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THE CONCEPT OF "ORIENTALISM" IN WESTERN EUROPE AND ITS POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract: This article explores the development of the concept of Orientalism in Western Europe and its interaction with Enlightenment-era political thought. Drawing upon the monographs of Alexander Bevilacqua and Noel Malcolm, it analyzes Europe's perception of the Islamic East, the study of Arabic sources, and how these shaped the evolution of European political ideas. The article also provides a critical reading of Edward Said's "Orientalism" thesis within this historical context.

Keywords: Orientalism, Enlightenment, European political thought, Bevilacqua, Malcolm, Islam, Ottoman Empire, Edward Said.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola G'arbiy Yevropada sharqshunoslik tushunchasining shakllanishi va siyosiy tafakkur bilan aloqadorligini tarixiy-nazariy nuqtai nazardan o'rganadi. Aleksandr Bevilakva va Noel Malkolmning monografiyalari asosida Ma'rifat davridagi Yevropaning islomiy olamga bo'lgan munosabati, arab manbalarining o'rganilishi, va bu jarayon siyosiy g'oyalar evolyutsiyasiga qanday ta'sir ko'rsatgani tahlil qilinadi. Shuningdek, Edvard Saidning "Orientalizm" konsepsiyasiga tanqidiy yondashuv berilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: Orientalizm, Ma'rifat davri, Yevropa siyosiy tafakkuri, Bevilakva, Malkolm, islom, Usmoniylar, Edvard Said.

Аннотация:Статья посвящена анализу возникновения концепции ориентализма в Западной Европе и её взаимосвязи с политической мыслью эпохи Просвещения. Основываясь на трудах Александра Бевилаквы и Ноэля Малколма, автор рассматривает восприятие исламского Востока в Европе, исследование арабских источников, а также влияние этих процессов на развитие европейской политической мысли. Также предложена критическая перспектива на тезисы Эдварда Саида.

Ключевые слова: Ориентализм, эпоха Просвещения, европейская политическая мысль, Бевилаква, Малколм, ислам, Османская империя, Эдвард Саид.

The mode of self-perception among democratic societies within the Western intellectual space has, to this day, been deeply shaped by the norms and ideals of the Enlightenment. Despite numerous regressions and critiques, we continue to live within the horizon of expectations and hopes that were established and achieved through the long and complex process of studying the Enlightenment era. On the other hand, in contemporary Europe, there is a prevailing assumption that Islam—as a generalized entity—has never undergone an Enlightenment of its own. Therefore, the question of whether the Islamic East contributed to the formation of political thought in Enlightenment-era Europe, and if so, how, becomes a matter of crucial significance.

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It is striking to observe that this question was scarcely raised in the history of European political ideas until recently—namely, prior to the debate on Orientalism[1] initiated by Edward Said—and, as a result, has remained largely unanswered. This paper refers to two important monographs written in English. These works not only underscore the significance of the question regarding Islam's role in European political thought, but also compile and present elements of an answer. In his richly sourced, intelligently structured, and elegantly written study, Alexander Bevilacqua portrays the "Republic of Arabic Letters" in Enlightenment-era Europe. Noel Malcolm, on the other hand, analyzes the history of European political thought between 1450 and 1750, examining how Islam and the Ottoman Empire were received and how these perceptions influenced European intellectual developments.

One of the main strengths of these two studies lies in their ability to re-open and re-evaluate the foundational sources of European political thought. Rather than focusing on well-known and widely studied thinkers, these works analyze and give due recognition to lesser-known authors and texts that have long remained in the shadows of history.

Bevilacqua investigates how Europe's knowledge of Islamic civilization was formed and traces the origins of this intellectual engagement. In the first chapter of his study, he demonstrates how European scholars, diplomats, missionaries, merchants, and travelers—either on their own initiative or under the commission of their respective states—purchased Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman manuscripts from book markets in Istanbul and brought them back to Europe, thereby establishing Eastern-style libraries. During this period, the enthusiasm among Europeans for collecting and acquiring such works became so intense that by 1715, Ottoman authorities were compelled to prohibit the sale of books to foreigners.

