Chapter 8

The New Orientalism

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I would like to deal in this paper with a theme that has preoccupied me for some time, a theme relating not just to Turkey but to the broader Middle Eastern region and a theme that has been the focal point of attention of many scholars. I am talking, of course, about orientalism and thus about the connections between knowledge, power and control. As a strand of political, historical and cultural studies, orientalism so far has been concerned mainly with the relationships between the west and the east at the high point of imperialism in the late 19th century. On this basis, by comparing past attitudes and involvement with the present, it is not difficult to argue (as Edward Said and numerous others have done) that orientalism is alive and well at the end of the 20th century, if dressed up in slightly different clothes. My purpose in this paper is to examine these attitudes and involvements. The field in which such a study could be carried out is almost as broad as one would like to make it considering the scope of European control of distant and alien territories by the end of the 19th century. But my purpose is to examine these attitudes and involvements only as they relate to the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey and what lessons emerge as a consequence. The Ottoman Empire is additionally interesting because while the European powers succeeded in nibbling away at the periphery, until 1918 the Anatolian and Arab heartland eluded their attention.

In the first half of this paper, which is concerned with the old orientalism, I wish to refer to the second half of the 19th century and in particular the two decades after the Congress of Berlin in
1878. I will do my best to extrapolate from this period only those aspects of the relationship between Europeans and Ottomans that will illuminate my theme, in the hope that I can do so without distorting the overall picture.

The Russo-Ottoman war of 1877–78 and the Congress of Berlin which followed it together constituted the greatest single blow the Ottomans had suffered during a century of warfare, internal conflict and the piecemeal partition that inevitably followed losses on the battlefield. It underlined yet again the weaknesses of the Ottomans in dealing with predatory European powers. In the decades before this war the Ottomans had in fact sought to isolate the sources of this weakness and attend to them. Successive sultans and their ministers had agreed on the need for reform. Contrary to European opinion at the time the reform movement was genuine. At its core stood the desire to make the Ottoman state strong by introducing changes in critical sectors of government. The reform program was underpinned by principles which were regarded as just as important to the strength and cohesion of European societies. Absolute equality before the law was one and the notion of an overarching Ottoman identity another.

By and large the European governments tended to the view that the Ottomans were playing around and that their reforms—to quote a phrase frequently used at the time—were 'dust thrown in Europe's eyes to conceal uglier realities'. The European governments also talked of reform but their ideas were quite different. Their concerns were not intended for all, but for Christian minorities suffering under what the supporters of these groups liked to describe as the Ottoman yoke. To these troubled humanitarians the Muslim majority was invisible. In this sense attitudes after the Congress of Berlin were the same as before. Throughout the 19th century there always had been a special interest group to engage the interest of Europeans and their governments. If we were to single some of them out we would move from the Greeks to the Maronite Christians of Mount Lebanon to the Christians of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Christians of Chios and Crete and finally to the Armenian Christians as the century began to wind down. The exertions of the European powers on their behalf had led to independence for Greece, autonomy (and finally independence) for the Christians of what became Bulgaria, and autonomy for the Christians of Mt Lebanon. The
fate of the Armenians was destined to be different because by the 1880s any political gesture that carried even the whiff of autonomy met the wholesale resistance of the sultan and his ministers.

Whatever the narrow national interests that led to their involvement in the affairs of these communities, European governments argued that that there was no difference, anyway, between the pursuit of their own interests and the general interests of humanity and civilisation. They were running on parallel tracks. And in an age inflected with social Darwinism, manifest destiny and linked theories of moral and religious superiority, it was scarcely a problem to sell these policies. It was widely believed by the general public in England and elsewhere that Christians living under Muslim rule suffered as a matter of course—not just that they suffered but more importantly that only they suffered. The fact of their suffering made their deliverance a Christian duty if humanly possible. These attitudes were greatly compounded by the long and complicated relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Europe. By the 19th century there was a capacious ragbag of ideas about Muslims drawn largely from the 'medieval canon' into which one could delve for a ready made explanation of their behaviour or, as was more frequently the case, their perceived misbehaviour. In this fashion all the complexities surrounding a specific situation could be ignored or discarded in favour of earnestly made points about Islam and the immutably unchanging nature of the Turks.

