

Western Disorientations: The Vanishing East of South America and Eastern Europe

Gražina Bielousova

Duke University

Durham, United States

gb26@duke.edu

— In this paper I utilise Edward Said's framework of Orientalism in order to investigate how the regions that the European explorers have mistakenly or negligently identified in their imaginaries as "the East" are brought into the colonial order through an *a priori* assumption of their inferiority to the West. I turn to South America and Eastern Europe as the two frontiers which make these operations visible. Through the analysis of primary sources such as travel journals and letters from Spanish explorers and conquistadors during the age of encounters, as well as the writings the English and French travellers made during their visits to Eastern Europe during the Enlightenment, I demonstrate how the Western European Orientalist imaginaries remain persistent through the ages despite the geographical explorations and geopolitical changes, and instead of disappearing, migrate to create the new orients as the realms of European otherness.

Keywords: Orientalism, Eastern Europe, South America, travel writing, colonialism, age of explorations.

Introduction

In 1978, when Edward Said penned his famous definition of Orientalism that the Western rhetorical imagination has constructed as “the basic distinction between East and West <...> the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on”¹ he was thinking primarily of the British and French “Orient”: the Near East, China, India and, to a lesser extent, Japan. He would have scarcely dreamed that the application of this concept was going to expand far beyond the Western discursive practices relating to the East in a classical sense to include the regions and contexts such as Eastern Europe, Central Asia, or the Balkans, to name but a few. Critiques, amendments, refinements, and expansions notwithstanding, Said’s *Orientalism* remains a bulwark of post-colonial and critical theory for understanding what “the East” represents in Western imagination and how it structures power relations.

Orientalism has opened up space to ask what happens when Westerners mistakenly think themselves to be in “the East” and invoke Orientalist tropes to describe what they encounter, only to later find out their geographical blunder. In this paper I will offer some insights into precisely such situations, when the West European lore of the East is unleashed on populations, continents, and regions that are neither geographically nor culturally akin to the European construct of the East, yet are forcibly brought into that figment of imaginative geography. To do so, I will examine the Spanish accounts from the era of Spain’s colonial expansion into South America (16–17th centuries) as well as the British and French travel writings about what will be designated as Eastern Europe during the (post-) Enlightenment (18–19th centuries). The texts examined below represent but a small sample of the writings available from these time periods, but they are perhaps the most explicit and direct of all of them, and vividly exemplify the discursive patterns of the Western rhetorical imagination.

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979, p. 5.

Proto-Orientalism² in the Colonisation of South America

Separated by oceans, time periods, hegemonic powers, and by every other imaginable marker, South American Indigenous people and inhabitants of continental Europe northeast of the Elbe River have only one easily discernible commonality: when the European explorers ventured into their lands, they were looking for the East, and because they were looking for it, they were determined to find it. In 1492, when Christopher Columbus set sail on the Santa Maria, his explicit goal was to reach India via a Westward route³, which would avoid both the dangers of travelling by land and the competition of the Portuguese, who by that point had circumnavigated Africa and thus were able to reach the coveted trade destinations in Asia⁴. In a tri-partite division of Columbus' world in which no continents besides Europe, Asia, and Africa existed⁵, the newly encountered peoples were predestined to be “Indians”.

In Columbus' imagination, being an “Indian” was not clearly differentiated from being a Muslim, even though he seemed to make a distinction between the “Indians” who were willing to accept the Christian faith and the Moors, who rejected it and thus were expelled from Spain. In fact, Clayton and Lantigua see Spanish explorations as an extension of the Reconquista, fuelled by the same fusion of missionary and protocapitalist ideology⁶. It is within this framework, of expanding the domain of Christian faith as represented by the Spanish monarchs, that Columbus set out in search of India, whose “Prince, called Great Can, which in our language signifies King of Kings, <...> had sent to Rome soliciting instructors who might teach him our holy faith”⁷. The Pope’s refusal to instruct the Prince

² I choose to use the term proto-orientalism here since both Edward Said and Lisa Lowe, the eminent scholars of Orientalism, use the term to denote systemic production of knowledge (even if it is irregular; as Lowe points out), that is rooted in the rise of human sciences. While prior discursive practices were utilised in the creation of “oriental studies”, and they betrayed the same colonial logic, they lacked the hegemonic knowledge-power dynamic that Said attributes to Orientalism.

³ In his Journal, addressed to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, he writes, “[you] directed that I should not proceed by land to the East, as is customary, but by a Westerly route, in which direction we have hitherto no certain evidence that any one has gone”.

⁴ Cf. Lawrence A. Clayton and David M. Lantigua, “Introduction”, in: *Bartolomé de las Casas and the Defense of Amerindian Rights: A Brief History with Documents*, 2020, pp. 1–28.

