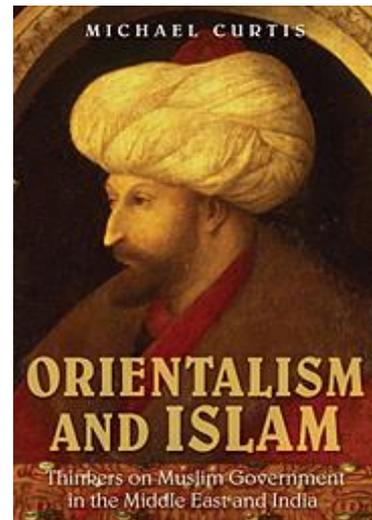


Orientalism and Islam

Curtis about Thinkers on Muslim Government in the Mideast and India

Americans leaving Iraq in agreement with the government of this country after more than six years of war. Thus, U.S. combat troops met a June 30, 2009 deadline to withdraw from the cities. If everything goes well, they slide into an advisory role. The transition to Iraqis goes fully on. They take control of their destiny.

That milestone in mid-2009 marked also another event. An American advisor to the Iraqi military's Baghdad command edited an unusually blunt memorandum. Therein, Colonel Timothy R. Reese concludes not only that it is time for the U.S. to declare victory and go home. But he points at systemic flaws beyond the military. His remarks sound very familiar if you consult also this timely book by Michael Curtis on the history of American and European thinking about Mideastern and Indian governments.



Let us take a look into one example of that European thinking in this book, though here are first some of Reese's key notions: Corruption is widespread. Neglect and mistreatment of people is the norm. Cronyism and nepotism are ram-pant. Laziness is endemic. Extreme centralization is the norm. Lack of initiative is legion. There is an unwillingness to change or to do anything new so that the progress is blocked. A near total ineffectiveness prevails in institutions. Sure, Reese also says, there are always good examples and exceptions among the Iraqis.

But Reese claims that the Iraqis are currently unable to plan ahead, to stand up against certain parties, to instill discipline and to take steps to manage the development. Is there perhaps an underlying historical or general pattern?

Rutgers University emeritus Michael Curtis opines that the contemporary Middle East and today's nature of Islam can only be fully understood in the light of the past. He reminds us that thoughts and events have antecedents and consequences.

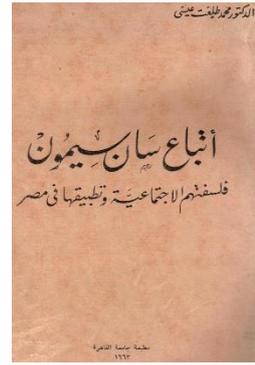
Thus the author, a Distinguished Professor emeritus of Political Science, poses key questions anew in the light of various European views about what became known as despotism:

- Are Arab Muslim societies compatible with democratic governments based on the principles of human rights?
- Are those regimes able to reform?
- Can they owe allegiance to society and state not only oriented to religion?

According to Michael Curtis not all of the European writing about those Islamic regions is racist, imperialistic, or ethnocentric. With this notion he refutes reductionist allegations made by English professor Edward Said in his book "[Orientalism](#)" of 1978. So Curtis investigates first broader [topics](#) as [European](#) views of Islam and their correlation to so called Oriental despotism, observant travelers and political thinkers.

History of Religions

Then Michael Curtis tells us how the European writers of the 18th and 19th century deal with the Oriental despotism: Charles de Secondat Baron de Montesquieu, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, James Mill (and John Stuart Mill), Karl Marx (plus Friedrich Engels) and Max Weber. A very good and unique selection to which I would like to add Henri de Saint-Simon who gained a remarkable influence in Egypt, see here the cover of the Arabic book "The Followers of Saint-Simon – Their Social Philosophy and its Application in Egypt" by Muhammad Talat Isa (Atbā‘ Sān Sīmūn: falsafatuhum al-iğtimā‘īya wa taṭbīqihā fī Miṣr, Cairo University Press 1963, 338 pp.). They promoted the building of a [Sues Canal](#).



Curtis, also known by books like the 2015 "Verdict on Vichy" and his 1987 "Totalitarianism," does challenge us on his fine journey into intellectual history. Before coming to conclusions, just as an example, I highlight his thoughts on Karl Marx, the Asiatic mode of production and Oriental despotism. Indeed, Curtis rescues a tradition that is, besides of the Mideast, still an analytical tool for India, China and Russia. How did they evolve, did they open a path to their modernization? Can they offer new clues for Arab societies like Egypt in the Middle East?

Michael Curtis discusses the Asiatic mode of production as coined by Karl Marx in his "Capital" of 1859: the economic base and its political superstructure, Oriental despotism. But, says Curtis, Chinese communists and Soviet experts buried that dangerous concept in Moscow in 1928 and Leningrad in 1931. Stalin ignored it since 1938. Indeed, for obvious reasons: it would lead to insights that basics of Marxist theories may only apply to advanced societies in Western Europe but not to Afro-Asian regions. In other words: the analysis of Marx, its consequences and "revolutionary prospects" deal with a regional exception, the democratic island of Britain. Marx touches just on the sidelines India, Russia and China.