That there was something especially visceral about European attitudes to the Ottoman Empire can scarcely be denied. Europeans never forgot the capture of Constantinople and perhaps still saw in their imagination the Ottoman camp fires outside the gates of Vienna. The Turks as Muslims were always much more of a serious threat than the Arabs as Muslims. For many Europeans they were not just different but uniquely different. Gladstone set them outside the normal processes of history altogether, describing them during the Bulgarian agitation of the 1870s as the one great anti-human specimen of humanity and deserving to be packed 'bag and baggage' out of Europe. In circumstances involving the fate of Christians in the Ottoman Empire, popular prejudice was like a tap waiting to be turned on: what Europeans already believed about the Turks and their religion quickly came into play, allowing interventionist policies not only to be justified
but made to appear morally proper.

In looking at the twenty years after the Congress of Berlin I would like to focus on the Armenian question as a framework for examining European attitudes towards Turkey. The congress and article 61 of the treaty with which it ended, obliging the Ottoman government to introduce reforms for the Armenians, set in motion a wheel which has not quite stopped rolling even now. My purpose here is not to discuss the rights and wrongs of the Armenian question but how Europeans and their governments chose to interpret it. Over what this reveals I then intend to put a template of present European attitudes towards Turkey and see how closely the two fit.

Perhaps we should look at this history as a series of variations. I cannot talk of a European view on the Armenian question because there was not one. The policies of European governments were based on expediency, an inherently fickle element which sometimes allowed them to work together but often drove them apart. So I will take the view of the British government and even here there was not one view but as many views as there were governments between the 1870s and the 1890s. The Armenian question was partly a by product of the overriding imperative of the British government throughout much of the 19th century, which was to block Russian influence wherever it might be encountered. Insofar as the Ottoman empire was concerned this meant preventing Christian communities from being used as a pretext for Russian meddling and intervention. After 1878 the weight of this policy fell on the Armenians. From the official British point of view reforms meant changes in the status of the Armenian community that would eliminate grievances the Russians might try to exploit. What the British sought over a long period of time, in pursuit of this policy, were administrative and judicial reforms predicated on an 'ethnographic' separation of the people in the Ottoman empire's six eastern vilayets. Given the focus of European attention today it is somewhat ironical that the only group specifically excluded from this arrangement, because of what were regarded as their wild and predatory habits, were the Kurds.

Influential sections of the British public followed the lead of the British government. Members of parliament, the clergy and the press were caught up in the movement for Armenian reforms. The Armenian Patriotic Association and similar movements lost
no opportunity to press their case at the Foreign Office. The pages of the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Nineteenth Century* were thrown open to articles on the plight of the Armenians while Canon MacColl and others—veterans of the Bulgarian agitation—wrote indefatigably on the connections between the nature of Islam and the sufferings of the Armenians. Close attention was paid to the workings of the Turkish system of justice and outrage frequently expressed when those accused by the Ottoman authorities of incendiary activity were put on trial and then imprisoned. The manic nature of the sultan and the general evils of 'Muhammadan government' were elaborated upon as the relationship between Muslims and Christians in the eastern provinces slowly broke down. Rather than look for explanations relating to the specific time and circumstances, why these things were happening in the late 19th century when they had never happened before, many in England made their judgments on the basis of what they believed to be immutably true of Islam and the Turks.

This sententious moralising and meddling was deeply resented by the sultan and his ministers. They accused the Europeans—the bearers of civilisation at the point of the gun or bayonet in the Congo, North Africa and India—of hypocrisy. The sultan frequently warned the European powers that if they continued to impose upon him reforms for which his people were not prepared, dire consequences would result. He and his ministers regarded the 'ethnographic' redistribution of the eastern provinces as a euphemism for autonomy. This the sultan made plain he would resist with all the power at his disposal.

The involvement of the European powers (particularly of Russia and Britain) had a powerful effect on the thinking of the Armenian revolutionary committees. They believed that through militant action they could provoke a situation which would shame one or more of the European powers into direct military intervention. Thus began a cycle of provocation and repression which lasted for almost twenty years.

