



Noel Malcolm.- *Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 487p.

Malcolm's book *Useful Enemies* was crystallized on the grounds of the author's interest in Islam, Ottoman Empire and Oriental despotism to the extent that when the Carlyle electors suggested that he speak about the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes within the Carlyle Lectures as a long-running and distinguished series, he preferred to speak about the first topic. Hence, the fundamental fulcrum of this book, which has the accolade of originality, is the theory of eastern despotism, its origins and developments in Western political thought from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. The dates used in the title of this book, 1450-1750, are round figures; for practical purposes 1450 is a proxy for 1453, the year of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople; and 1750 is close enough to 1748, the date of publication of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* – a work which took the long-lasting tradition of theorizing about Ottoman “despotism,” developed it further, and, by means of the reactions which Montesquieu provoked to his most extreme claims, helped to bring about its end.

Malcolm shows that this Western theory was created by enduring hostile traditions towards Islam and the Ottoman Empire. It is true that some humanists did consciously revive the notion of “Europe,” as an ethnocultural as well as a geographical entity, which they found in the texts of classical geographers. It is certainly true that such writers borrowed classical terms and concepts in order to distinguish as strongly as possible between their own high culture and the presumed savagery of the Ottoman invaders: the latter were described as “barbari” (barbarians), “saevi” (wild or savage people). It became common practice to refer to all Muslim peoples as barbarians, regardless of their particular cultural features.

Christian theology made a huge contribution, providing a sense of superiority and hostility, as a platform for the theory's growth. Christian anti-Muslim polemics were rampant; early modern Europe inherited from the Middle Ages a large body of ideas about Islam, of which some were broadly correct, some imaginary, some innocently perplexed, and some wilfully

false and offensive. In particular, this theology incorporated rumours and unsubstantiated stories, which became accepted truths about Muhammad, his life and the Qur'an. These mindsets of the medieval Christian imagination persisted for an extraordinarily long time in Western writings. For almost every Western thinker until at least the latter part of the seventeenth century, deception was simply intrinsic to the origins and nature of Islam.

Likewise, ethnographic-cum-anthropological inventions on Ottoman mores and government were uncritically transferred from one generation to another. This was not a uniform process. The sixteenth century, from Malcolm's standpoint, is the era of Protestantism, Calvinoturcism, and Turcopapalism *par excellence*. Even if there is a reaction against the Ottoman Empire, there is certain criticism against the Christians themselves: A moral and religious reaction against the intra-Christian warfare of the first two decades of the sixteenth century set the tone. Various currents of thought and practice in Western Christianity contributed to such a reaction. Religious reformers and pious humanists – Juan de Torquemada, Nicholas of Cusa (in his *Cribratio Alkorani*, in particular), Juan Luis Vives, Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, to mention just the most prominent – did call for moral and spiritual purification and renewal on the Christian side, demonstrating, each in his peculiar way, a somewhat different attitude, whether in essence or in style. Still, the sense of religious superiority and hostility were relentless. As Malcolm points out (131, 411), Guillaume Postel, the maverick Catholic and oriental linguist who studied Arabic and Turkish, went to Istanbul in 1535, and travelled to Syria and Egypt, instigating a significant change and new paradigm, in terms of unpicking false claims that were attached to Islam. He also did his best to yoke Protestantism and Islam together; his ideas would percolate, over time, into the mainstream of anti-Protestant polemical writing.

The old paradigm still had a considerable anti-Muslim and anti-Ottoman impact; the descriptive writers of the early-and mid-sixteenth century tried to analyze the causes of Ottoman strength and to consider whether some of those advantageous practices could be replicated by Christian Europe. In the last two decades of the sixteenth century, a change and an approach in how the Ottoman Empire was conceived, however, began to concretize on the grounds of the notion of "*ragion di stato*" or "reason of state." This approach was attributed to a number of theorists of "reason of state," the first and the most influential of whom was Niccolò Machiavelli, whose different sections of his works were writ large in this vein.

In addition to Machievelli, there is the focus on French soldier, diplomat, and writer René de Lucinge. His treatise *De la naissance, durée et chute des États* (1588) focused on the Ottoman Empire. Lucinge's treatise was widely read, being reprinted several times in French and translated into Italian, Latin, and English. It also wielded a strong influence on his friend Giovanni Botero, who was partly inspired by it to write a wide-ranging treatise on the arts of government and war, entitled *Della ragion di stato*, in 1589. Lucinge's and Botero's treatises were anti-Machiavellian as their aims were to replace it with a true doctrine of reason of state, showing how and when it was legitimate for a ruler to (dis)simulate, and even (in wartime) engage in active deception, so as to defend and promote the true Catholic religion. The political writer Girolamo Frachetta, the commentator on Tacitus and historian Scipione Ammirato and the theologian and political theorist Tommaso Campanella saw themselves, as theorists in the Catholic "reason of state" tradition, as defending true religiously based politics against Machiavellianism, and as advancing the cause of Christianity against the infidel Ottoman Empire.