Curtis explains phases and contents in which Marx and Engels deal with the Asiatic mode of production. They watch closely the British policy in India. So they discover: there is no evolutionary strain in which a main form of private property led to another one like in Western Europe. Both regard the absence of (independent) private ownership not only "the key even to the Oriental heaven." But the Oriental [history](#) appears to them as a "history of religions." They argue also that Muslims spread a no private property principle throughout the whole Asia.

Consensual Despotism

Marx and Engels take some geographical factors into account. Explaining the stationary nature of India in 1853, Marx points at the public works as business of the central government which rules over a microcosm of villages. He describes a system of tribal, common and state property. It still exists in his time as the reason of the Oriental or stagnant Asiatic despotism. Later, Karl Marx discovers also even variations of state and private property in Africa, Russia and China.

In 1882, I add here, he lives in Algiers for two months. Marx gains insights in Muslim life of a French colony. But he does not change his theory: the state, embodied in pharaoh or sultan or Mughal, is the one all-embracing unity, the patrimonial higher or sole proprietor. The people are in the communes only temporary and hereditary possessors. This upper unity is the real owner of the main means of production, including soil and irrigation. The individual in the village is just the transitional possessor.

In "consensual relations" though nothing leads to a "unilinear inner-dynamic progression," claims also inspired by Marx the [German](#) August Bebel in his 1884 book about the "Muhamadan-Arab Period of Culture". Under such stagnating conditions, claims this founding father of the German social democrat movement, all the main impulses come from the outside. Thus, they lead "eternally" into four directions – revolts, destruction, rejuvenation and conservation.

History in a Vest Pocket

From here stems a vast literature about the historical role of European colonial ventures. If Asiatic despotism is true and moves in circles, there emerge no antagonistic classes yet, neither is "class struggle" the driving force of history. Thus, no profound socio-economic revolutions are to be expected like in Western Europe except of the usual coup d'états or palace revolts (later, for this reason the Soviets would support the industrialization of those countries generating the "missing class fighters"). [For revolts in early Islam and Islamic concepts thereof see: Bernard Lewis: Islam in History (Open Court: Chicago 1993), 295, 311.]

Without wage workers en masse in peasant's lands, the whole revolutionary Marxist theory fails. Or as a Syrian leader once troubled an East German envoy in Damascus: "You come always with your policy for the working class. Well, in this old country, I can put your proletarians into my vest pocket."

Luckily, as Michael Curtis reveals, Marx liberated himself of ethnocentric views. In 1881 he groups his Asiatic mode of production into the first type of archaic formations on the original level of agrarian communities. Do those tribal countries have to go through the European strain of private property to get to Communism? No, Marx says: But they need to be towed into progress by a proletarian revolution in the West.

Delusional Leap

Since a revolution did not succeed in the West, but did in the least developed Russia, Lenin adapted a bizarre global leap of Marx' Western theory to his East. Not to let others discover this historical [inversion](#), the Soviets suppressed Marx' thoughts about the Asiatic mode of production. So did the Chinese, just to return with Mao to it in vulgar ways: "world village against global town."

After Stalin, in 1957, Karl August Wittfogel furthers Marx' ideas in his book about the "Hydraulic Society." He puts the Oriental despotism in a comparative light of totalitarian powers. So does Ahmad Sadiq Sa'd of Egypt in his "An-Namat al-Asiyawi lil-Intağ" in 1979. A school of this "Asiatic mode of production" supported the concept of an [Arab Socialism](#). The prophet Muhammad becomes, as Egypt's [Abd an-Nasir](#) famously claimed, "the Imam of the Socialists."

A theoretical step further went Hisham B. Sharabi in his 1988 book on the "Neopatriarchy" or "An-Nizam al-Abawi".] The Egyptian Hasan Hanafi suggested "occidentalistics" in his "Prolegomena of Occidentalistics," in Arabic "Muqaddima fi 'Ilm al-Istighrab" of 1991 calling for a likewise – as in the West, now the East on the West – study of Europe's thinkers and the ways from Mideastern viewpoints.



Today, basic ideas as researched by Michael Curtis concern again Mideastern lands. Take his book, if you like a non-ideological study how the best in Europe watched Afro-Asian regions. This great scholarship enables the reader to catch better the echo and congenial spirits of Afro-Asian lands. Therewith we can rethink also Timothy R. Reese's observations: what are passing and what are systemic flaws, and where might lay some real keys for a true development for and by the people in the lands of Islam and the Middle East?

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Michael Curtis: *Orientalism and Islam. European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, 382 S., ISBN 978-0-521-76725-5, USD 85,00. This review appeared in *Sehepunkte*, 9(2009)10, [15.10.2009]. Here updated, links were added.