

From Orientalism to Occidentalism: the rise of Westophobiaⁱ

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Abstract

This article discusses the issue of Orientalism and Occidentalism and the increasing conflicts between Muslims and Westerners. Both belligerent parties are putting gasoline on a reciprocal fear that is feeding both Islamophobia and Westophobia. The question raised in this paper is whether the fear of Muslims from the West can be justified. Indeed, the West's bloody aspirations to promote secularism and its unconvincing claim that it aims at the democratization of the Muslim world, especially the Arab one has led to the spread of the theory of the West's violent conspiracy. Consequently, whatever happens in the Arab world is believed to be a direct outcome of the West's direct interference in the local affairs of the so-called sovereign countries.

Key words: Orientalism, Occidentalism, Islamophobia, Intercultural communication

Orientalists are western scholars who are interested, in a way or another, in the Orient irrespective of their work disciplines. Orientalism is further defined as an ontological and epistemological differentiation between the “Orient” and the “West”. The ultimate goal of the latter is to know, understand for strategic reasons in order to control better the former (Said, 2003). The fact that these studies are undertaken by western researchers, from a dominant-dominated perspective, entails that the Orient is usually depicted as inferior that needs to be developed and even civilized by the powerful and “civilized” West (Gunew, 2007). In this “civilized” West, Muslim women are the favorite topic. They are not allowed to wear their Islamic veil in public institutions, including schools, under the pretext that it is a religious sign, as the Christian cross, in a secular country like France. According to (Ramadan, 2003)ⁱⁱ, the veil is the tree that hides the forest. It is a false debate that hides serious social problems in France related to unemployment, segregation and exclusion of Muslims from integration. Before, it was believed that the veil was a strict dress code imposed by Muslim men on women depriving them from their freedom. Afterwards, they realized that many women decided themselves to wear the veil and so, according to their detractors, they condemned themselves to a self-alienation. While in fact, women’s veil in Islam is an obligation as it is explicitly stated in the Koran. Indeed, as in the Sourat Al-Ahzab (The Coalition) verse (59) it states:

O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful.

Or the Sourat An-Nnoor (The Light) verse (31) it states:

And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeedⁱⁱⁱ.

While the veil is a religious obligation, it does not mean that it should be imposed by anyone on Muslim women. In contrast to the image propagated that women are bereft of their rights in Islam, it is the opposite that we remark if we consider the issue of divorce of women in the Western world who were allowed this right only in the twentieth century, whereas in Islam the possibility for women to divorce was granted more than fourteen centuries ago.

It is an insult to the intelligence of Muslims the declaration of George W. Bush^{iv} that the main reason of the American presence on the Afghan soil was to liberate, empower, and educate Afghan women. Consequently, the Americans have appointed themselves as the “protectors” of the rights of these women from the tyranny of Afghan men!

This prejudicial Orientalization, reduction and inferiorization of Islam and Muslims led to Islamophobia. Hence, religious differences are transformed into racial, ethnical and cultural differences whose aim is to create a virtual fear from Islam and Muslims to justify any western direct or indirect colonization of the Muslim world (Grosfoguel and Mielants, 2006) (Kesbi, 2011).

The strong link between Orientalism and imperialism need not to be justified as there was a clear correlation between the imperialist expansion of France and Britain and the flourishing of Orientalism. Indeed, it confirms the slogans of “knowledge is power”, “cultural power equals imperial power” and “I conquer therefore, I exist” (Salmagundi, 2004) (Grosfoguel and Mielants, Ibid.). The tactic is first to show the evidence that the Islamic civilization is undergoing a serious decadence. Consequently, whatever are the claims and ideas of scholars representing this backward and decaying world is not worth considering. According to (Said, Ibid.), Orientalism is the glorification of the Western identity to the detriment of the non-Western one with the goal to make this superiority everlasting to justify their dominance. Then, comes the decisive role of the “all-knower” West, which prescribes and dictates, by force if necessary, the “right medicines” including capitalism and an adjusted democracy to meet the hegemonic needs and desires of the West, especially the control of the Arabs’ oil (Aydin, 2004). The increasing interest in the Islamic world was accelerated by some major political events such as the Islamic Iranian revolution, the destruction of the Berlin wall, the fall of the Soviet Union and more recently the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Those events were enough to make of the Muslim world the right new enemy (Shah, 2011).

In their preface of the book *Orientalism and conspiracy*, (Graf et al., 2011) define the conspiracy theory as an ideological explanation that tends to confine the political and social problems in a given community to the “us” threatened in secrecy by the “other”. According to (Pipes, 1998), conspiracy theories are not only a characteristic of the Muslim World but also of third world countries as it is the only way to justify their continuous defeat against their strong enemies. Yet, conspiracies are a worldwide phenomena, a case in point is the death of the president Kennedy. Another concrete example in the same developed country is the attacks of the 9/11 though acknowledged by Ben Laden, some western and eastern conspiracists suggested that Muslims are not smart enough to perform such an act and only the powerful USA can perform it on its soil to justify any of its future political and military acts.