The result of this tormented period of history was a breakdown of communal relations in the eastern provinces of the Ottoman empire with the sultan being blamed, as he had predicted, for the collapse of law and order. Horrific scenes ensued. The Armenians suffered terribly but the European powers did not intervene as the revolutionary committees had hoped. They could not agree on
intervention and lone intervention might well have sparked off the European conflict over Ottoman territories they all feared. In any case by the 1890s the principal powers involved, and especially Britain and Russia, had bigger fish to fry. Britain was more concerned with the ‘scramble for Africa’ than with the interminable frustrations of dealing with the Sublime Porte. Russia had a variety of immediate concerns: revolutionary threats to the dynasty and the security of its territories in the Far East among them. For both Russia and Britain the Armenians had lost their valency. Humanity and their own narrow interests had become abruptly unhitched.

What lessons can be drawn from these experiences? Modern Turkey is now passing into another significant stage of its development. It has recently had two changes in government, and in December 1995, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly to endorse the Customs Union with Turkey. The breaking down of borders around Turkey has created new opportunities and challenges, and in the meantime the government and the people are living through a number of internal problems of which the state of the economy and the situation in the south east can be counted as the most serious. These issues are all tied together.

I would suggest that there are strong parallels between the late 19th and late 20th centuries in the interplay between Europe and Turkey, confirming the judgment of scholars such as L. Carl Brown that in many respects the eastern question of a century ago is still being played out. There is the same predilection for playing favourites except it is now the Kurds, the much vilified predators of the 1890s, who are the prime objects of European sympathies. The same kind of committees once established in support of the Armenians now operate on their behalf. The same tactics are employed: the lobbying of foreign offices, of parliaments and the press. The same kind of outraged and almost reflexive judgments are passed on the decisions of the Turkish government and Turkish courts. The same demands for autonomy are made—demands that effectively Turkey should split itself in two—demands that European governments would undoubtedly find outrageous were they to be made of them (on behalf of the Basques or the Corsicans for example). There is the same moralising and encouragement of the Kurds without a unified strategy to achieve what is deemed desirable for them. There is
the same visibility of the minority and invisibility of the majority; the visibility of the Kurd in European consciousness and the invisibility of the kapaci (doorkeeper) or memur (bureaucrat) struggling to put enough bread and lentils on the table to feed his family. There are the same underlying orientalist assumptions that somehow Europe has the right to tell Turkey what to do—to dictate solutions to what is manifestly a complex situation. And we have to ask ourselves whether the outcome will not also be the same: that when the European powers have had enough of the Kurdish question (in Iraq as well as in Turkey) they will not abandon the Kurds as they have already been abandoned by a variety of governments who have involved themselves in their affairs.

The question here is not whether there is a Kurdish question. Turks are not blind to the realities in their own country. My own view is that at some point a Turkish government will have to grasp the nettle and deal with the aspirations of those who define themselves primarily as Kurds for the free expression of their culture. This is also (I believe) the view of Turkish political parties on the centre-left. One cannot tell people to be what they do not want to be. Having said that, I do not believe the demand for autonomy being made by the European parliament is attainable in the foreseeable future or, bearing in mind what ethnic politics have brought to the Balkans, even desirable. In any case the solution—whatever it is—will have to evolve. The issue is not one of 'Kurdish rights' in the abstract. The Kurdish question involves questions of civil society and democracy; questions of economic and political stability; of confidence in leaders, parties and political institutions; of identity (and given the fusion of ethnic backgrounds in Turkey I am always puzzled by the clear demarcation Europeans are able to make between Kurds and Turks); of demographics; of centre-periphery relationships; of questions of historical consciousness; of feudal-tribal relations among the Kurds themselves and the historical underdevelopment of Turkey's eastern provinces; of public opinion and what the public will tolerate. If we accept that all of this is necessary to 'understand' the Kurdish question, then I would argue that the Kurdish question is rarely understood in Europe or elsewhere in any real sense.

But one has to go further and ask first whether Europe actually wants to understand the general picture and if not why not. Has
human rights in Turkey become a convenient point of leverage that serves other purposes? One has to ask why the western media or for that matter the Eurosocialists, singling out the Turkish government and the military for blame over what is undeniably a mess in the south east, have invariably underplayed or skated over the attacks by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) on civilian targets in the same area. Anyone who has lived in Turkey will know how terrible these attacks have been and how even the strongest critics of the government and the military draw the line between Kurdish rights and the PKK. Why have the individuals and missions coming back from Turkey with horror stories of what the military has done in the south east—the equivalent of the 19th century humanitarians but now German Greens and British trade unionists—failed to visit the villages which have been the sites of PKK massacres? Why are screeds written about the military and bland paragraphs about the PKK? Why, in short, is there such a lack of balance? As it was, only when the PKK transferred its activities to European cities did European governments take fright and declare it a terrorist organisation.

