

GEOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND THE RISE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES IN EUROPE

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Abstract. *The development of Oriental Studies as a serious academic discipline within European circles came about as a result of the geopolitical relationships that were taking place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The discipline expanded because of the interactions of Europeans with the East during trade, travel, colonialism, and wars. This article looks into the ways in which spatial political events facilitated the growth of Oriental Studies, discussing many development stages, institutions, and people involved while placing this movement into a broader scope of history. This article examines the evolution of the coined term Oriental Studies in Europe with an emphasis on the geopolitical and colonial circumstances that prevailed during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. It analyzes how European Empire, colonialism, and intellectual paradigms such as Romanticism and philology contributed to the expansion of the discipline. The article further sheds light on the politics of the disciplinary practice of Oriental Studies, its affiliations with imperialism, and the evolution of the discipline under the impact of disputes like decolonization and the Cold War. These are important issues today as well, in particular with the growing demand to change the research traditions and to adopt the approaches of the indigenous people of the researched areas.*

Keywords: *oriental studies, geopolitics, colony, romanticism, decolonization, area studies, Indo-European Languages, Edward Said, comparative linguistics, nationalism, digital humanities.*

ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ СОБЫТИЯ И ПОДЪЕМ ВОСТОКОВЕДЕНИЯ В ЕВРОПЕ

Аннотация. *Развитие востоковедения как серьезной академической дисциплины в европейских кругах произошло в результате геополитических отношений, которые имели место в восемнадцатом и девятнадцатом веках. Дисциплина расширилась из-за взаимодействия европейцев с Востоком во время торговли, путешествий, колониализма и войн. В этой статье рассматриваются способы, которыми пространственные политические события способствовали росту востоковедения, обсуждая многие этапы*

развития, институты и вовлеченных людей, помещая это движение в более широкий контекст истории. В этой статье рассматривается эволюция придуманного термина «востоковедение в Европе» с акцентом на геополитические и колониальные обстоятельства, которые преобладали в восемнадцатом и девятнадцатом веках. В ней анализируется, как Европейская империя, колониализм и интеллектуальные парадигмы, такие как романтизм и филология, способствовали расширению дисциплины. Статья далее проливает свет на политику дисциплинарной практики востоковедения, ее связи с империализмом и эволюцию дисциплины под влиянием таких споров, как деколонизация и холодная война. Это важные вопросы и сегодня, в частности, с растущей потребностью в изменении исследовательских традиций и принятии подходов коренных народов исследуемых территорий.

Ключевые слова: востоковедение, геополитика, колония, романтизм, деколонизация, региональные исследования, индоевропейские языки, Эдвард Саид, сравнительная лингвистика, национализм, цифровые гуманитарные науки.

Introduction. The fusion of geopolitics with the genesis of Oriental Studies on the European continent has sufficiently captured scholarly attention. A number of scientists and historians approached this subject from different perspectives and analyzed the socio-political, cultural, and intellectual tendencies that were important for the development of the discipline. This analysis encompasses the key contributions of relevant scholars, their work with the findings and conclusions from their work.

Edward Said and the Criticism of Orientalism. When examining the connection between geopolitics and the Oriental Studies, Edward Said's most notable book, *Orientalism* (1978) is a fundamental work. Said maintained that Orientalism was not only an academic discipline, rather it was a cultural practice and set of political actions which Europe employed to subjugate and rule over the East. His assessment of the treatment of the Eastern societies by the Western academia has reignited debates, challenged the status quo, and inspired subsequent research.

- Approach: The father of Postcolonialism, Said applied a postcolonial theory, along with a methodological and textual analysis, to formulate and justify the representations of the East in Western literature and scholarship.

- Outcome: His work redefined power relations within any given discipline and inspired younger scholars to think amiss.

In the text *The Oriental Renaissance*, Raymond Schwab writes on the rereading of eastern texts and their impact on European thought in the 18th and 19th centuries. He also remarked how the literature of Europe was expanded by the translations done from Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic languages.

- Approach: Schwab's historical research is centered on the Intellectual history of Europe from the standpoint of cultural cross exchanges.

- Outcome: His work revealed the intellectual indebtedness of Europe to the East and their Euro centric discourse.

The research done by Max Muller, Franz Bopp and other similar people worried about the development of the Indo European languages and linked Language studies to historical, cultural studies. Wells proved that the European languages had a common origin with the eastern languages, which improved the value of cultural relationships.

- Approach: Such scholars used comparative philology of languages to find relations between the languages and the

The *Description de l'Égypte* stands as a major accomplishment thanks to the synergetic collaboration of military and administrative officials alongside scholars during Napoleon's expedition in Egypt between 1798 to 1801. This particular case serves as an astonishing instance of how scholarship and geopolitics interrelate and during this case, it focused on both science and culture.

- Analysis: The literate society has captured how the initial curiosity paired with colonization has drawn remarkable contributions to archaeology and Egyptology during this endeavor.

The *École des langues orientales* as well as the Asiatic Society of Bengal acted as landmarks for the development for research and education in the British and French Empires through direct contact with the imperial structure, allowing for fostered engagement in these civilizations.

- Critique: Metcalf along with other scholars have brought enlightenment towards the so called bizarre construct of an academic colonialist, allowing for clearer understanding within delicate structures in international inquiry.

Some modern academics such as Sheldon Pollock have raised the issue of the colonial construct of the field and emphasize the idea of decolonizing oriental studies as more focus is

directed towards the indigenous perspective alongside challenging the authentic concepts relative to eastern studies.