Malcolm accentuates the traditional arguments of Christian polemics against Islam, probing and analyzing the views of Vanini, Toland, Addison and Prideaux, Bayle and Voltaire, *inter alia*. For a writer such as Voltaire, Islam provided a critically useful counterpart to Christianity. It was a parallel religion, a familiar enemy, traditionally and easily denigrated; but some of the criticisms levelled against it were such that, if suitably expressed, they could rebound on Christian practices, and some of the things for which Christians praised their own faith might turn out to be more praiseworthy in the Muslim case. What these critical manoeuvres required was a decentering of Christianity, taking an external view of it in the same way that one might look at other religions.

The seventeenth century Enlightenment saw a shift in perceptions, but not before anti-Ottoman attitude culminated with Montesquieu's *Persian letters* (1721), as well as his more general works. The underlying assumption of the great majority of early modern writers in Western Europe was that Ottoman rule was predicated on oppression. The theory of despotism was revived and developed specifically in order to describe the power Ottoman sultans exerted. A number of writers provided their political investigations about the notion of despotism, culling from English and French political thinking.

The mid-eighteenth century saw a huge efflorescence in the use of the concept of despotism, which seemed for a while to become a fundamental category of political analysis. This was thanks to Charles-Louis de Secondat,

baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, and his *De l'esprit des lois* of 1748. Montesquieu stood in the broad tradition of Fénelon, Saint-Simon, and Boulainvilliers, conducting an intra-French argument about the constitutional role of the nobility and using the concept of despotism as a theoretical counterweight. If that was all he had done, the discussion of his theory of despotism could end at this point. But his treatise *De l'esprit des lois* was not just about France; it was a hugely ambitious attempt to set out a general theory of law and government, applicable to human beings everywhere.

With Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756) a flow of counter-Montesquieu writing began. Voltaire felt he had to counter a prejudice, namely, "the idea that the Ottoman government is an absurd government, described as "Despotic"; that all people are the Sultan's slaves, that they have no property, and that their life and their goods belong to their master" (397). Voltaire's main authority was Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli's *Stato militare dell'Imperio Romano* (1732), which countered the Western perception of Ottoman rulership as despotic. A more vociferous refutation of Montesquieu's premise came from Sir James Porter, who, having spent sixteen years as British Ambassador in Istanbul, published his *Observations on the Religion, Law, Government, and Manners of the Turks* in 1768.

As Malcolm avers (404), Simon-Nicolas Linguet, writing under a certain Hobbesian influence, contributed decisively to the counter-Montesquieu writing with his *Théorie des lois civiles, ou principes fondamentaux de la société* (1767), but the most uncompromising rejection of Montesquieu's theory laid bare in his book *Du plus heureux gouvernement, ou parallèle des constitutions politiques de l'Asie avec celles de l'Europe*. The final rejection of Montesquieu's theory of despotism was brought about by a scholar with a direct and deep knowledge of conditions in a so-called despotic empire: Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, whose book *Législation orientale, ouvrage dans lequel...* (1788) struck a fatal blow to Montesquieu's eastern despotism theory. As an Orientalist, Anquetil-Duperron refuted once and for all Montesquieu's claim that there was an absence of law in Eastern societies, disproving the rumour that the Sultan had absolute property rights over every other ownership. In Anquetil-Duperron's standpoint, the notion of Asiatic despotism had become subterfuge for Western interference in these parts of the world, and it was his moral duty to show what a falsehood it was. Anquetil-Duperron demonstrated the new paradigm at its height, questioning of the perception of non-Europeans as "barbarian people" or "inhuman," and putting on view a relativistic attitude to cultures that is surprisingly modern:

For all our knowledge, our sophisticated behaviour, our ‘civilization,’ if the Ancient Greeks were to reappear, they would treat us as barbarians. Would they be right? Well then, let us stop using these partisan terms. Let us believe that every people, even if it differs from us, can have a real value, and reasonable laws, customs, and opinions (407).

Malcolm’s final conclusion is that that non-European cultures were “not there to be beaten down [...] into conformity with complacent Western attitudes; often [they were] used *to shake things up, to provoke, to shame, to galvanize*” (417, italics added). Thus, Islam and the Ottomans enriched western thinking in general and western political thinking in particular:

early modern Europeans viewed the government and religion of their powerful Eastern neighbours with a whole gamut of attitudes, from fear and fierce disapproval to fascination, admiration, and envy. For many Western thinkers, the Ottoman Empire and Islam played an important part in their own mental world, not as mere ‘others’ to be put in their subordinate place, nor simply as threats to be conceptually isolated and neutralized, but as active ingredients to be worked into their theories (417).

Islam and the Ottomans in particular were rendered as useful enemies, of both importance and interest.

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