It is within this context that the removal of the parliamentary immunity of six MPs as a prelude to their prosecution on charges of involvement with the PKK should surely be examined. They were subsequently imprisoned. In a 1995 hearing a Turkish court upheld the appeals made by two of the MPs while dismissing four others. The case has caused outrage across Europe without, it seems to me, the circumstances being given careful consideration. In similar circumstances, if a prima facie case was established, I do not believe a European government would have acted any differently. The Turkish state is locked in a conflict with an organisation which has effectively declared war on the state. In the past decade more than 18,000 people have died in this conflict, many of them Kurds and many of them women and children slaughtered by the PKK. Involvement with such an organisation obviously becomes an extremely serious matter and no government in these circumstances could make exceptions for members of parliament. If the evidence was compelling, the government had no option but to prosecute, as inexpedient as even Turks regarded this action considering the inevitable reaction in Europe. Insofar as parliamentary immunity is concerned there cannot be a country in the world where it is sacrosanct. It is removed frequently as the preliminary to
prosecuting errant MPs. If it was the principle that was at stake I do not recollect committees being formed to defend the rights of Hasan Mezarci whose parliamentary immunity was also removed but over an entirely different matter. If the basis of European outrage was alleged shortcomings in the evidence I do not recollect anywhere seeing the evidence properly scrutinised. Indeed, given the cultural, linguistic and judicial problems and the fact that the findings of a judge in any tribunal are always open to question I wonder whether the evidence could be properly examined by an outside party. There would always be cries of foul. What is striking about this case is the inevitability of the European reaction and the way it again demonstrates how knowledge about Turkey is not so much disseminated as deployed. There is a clear historical pattern here—another example of Europeans making Manichean judgments about Turkey in a way that is very reminiscent of the external world’s dealings with the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and its attitudes towards Islam and Islamic societies over a much broader period. The west still has its heroes and villains—one is tempted to say that for reasons of control it must have them. I believe essentially orientalist assumptions still govern the external reaction to a broad slate of issues involving Turkey from the charges brought against the six MPs to the military incursion in early 1995 into northern Iraq. I do not recollect any of the underlying issues being argued out any more logically or clearly than were points of contention between Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. In other words, the template fits almost exactly.

I cannot develop the argument to the extent I would like in this brief paper but I would venture the view that orientalism is still very much part of the European approach to Turkey. Its contours have changed. The nineteenth century for Europe was one of unashamed self-confidence. Europeans had no hesitation in expressing their belief in the superiority of their civilisation over all others. They set the standards by which others should be judged. The rhetoric has changed now that cultural relativism must be hidden—I certainly believe it is still there—but I would suggest that there are striking parallels in the relationship between Europe and Turkey and Europe and the Ottoman Empire of a century ago. There are the same ambivalences in the European attitude towards Turkey, the same vested interests hiding behind moral outrage and the same reluctance to admit Turkey into the European community until its standards of justice
and government meet European norms. There is the same holding at arm's length coupled with the acknowledgement that Turkey is too important to ignore. And on the Turkish side I think there is the same resentment if not anger at European double standards and the posturing of European politicians when it is the Turks, however they are ethnically defined, who are saddled with the practical difficulties of solving these problems.

We have a lot to learn from history and no relationship between two countries can be regarded as complete when the deeper cultural significance is ignored. Turkey is not understood in this country beyond marginal references to Gallipoli and the occasional article about Cappadocia or Ephesus. The level of ignorance about the Middle Eastern region generally at universities has to be experienced to be believed. The Ottoman empire and the development of modern Turkey are almost absent from school and university curricula. It is impossible for this ignorance not to percolate through the entire culture and ultimately for orientalist myths and what is essentially an orientalist way of looking at Turkey and the broader Middle Eastern region not to prevail. If there is to be a starting point for a more constructive interpretation of what is happening in Turkey it must be within the school and university system. I think it important for the sake of the Turkish community living in Australia as well as for the broader relationship between Australia and Turkey that these questions of culture and history be given greater importance than hitherto.