible, and
the reverse was also true from the perspective of the Christian subjects of the
empire. Yet, from the end of the eighteenth century on, as Europe acquired
greater diplomatic and military leverage on the empire, as western traders
gained a prominent position in Ottoman trade with Europe, as Philhellenism
rose among a growingly Romantic intelligentsia and public opinion in the West,
as oriental Christians—especially Armenians—became increasingly accessi-
ble to the conversion efforts of Catholic and Protestant missionaries, the sta-
tus of oppression that had already been associated with non-Muslims gained
a new and more powerful political connotation that begged for greater sol-
idarity and sympathy from the West. The logical consequence of this trend
was the growing estrangement of the ‘Turks’ from contemporary perceptions