As for the recent events of the Arab Spring, to know whether it was a consequence of a western conspiracy or a simple consequence of an oppressed population upsurge we should ask ourselves who would benefit from such a change of the leaders of the Arab world. The revolutions in the Arab world have surprised the world and no one could have imagined such a scenario where, in a very short span of time, a president will flee, another will be in jail and another killed and the list is not closed yet. Some of those authoritarian regimes were backed up by the West because they served its interests. That is why the US did not support the Egyptian revolution, for instance, until they were sure that the Mubark’s “reign” was over. Nevertheless, the West will in no way sit back without doing its best to influence by all means the denouement of these events to its benefit.

From Orientalism to Occidentalism

Occidentalism is the creation of the weak and marginalized Orient in an attempt to reverse roles. Instead of having an Orientalist perspective based on a superiority complex, we end up with a constructive Occidentalism to rectify previous errors. In the same vein, history was written by the West. Accordingly, the short West’s history is overrepresented and expanded to the detriment of the long history of the other civilizations overlooking their contributions to the world’s development. A case in point is the Hollywoodien excessive depiction of the American history, which can in no way be compared to the great and old history of China or even Morocco. The latter was once the first country to acknowledge the independence of the newly born USA! This wrong belief in historical supremacy is illustrated in the controversial speech of the previous president of France^v. Indeed, he gave himself the

right to teach the Africans that their plight and drama is the fact that they have not sufficiently entered history! Africans, according to Sarkozy's clumsy statement, should cease regretting the golden age of Africa as it had never existed! It is historically unfair to overlook the important contributions of many African inventors like Lewis Howard Latimer who invented the light bulb, which is attributed instead to Thomas Edison^{vi}! Many of the western societies including France are what they are now because of the contribution of many Africans who were ungratefully forgotten in the history of the whites. It would be difficult to imagine what would have been the historical and political aftermaths if many African soldiers did not help in the independence of France during the world wars. Thus, Occidentalism aims at creating a historical balance in the world history (Hanafi, 2006), as there are no intrinsically superior or inferior races.

Nonetheless, it is very difficult to be objective when you start from a retaliatory perspective. Certainly, the logical goal of Occidentalism would be an Orient taking revenge and treating the West the way it was treated. This Occidental discourse can lead according to Al-Azm (2011) to violent actions and hostility by the Muslim world in an attempt to criticize and minimize the West (Buruma, 2004). Occidentalism is based on a counterattack against Western imperialism and colonialism. The main representation of Occidentalism is that a westerner is denied the capacity to understand well the culture and language of the Orient (Lary, 2006). If in Orientalism the Orient is prejudiced and stereotyped; in Occidentalism the same phenomena are reiterated against the West. Likewise, the movement of negritude started as a process to restore the image of the blacks distorted by the white racists but became eventually racist itself. As long as there are conflicts of interests between the West and the Orient, the negative aspects of each of the belligerent parties will be stressed (Kesbi, Ibid.).

The West or the Occident is referred to as Europe headed by the United States, "the modern self" in opposition to the "other" underdeveloped third world countries that were entangled, after the Second World War, between Capitalism and Socialism (Coronil, 1996). The West plays the role of a corrupted sheriff who can unilaterally attack or intervene in any country in the world in accordance with its predicted and calculated profits. So, can the growing fear of Muslims from the West be justified? I think that the answer would be the US foreign policies and interventions. (Grossman, 2001) sketched the history of the American military interventions from 1890 to 2001 to realize that American troops were nearly everywhere in Philippines, Cuba, Puerto-Rico, Europe, Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Iraq, Vietnam, Somalia, Afghanistan etc.

Consequently, the US deserved amply the gold medal in world military intervention for more than a century! The irony is that the West justified its interventions sometimes in the name of “freedom”, “democracy”, “humanitarian aid” while in fact it was in general done to support “dictatorship”, “Capitalism” and “protection of their oil profits”. As there are no “clean” wars, each time thousands, if not millions, of civilians are killed and many civilian infrastructures are destroyed because they claim to be inevitable and unpremeditated.

The Muslim’s world skepticism and fear grew and developed with the creation of Israel in 1948 with the blessing and support of the West. This has been referred to as the “Nakba” (the catastrophe). In this so-called post-colonial world, Israel is backed up economically, militarily and mediatically, especially by its strong ally the US. A direct consequence of this creation is millions of Palestinian refugees who are expelled from their country to live in inhumane conditions in geographically dispersed makeshift camps. The daily nightmare of Muslims is the recurrent killing of unarmed Palestinians by Israeli soldiers to become the usual torturing images that we start our day with in many television channels. Palestinians are neglected, ignored, unwanted and even abandoned to their bloody destiny that gives us the impression that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the fake peace negotiations will be eternal. In each anniversary of the “Intifada” (uprising), it is the time for Muslims to count the uncountable casualties among the stone-armed Palestinians.

