Review


Reviewed by Mehammed Amadeus Mack, Columbia University.

Edward Said’s Orientalism has not permeated the French academy to the same extent it has its American counterpart. This is an absence that many French academics of a certain brand—those who are not hostile to Anglo-Saxon or American imports like cultural or ethnic studies—have sought to rectify. In France, the current buzzword “Orientalisme” belongs to a larger trend of borrowing from an English-language academy. Previous articulations include the many post-colonial ideas seized upon by France’s new generation of academic “misfits”: activists, comparatists who cross boundaries of discipline, and those who seek to make queer studies more relevant in France, among others. There is a collective effort to inject these Anglophone “advances” into static French debates (about immigration and colonialism especially) in order to finally animate an extremely rich French corpus of colonial and post-colonial material, the analysis of which has been underway for quite some time now across the Atlantic. Of course, there are issues of colonial memory and national tension that prevent such a forthright dive into the past, as well as issues with France being judged from the outside, which partly explains why only the marginal wings of the academic and journalistic community have come forward to deal with this colonial baggage using “imported” analytical tools.

It is in the context of this debate that we can situate Réver d’Orient, an essay collection based on a 2003 conference at Université Paris-Est Marne-La-Vallée. Under the guidance of editors Isabelle Gadoin and Marie-Élise Palmier-Chatelain, authors of this French-language volume written about the British Oriental corpus, adding to debates about Orientalism and post-colonial studies. The book is not simply an advertisement for, or promulgation of Orientalism’s theses, but a mostly friendly interrogation of them from a French perspective. Gadoin and Palmier-Chatelain’s introductory abstracts to each piece are meticulous in their summary and eye for context. The authors adopt a comparatist, multidisciplinary approach in order to investigate one of the central tenets of Said’s Orientalism, namely, that the opposition between the “scientific”/academic and “fantastical”/imaginative branches of Orientalism is less of an opposition than a mutually constitutive relationship, whose components work to assert Western hegemony over the Orient.

This binary reflects tensions between “dreams” and “knowledge” regarding the Orient, an opposition that Said revealed to work dialectically: the authors echo him here and attack the stereotype that “dreams” are subjective and disconnected from subject matter, while “knowledge” is supposedly empirical and objective. The essayists—diverse scholars of architecture to theology to art history—investigate the links between dreams and knowledge and end up concluding, most of the time, that dreams have prescribed the content of knowledge even in the most “objective” of accounts. The stance taken in this collection carries within it a self-critical indictment of European intellectual history—in particular, a questioning of the heritage of the Lumières or Enlightenment thinkers whose rational imperative was integral, in Said’s view, to
the imperialist project. Many of the essayists elaborate on a Saidian insight, interrogating how the subjugation of the unconscious and especially the dreamer goes hand in hand with the subjugation of the Other.

It is in that sense that one feels the editors aiming to recover the “dream” for a progressive purpose. Rather than remaining one of the two modes of Orientalist subjugation, the “dream” could constitute a realm to be salvaged, the irreducible remainder of fantasy that cannot be cancelled. “Dreams” would be a subset of European thought about the Orient, somehow more “innocent” and well-intentioned because not a product of an oppressive, conscious rationality, nor the instrument of a knowledge regime that seeks to subjugate. What is curious about this approach, from a psychoanalytical standpoint, is that it omits a discussion of the ways that dreams can reflect desires to subjugate the other or, in a less violent sense (which can arguably be just as appropriative of the Other’s experience), to identify with the other.

Where Said’s acolytes might have dismissed these attempts at identification, some of the essayists in this volume charitably interrogate how the search for the Other/Orient is also the search for Self, with the desert serving as a blank canvas for personal re-creation by confronting Man with his naked self. Especially in cases of conversion to Islam, Laurent Bury holds that such attempts at recovery of identification ring truer. Gadoin in her introduction seems to allow for the notion that a dream is faultless, or at least blameless, that a dream about conversion to Islam or the absorption of the Other’s culture can sometimes be a “selfless” initiative, especially when identifying with the Other leads to a deterioration of one’s previous identity. However, Gadoin notes that psychoanalysis exposes identification with the Other as a desire for the Other, for acquiring what the Other has. In the way that it dictates what the Orient is, the “dream” can be just as epistemologically violent as the will to knowledge. In her introduction, Gadoin does acknowledge the ambivalent nature of the dream; it is both what sparks the search for knowledge, as well as what knowledge could not dominate completely—the irreducible part left over after the attempted conquest.

Gadoin contextualizes this discussion of Orientalism and usefully connects it to French intellectual history, offering paths by which the French perspective on the Anglo-Saxon world might supplement or call into question some Saidian cornerstones. Gadoin explains how, for some Orientalist writers at least, the Orient is approached not according to disdain and separation, but rather according to a doctrine of intimate and personally risky identification. She connects the Romantics’ focus on “sensibility” and the “individuality of conscience” with a greater attempt at disturbing “the certainty of being able to conquer the world through and for knowledge” (10). Because of her belief in the sincerity of certain travelers’ identification with the Orient, their personal investment in the Orient for the Orient’s sake, Gadoin insists that “this intimately personal component of the motivation for voyages to the Orient brings us to correct once again Said’s proposal, which described the Orientalist as being radically distant from the Orient, and his representations as being necessarily exterior to the reality of the Orient” (ibid.). Though Gadoin admits that Orientalists did not and could not fully seize the “reality” of the Orient even when they identified with it, her use of the verb “correct” (corriger) is tellingly strong and reveals a certain resentment towards the dismissal of well-wishing Orientalists. For Gadoin, it is as if the sincerity of these attempts at identification should not be under dispute.

One of the essential disagreements with Said, according to Gadoin, is over the question “to what extent is a unification with the Orient possible for the Orientalist?” The collection is particularly concerned with ethics; many essays focus on the encounter between the Orientalist and the Other with an eye to recovering that encounter from a history of subjugation. In the interest of making communication between the Orientalist and the estranged Other possible, Gadoin looks to a concept that has long troubled French thinkers descended from the Enlightenment, and gives it a more palatable definition: “‘Relativism’ here does not signify that it is not worth the effort to risk a movement toward the Other, but signals rather the difficulty of that move-