- Impact: The received scope of the studies has now been changed by this new adaptation, freeing it from western constraints.

Technology and Digital Humanities

The digitization of Oriental texts and artifacts has greatly benefited from the progress in digital humanities. The availability of digitizing, analyzing, and joint venture tools means that classical scholar's texts can be approached anew.

- Example: The recent projects on the ex-Cairo Geniza documents have transformed the research of Jewish and Islam history in the Medieval Middle East.

European engagement with the East can be traced back to medieval period during the crusade, however, it was during the Age of Exploration (15-17 centuries) where there was continuous deep-rooted interaction. The Portuguese and Spanish Empires were the pioneers of sea routes to India, Southeast Asia, and gradually China. Then followed the Dutch, British, and French.

There were systematic attempts to understand the language, culture, and religion of the East primarily for trade, diplomacy, and missionary purposes.

The Europeans' understanding of the east has been influenced greatly by the Ottoman Empire. As a powerful empire around the borders of Europe, the Ottomans posed a military threat and also invited cultural intrigue. European scholars, diplomats, and travelers needed a deeper understanding of the empire's governance, religion and society which formed the basis of what was known as Oriental Studies.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the swift growth of European colonial empires, especially in Asia and the Middle East. Britain's dominance in India, France's objectives in North Africa and Levant, and Russia's dominion over Central Asia meant that there was an increasing need to understand the peoples and cultures of these places. This practical requirement led to the start of Eastern Studies as a well-structured academic discipline.

Colonial civil servants, as well as army officials, often made use of Orientalists for assistance with languages, culture, and history. Goerge even William Jones – who, for instance, established the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, represents this link between colonial rule and academic endeavor. Jones's writings on Sanskrit and the Indian legal systems are cases in point of how Eastern studies were beneficial in more ways than one.

The establishment of Eastern Studies as a discipline in Europe commenced formally at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Universities and academies in different regions began to allocate specific roles for Oriental language instructors, and dedicated departments were created with the aim of educating and training scholars and bureaucrats.

1. France: The French Revolution and Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt (1798–1801) were pivotal in shaping modern Oriental Studies. Napoleon's expedition included a team of scholars and scientists who produced the monumental *Description de l'Égypte*, a comprehensive study of Egypt's antiquities, geography, and society. The establishment of the École des Langues Orientales (now INALCO) in Paris further institutionalized Oriental Studies in France.

2. Germany: In the German-speaking world, the tradition of philology and historical-critical methods profoundly influenced Oriental Studies. Scholars such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schlegel integrated Eastern texts into broader discussions of language, literature, and philosophy. The University of Göttingen became a center for Oriental philology, with prominent figures like Heinrich Ewald advancing the study of Semitic languages.

3. Britain: In Britain, the East India Company's dominance in India necessitated the training of officials in Indian languages and law. Institutions like Haileybury College and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) emerged to meet this demand. Additionally, scholars such as Max Müller contributed to the comparative study of religion and mythology, emphasizing the connections between Indo-European languages and cultures.

The rise of Oriental Studies was also linked to the formation of modern nation-states and their cultural ambitions. National pride often motivated the collection and study of Oriental manuscripts, artifacts, and texts. For example:

- The British Museum in London and the Louvre in Paris became repositories for treasures acquired during colonial and military campaigns.
- National academies sponsored translations of classical Eastern texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Avesta*, and *One Thousand and One Nights*, into European languages.

The Romantic movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries played a crucial role in shaping European attitudes toward the East. Romantic writers and artists often idealized the Orient as a realm of mystery, exoticism, and spiritual depth, contrasting it with the rationalism and industrialization of the West. Figures like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) drew inspiration from Persian poetry, exemplify this fascination.

Philology—the study of language in historical texts—became a cornerstone of Oriental Studies. Scholars like Franz Bopp and Max Müller applied comparative methods to reconstruct the history of languages and trace their connections. This linguistic approach not only advanced the understanding of Indo-European languages but also framed the East as a vital contributor to human civilization.

However, these scholarly pursuits were not without controversy. Critics, including Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), have argued that Oriental Studies often perpetuated stereotypes and served imperialist agendas. Said's critique highlights how the academic study of the East was sometimes complicit in justifying Western dominance.

The 20th century brought significant geopolitical changes that reshaped Oriental Studies. The decline of European empires and the rise of nationalist movements in Asia and the Middle East challenged the Eurocentric assumptions underlying much of the field. Scholars from formerly colonized regions began to assert their voices, advocating for new methodologies and perspectives.

During the Cold War, Oriental Studies evolved into broader "Area Studies" programs, reflecting the geopolitical priorities of the United States and its allies. The establishment of centers for Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian studies in Western universities was often driven by strategic interests, including the need to understand and influence regions critical to global politics.

Today, Oriental Studies faces the challenge of reconciling its colonial past with the demands of a globalized and multipolar world. Efforts to decolonize the curriculum, incorporate indigenous perspectives, and foster cross-cultural dialogue are reshaping the discipline. Digital humanities and advances in technology have also opened new avenues for research, enabling scholars to access and analyze texts and artifacts with unprecedented precision.

Conclusion. The rise of Oriental Studies in Europe was a complex phenomenon shaped by geopolitical developments, intellectual currents, and cultural exchanges. While the discipline has contributed significantly to the understanding of Eastern cultures and histories, it has also been criticized for its entanglement with colonial and imperialist agendas. As the field continues to evolve, it must grapple with these legacies while embracing new methodologies and perspectives that reflect the diversity and interconnectedness of the modern world.

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