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TECHNICAL NOTE:

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## "ORIENTALISM" AND TURKISH STUDIES

Andreas Tietze <sup>a</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In this short technical note, a case is being made on behalf of the "Oriental Studies", and more specifically the Turkish Studies, that they have a continuing relevance within the contemporary world of scholarship, and that the "Orientalist", the scholar coming from the outside, can still make valuable contributions to the harmonious scholarly dialogue with the native scholars of the field.

Oriental Studies as a field of research and academic discipline can look back at a proud tradition, at the same time being still able to attract a relatively considerable number of scholars and students. In spite of that, when the historical aspect of its genesis is disregarded, it is not easy to define it as a discipline and to describe its *raison d'être*. To understand our neighbours and thereby to understand ourselves? If this is our goal, then we must miss the corresponding endeavor, a research orientation termed Occidentalism among our neighbours. Why does it not exist? Is this lack proof of the underdevelopment of "their" academic institutions? Is it superfluous because the Occident is sufficiently under scrutiny by itself? Has the Occident already revealed all its secrets, leaving behind an uninspiring corpse? Or is the mentality still alive that forbids the native, the colonial slave, to peek behind the curtain of privacy that surrounds his master.

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<sup>a</sup> Prof. Dr., Dept. of Literature and Linguistics, Boğaziçi University and Vienna University.

None of these arguments seems satisfactory. We are trying to understand our neighbours, but are our neighbours also trying to understand ourselves? What kind of one-sided interest, of unrequited love, is this? Some have seen in it a peculiarity inherent in our culture and absent from others. We are just more curious than the Romans were, for example. White spots on the map of our knowledge bother us, depress us. Just as we are obsessed by the desire to know everything about everything in nature, we are also under compulsion to learn everything about our neighbours. Or, in a wider context, in our eyes the world is indivisible, we reject all distinctions, we see nothing that separates us from our neighbors or our neighbours from us, and therefore they concern us as much as we ourselves do. Then, "Orientalism" is but an outdated, inherited concept, void of meaning within the framework of our worldview of today. We no more divide the world in an Occidental and an Oriental half. We are just historians, linguists, anthropologists, and so on, interested in, or specialized in one area of the world or another.

Having thus jettisoned the historical concept of Orientalism, we are confronted with another problem: We have neutralized the areas, the categories of men. What is then the relationship between the native scholar and the outsider? Are they to be considered equals? In other words, do they compete with each other? Do they have to be equipped with the same foundations of knowledge, training, methodology, or must they at least strive to approximate such equality? Apart from the limited possibility of its realization, the question of its desirability has to be raised. Fruitful cooperation and mutual inspiration presuppose different approaches, or, to put it differently, different tasks. The outsider, or "Orientalist" (in quotes) cannot and must not fulfill the same tasks that the insider fulfills. This is clear, but can it be more closely defined?

Let us first try to approach the problem through comparison: a similar situation arises when the outsider does not come from a different area but from a different discipline. For this we have many examples in the history of Turkish studies. Böhtling, the founder of Yakut philology, was an Indologist. Thomsen, the decypherer of the Orkhon inscriptions and father of studies on Old Turkic, was an Indo-Europeanist. Carl Brockelmann, to whom Middle Turkic Studies owe a considerable debt, was a Semitist. Willi Bang-Kaup, the founder of modern comparative Turkology, was in English philology. Wittek, who introduced modern scholarly standards in Ottoman historical research, was trained as a scholar in Classics, and the same is true of Fekete, the pioneer in the field of Ottoman archival studies. All of these – and the list could easily be enlarged – have played decisive roles in the development of Turkish studies. The fact that they originally were outsiders, that they were trained in a different discipline before they entered the field of Turkish studies, was not to their disadvantage nor was it to the disadvantage of Turkish studies, though it may have caused them some initial difficulties. On the contrary, it was precisely this fact that enabled them to bring to the field of Turkish studies valuable experiences accumulated in other fields, proven methods which, applied to the new field, produced magnificent results. Empirically

it can be stated that this transfer of scholarship has had a very beneficial influence on the development of Turkish studies.

Certainly, comparisons are never conclusive. The transfer of experience and method from discipline to discipline cannot be equalized with the contribution of the geographical and cultural outsider. Furthermore, our approach to the question was a theoretical, not an empirical one. But nevertheless, there is a phenomenal parallelism between the two.

We have concluded that the "Orientalist", the scholar coming from the outside, differs in his approaches and hence also in his tasks from the native scholar, a difference which constitutes the justification of his role. Wherein concretely lies this difference? How can it be formulated concretely and specifically in the case of Turkish studies today? The following points seem to me most essential:

1) The outsider cannot compete with the native scholar in matters of language and culture. On the other hand, his foreignness may qualify him to make certain observations which may escape the native's attention.

2) The outsider will have more opportunities to acquit himself of his responsibilities vis-a-vis his own country or nation or the world as a whole in interpreting a foreign culture to them and thus furthering mutual understanding and respect. For instance, by translating, by explaining, by correcting misconceptions. Truly, a native scholar can do this, too, but the outsider will have more opportunities for it and often he will be more effective.

3) The climate of scholarship in one country may not be conducive to every direction of research, it may suffer under certain biases or may be restricted in certain points by considerations of law, mores, politics, etc. This may produce neglected or underdeveloped areas within the field of research, areas of relevance and urgency which under the circumstances (and for the duration of these circumstances) will become the domain of outsiders' research.

4) Finally, but not less important, the scholar outside the country – whether he is himself an outsider or a native makes no difference – has more possibilities to keep abreast the developments within the scholarly community as a whole, both in his specific field and in the neighbouring disciplines. He has access to libraries with a better influx of recent publications than those available to him inside the country; he is able to order himself what he needs; his easy mobility may allow him to visit places of interest to him and to keep in touch with colleagues by attending congresses and other scholarly meetings.

However, these points work in favour of the "outsider", not only because he is

often better equipped with the linguistic skills needed for communication within the larger scholarly community, but simply because he is normally and usually located outside the country whereas the native scholar seldom has the opportunity to stay abroad for a longer period beyond the years of his studies. The practical conditions of our time therefore necessitate that the responsibilities of keeping contact, of integrating the field within larger fields, and to some extent also of drawing attention to new methods in related fields, fall predominantly to the charge of "outsiders".

From these points it becomes clear that there still is a place for the Orientalist, or, if we avoid this label, for the "outsider" within the texture of Turkish studies, both on the theoretical and on the practical levels (to these could be added the empirical level, if we wished to enumerate significant contributions to the field made by such outsiders). His importance is assured by his special opportunities and as a consequence thereof by the special tasks incumbent upon him. He supplements the work of the native scholar in those aspects which are more readily at his disposal and thus, to the common advantage of both sides contributes to the harmonious scholarly dialogue. The mentality originally inherent in Orientalism has long been dropped and forgotten.

#### "ŞARKİYATÇILIK" VE TÜRKİYAT ARAŞTIRMALARI

##### ÖZET

Bu kısa teknik not ile "Şarkiyatçılığın" ve bilhassa Türkiyat Araştırmaları yapan yabancı araştırmacıların konuya önemli katkılarda buldukları ve bulunmaya devam edecekleri kanısını destekliyen görüşler belirtilmektedir.