This fact alone illustrates that Europe's interest in Islam and the Ottoman Empire was far from disinterested; rather, it was driven by the need to appropriate knowledge deemed essential for political power. For example, in the list of books requested by the French Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert from his learned diplomat Antoine Galland, it is evident that European political elites were not only interested in the history of Islam as a religion but also sought to understand the operational mechanisms of the Ottoman Empire, the customs and intellectual traditions of its society, its languages and cultures, as well as its levels of artistic and scientific advancement.

Nevertheless, from the outset, Europe's engagement with the Islamic world took on a "religious and textual" character, which may be linked to the shared foundations of the three monotheistic religions. These traditions all maintain the belief that the entirety of human truth can be encapsulated between the covers of a sacred book. For this reason, as Bevilacqua[2] notes in the

[1] *Orientalism* refers to the study and depiction of Eastern societies and cultures—particularly those of the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia—by Western scholars, writers, and artists. The term gained critical significance through Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism*, where he argued that Western representations of the East were often stereotypical, exoticizing, and served colonial or political agendas. It is now widely used in cultural and postcolonial studies to describe the ideological framing of the East as "the Other" by the West.

[2] Alexander Bevilacqua is a historian of early modern Europe, specializing in the intellectual and cultural interactions between Europe and the Islamic world. He is currently an Associate Professor of History at Williams College, USA. His notable monograph, *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, 2018), explores how European scholars in the Enlightenment era studied Arabic texts and Islamic thought, contributing to the formation of Orientalist scholarship. Bevilacqua's work is recognized for its rigorous archival research and its contribution to rethinking the history of Orientalism beyond colonial contexts.

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second chapter, one of the most significant achievements of the European "Republic of Arabic Letters" was the translation of the Qur'an, which served as a central pillar of this intellectual movement.

In the third chapter, Bevilacqua advances his central thesis: he argues that between approximately 1650 and 1750, the European "Republic of Arabic Letters" significantly transformed the quality of European conceptions of Islam. For the first time in European history, Arabic sources and experiences were extensively studied, translated, and commented upon by European scholars such as George Sale, Edward Pococke, Richard Simon, Adriaan Reland, Henry Stubbe, Humphrey Prideaux, Friedrich Spanheim, Johann Jakob Reiske, Simon Ockley, John Toland, Eusèbe Renaudot, and Henri de Boulainvilliers. Through these efforts, the Islamic world was intellectually grasped and gradually incorporated into the Christian European framework of historical and cultural understanding.

This scholarly endeavor provided an opportunity to reassess Islam as both a religion and a civilization—an effort that notably emerged during a period when European fear of the Ottoman Empire had begun to subside. It is also important to note that the members of this European republic of Arabic letters were not secular intellectuals, but rather Catholic and Protestant clergymen. They sought to broaden Europe's perspective on human history by comparing Islam with Christianity, Judaism, and ancient Greek philosophy.

In the fourth chapter of his research, Bevilacqua highlights one foundational figure from the early generation of European Orientalists: Barthélemy d'Herbelot de Molainville. His monumental work—the multi-volume Bibliothèque orientale—was published in Paris in 1697, two years after his death. It was translated and widely read across Europe throughout the eighteenth century and was recognized as the most authoritative source on the Islamic world until the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the sixth and final chapter of his study, Bevilacqua explores the history of attitudes toward Islam during the Enlightenment through the examples of Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Gibbon. These three prominent writers—philosophers and historians—drew their knowledge and evidence regarding the Islamic world from the works produced within Europe's "Republic of Arabic Letters." Although travel literature also served as an important source of knowledge and often competed with the "scientific" writings of early Orientalists in shaping the understanding of Islam, Bevilacqua treats it only as a peripheral subject.

Travel literature, in particular, held significant importance for Montesquieu. He frequently used it to develop or support his conceptualizations of Oriental despotism. In his work Persian Letters, Montesquieu employs the imagery of the Islamic East through complex literary techniques to critique the political structure of absolute monarchy in France.

According to Bevilacqua, such an instrumental and utilitarian approach to the Islamic East was characteristic of Enlightenment philosophers and political thinkers. Rather than seeking a genuine internal understanding of Islam and the societies and empires it shaped, they tended to project their own philosophical aspirations and imagined fears onto that world.

Voltaire's stance on Muhammad, Islam, and the Arabs oscillated between hatred and admiration, demonization and idealization—a dynamic closely tied to both his limited knowledge of Islam and the critical message he sought to convey to his European readership.