Other conflicts with which Muslims are deeply concerned were the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. Both countries were great friends of the West in the past. Iraq was paid a high tribute by the West for standing as their protective shield against Iran. When the role of Iraq was done, it became the enemy number one of the West. Iraq was completely destroyed and annihilated because it was believed to have nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. After the methodic and planned Iraq destruction, it was declared that it was simply the consequence of a mistake in the information given by the general intelligence! In the same line, history repeats itself in the case of Afghanistan. Indeed, the previous friend of the West who stood in the face of the eternal enemy of the US, namely the ex-Soviet union turned out to be its new foe. The previously called “Mujahidin” by the western media, including Ben Laden, became the new “terrorists” and so it was legitimate for the West to occupy Afghanistan. We remember the president Bush^{vii} crusade speech or war against terrorism after the events of 9/11. The reaction of the US was again in the way we could see in a Hollywoodien film of the far West where the sheriff declares that Ben laden is “wanted”, “dead or alive”^{viii}! George W. Bush looked like a man hunter. Ben Laden was sentenced to

death before being caught or judged as would be any human being according to the international judicial treaties ratified by the US as a member of the civilized world! It is true that these attacks were condemned by the majority of Muslims mainly because of the innocent civilians that were killed. Yet, many Muslim immigrants in the Western world have been held responsible for this act and have suffered from harassment and xenophobic actions.

On the basis of double standards, American decision-makers were very sensitive to the loss of hundreds of innocent civilians in the 9/11 attack. Nonetheless, the same Americans do not consider making the effort of even counting the thousands of civilian victims, for example, in Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld, the American defense minister, openly stated that they only cared about the American soldiers casualties (Falek, 2011).

In the same vein, France has not changed his negative position one iota concerning the possible adhesion of Turkey to the European market. The pretexts given are the problems of the human rights in Turkey, the caution concerning the acceptance of a predominantly Muslim country, the Greek and Turkish conflict related to the island of Cyprus and the refusal of Turkey to acknowledge its war against the Armenians as genocide. Surprisingly, France itself refuses to present its excuses to Algeria as a consequence of its vain and bloody attempts to annex this country to France.

The Muslim world has developed a complex of inferiority as it was conscious of its weak military, scientific and economic power. Thus, the fear for the mighty West can be justified. A Muslim and a Westerner could be caricatured as two men sending a yellow smiley face to each other and shaking hands in a seemingly warm intercultural communication and at the same time both in their hidden left hand; the Muslim is carrying a knife and the Westerner a gun. This image can sum up the actual relationship between Muslims and Westerners characterized by a mutual fear, suspicion and mistrust.

The situation is felt more acutely in the difficulty of Muslim immigrants to be assimilated into the "host" countries. Muslim immigrants would like to be integrated to demonstrate their good western citizenship, but at the same time preserve their proper Muslim identity. Yet, having the nationality of a given western country is not enough to make a Muslim fully recognized as being on the same footing as a native. As long as you are a successful immigrant, the media will never refer to your Islamic origins as is the case of the great football-player Zinedine Zidane who is completely adopted by the French society as a

full-fledged French citizen. His Algerian origins will never be mentioned because he became a French national hero. On the other hand, in the case of the queer attack of Toulouse where Mohamed Merah a French citizen killed some Jews and Muslims, the media did not spare any effort to specify and stress his Algerian origins. The logical interpretation of this event would be that whenever a Muslim does something awful he does it because he is Muslim and whenever he does something good, he does it because he is a westerner. This biased and prejudiced attitude of the media contributes in feeding both Islamophobia and Westophobia.

Conclusion

The xenophobic conflicts could be reduced if the West's unjustified claim to have the exclusive access to modernity and civilization could leave a space for the other cultures including the Islamic ones to achieve a fruitful and peaceful intercultural communication. The Western governments should also support the real democratic political forces in the Islamic world to cut off the way in front of extremism that can be the result of the oppression and frustration of the subjugated and repressed Islamic masses.

According to (Turner, 1994 cited in Macfie, 2002), there are ways to surpass the negative consequences of Orientalism and [Occidentalism alike]. First, the heated discussions of Orientalism were constructive and favorable to a growing self-critical approach in current writings about Islam in particular. Second, if in the Orientalist and Occidentalist discourse the spotlight was on the differences between the Orient and the Occident, a shift should occur towards reaching a certain harmony instead of opposition. Thirdly, attempts should be made to shun being fault-finding in other's history, religion and culture. Last but not least, to make an effort following the Saidian advice not to overgeneralize in having false-unifying concepts such as the "West".

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ⁱⁱ Tariq Ramadan and the Islamic veil
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=f6EAO0bs8E>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.mosshaf.com/web/>

^{iv} George W. Bush : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIbPcxYc5Bc>

^v Sarkozy's controversial speech in Dakar <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9tU1vIKaTU>

^{vi} Les inventeurs noirs occultes de l'histoire
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=jMx-TfKd5Q8>

^{vii} Bush Crusade speech <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsJgJM56HRw>

^{viii} President Bush on Finding Bin Laden "Dead or Alive" Following 9/11 Attacks
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=januUtgHM8w>