Bevilacqua expresses particular admiration for the interpretations of Gibbon. In his monumental work The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon addressed the emergence of Islam and the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans. Nevertheless, Gibbon

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is also criticized for not always remaining faithful to historical facts and sources in his attempt to align Islam with Enlightenment historical thought.

Bevilacqua emphasizes that from the 1750s onward, European attitudes toward Islam began to take on a more negative tone. The earlier sense of distant kinship with Islamic civilization, characteristic of the first generation of Orientalists and Arabists, gradually faded. The Enlightenment's concept of history came to portray Europe as the driving force of world history, and its political and economic rise fostered a sense of superiority that eventually paved the way for imperialism and colonialism.

Even so, the philological studies and interpretations of the Islamic-Arab world conducted by European scholars during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not erased. These scholarly efforts would later serve as a foundation for promoting mutual understanding.

Malcolm proposes a different and more nuanced approach to the role of Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the history of political thought. Unlike Bevilacqua, Malcolm considers European political thought in a broader sense, taking into deeper account historical context and the balance of power. As a result, in some cases, European political thinking is interpreted as a direct consequence or side effect of the power dynamics between Europe and the Ottomans, although it is not limited to that alone.

Some of the authors discussed by Bevilacqua also appear in Malcolm's work; however, he does not analyze them as a single scholarly group united by their knowledge of Arabic, but rather within a wider historical framework. Nevertheless, the materials presented by Malcolm in his intellectual history demonstrate that discussions of Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Europe were conducted in a relatively structured and coherent manner.

Malcolm's monograph comprises sixteen chapters, combining both chronological and systematic approaches. He begins his inquiry with the fall of Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453 and the response it elicited from Christian Europe. The perception of the Ottoman Empire by Europeans as powerful, successful, threatening, and terrifying is closely linked to this historical event. Both sides interpreted it as a defining moment in the history of salvation.

Malcolm also shows that, in addition to widespread hostility and condemnation of Islam during the medieval period, there were also conciliatory perspectives. For instance, Nicholas of Cusa, in his work De Pace Fidei (On the Peace of Faith), acknowledged a certain aspect of truth within Islam and regarded diversity and unity as reflections of the divine will.

The distinction from Islam played an important role in shaping confessional identity. At the heart of this issue was the contested relationship between religion and politics. Martin Luther, for instance, accused the papacy of being excessively entangled in worldly affairs and material wealth. It was only Philipp Melanchthon who approached this issue in a deeper and more nuanced manner.

One notable aspect was the relative ease with which the Ottoman Empire was integrated into peace projects envisioned for Europe's major powers in the seventeenth century. For example, in a proposal advanced by Emeric Crucé, Enlightenment thinkers frequently acknowledged the Ottomans' relative tolerance toward Christians and juxtaposed it with the intolerance and oppression often associated with Europe's "Christian" monarchies—an observation that can be traced from Pierre Bayle to Voltaire. Nevertheless, such positive assessments and recognitions never dominated the broader European discourse on Islam and the Ottoman Empire. On the contrary, European political thought featured contradictory and multifaceted perspectives regarding their reception and interpretation.

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This ambivalence is particularly evident in the complex discourses on Oriental despotism that Malcolm reconstructs across three chapters. He traces the origins of this concept from antiquity, notably in the works of Aristotle, through its re-emergence in the political theories of Jean Bodin, and finally into the writings of Montesquieu. Another conclusion tied to this genealogy is that influential political philosophers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke scarcely referred to Islam or the Ottoman Empire in their works.

In retrospect, one may realize with some unease that, over the entire period under review, there were virtually no significant thinkers emerging directly from the Islamic-Arab intellectual sphere who had a direct influence on European political thought. An exception to this is the later recognition of the great historian Ibn Khaldun.

In the concluding part of his study, Malcolm revisits Edward Said's famous work Orientalism and directly challenges its central thesis.

That is, Europe has consistently portrayed the Islamic East as its "oppositional other" and sought to assert political control over it. In reality, however, Said's thesis cannot be directly applied to the political thought of early modern and Enlightenment-era Europe, as Said himself primarily focused on the nineteenth century and the power-infused knowledge production of Orientalist scholarship. In this regard, the noteworthy monographs of Bevilacqua and Malcolm do not serve as corrections to Said's groundbreaking work, but rather as meaningful supplements that enrich and contextualize his insights.

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