⁵ For example, see Fra Mauro’s map (1450), considered the ultimate representation of the West European cartographic knowledge before Columbus’ voyage.

⁶ Lawrence A. Clayton and David M. Lantigua, *op. cit.*

⁷ Christopher Columbus, “Journal”, in: *The History Guide: Lectures on Early History*, [online], 2009 [cited 05-05-2021], <http://www.historyguide.org/earlymod/columbus.html>.

obliged Columbus to voyage East, to fulfil this evangelistic imperative. The perceived receptiveness of the first “Indians” to the Gospel, as well as Columbus’ estimate that they will make “good servants”, were regarded as affirmations that he arrived at the right destination, that the islands were, indeed, the new Eastern-quia-Indian frontier.

While Columbus’ geographical mistake was clarified by Amerigo Vespucci, who realised the discovery of a new continent, and in 1507 Martin Waldseemüller reconceptualised the world by incorporating the fourth land mass into the world map⁸, the “Asiatic” tropes used to describe the Indigenous people of the Caribbean islands and what would become “South America” persisted. When describing the locals on Cozumel Island, Vespucci himself spoke of them as Asians: “they are not very good-looking, because they have broad faces, so that they would seem Tartar-like.”⁹

Yet no one cemented the proto-Orientalist tropes into the early modern discourse about Indigenous South Americans more adroitly than Hernan Cortès, the conquistador of Mexico. In his descriptions of the religious practices of the natives, he eclipsed them into Western imaginaries of Muslims, thus effectively rendering them the new savage enemy to be obliterated:

Every day, before they undertake any work, they burn incense in the said mosques (*mezquitas*) and sometimes they sacrifice their own persons, some hacking the body with knives; and they offer up to their idols all the blood which flows, sprinkling it on all sides of those mosques, at other times throwing it up towards the heavens, and practicing many other kinds of ceremonies, so that they undertake nothing without first offering sacrifice there.¹⁰

⁸ See “Universalis Cosmographia Secundum Ptholomaei Traditionem et Americi Vespuccii Aliorū[m]que Lustrationes”, in: Library of Congress Geography and Map Reading Room, [online], 2014 [cited 05-05-2021], <https://www.loc.gov/rr/geogmap/waldexh.html>.

⁹ Amerigo Vespucci, “Account of His First Voyage, 1497”, in: *Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook*, [online], 2021 [cited 05-05-2021], <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1497vespucci-america.asp>.

¹⁰ Hernan Cortes, “First Letter”, in: *American Historical Association’s Letters from Hernan Cortes*, [online], 2021, [cited 05-05-2021], <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/the-history-of-the-americas/the-conquest-of-mexico/letters-from-hernan-cortes/cortes-describes-the-country>.

The inculcation of the Indigenous South Americans into the “Moorish” discourse in the contemporary Spanish context did more than merely echo the initial geographic mistake. Such designations opened the doors for Spain’s political expansion via displacement, enslavement, appropriation of land, and other measures, used during the Reconquista against Muslims. In turn, naval, military, and colonial administrative prowess sharpened in the colonies would return to Europe and be used in new attacks against Muslims there. Cortès himself, after his return to Europe, participated in Roman Emperor Charles V’s attempted conquest of Algiers¹¹.

Such proto-Orientalist discourse that surrounded the Indigenous people persisted until 1735, when Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae* was published, and in which he formally distinguished four races of people – Europeans, Asians, Americans, and Africans, in that hierarchical order. In the two centuries that it took for human taxonomy to align itself with the newly found continents, the discussions on the origins and proper designation of Native Americans excited passionate scholarly debates. Henry Francis Wright, an early twentieth century American scholar of international law, brought to the attention of academic audiences a famous (and heated) debate among two Dutch intellectuals, Hugo Grotius and Johan de Laet, which both represented and shaped the dominant views on Native Americans in the middle of the seventeenth century¹².

Grotius, a distinguished political theorist and jurist, held that Americans mostly hailed from Northern Europe, with some regions inhabited by Ethiopian descendants, and some by Chinese. Meanwhile, in a detailed rebuttal of Grotius’ view, de Laet, the director of the Dutch West India Company at the time, argued that the true origin of Americans was Scythian, that is Eastern European and Central Asian. The question of origin for both men was not just a matter of history, but more importantly, a matter of proper classification and placement in the changing schemata of the colonially known world. Within the Saidian framework, the question of classification can be seen as a debate on the degree and type of colonial difference, since at that time the Netherlands were actively establishing

¹¹ Randall Ray Loudamy, *Cortes after the Conquest of Mexico: Constructing Legacy in New Spain*, 2013, pp. 141–142.

¹² Herbert F. Wright, “Origin of American Aborigines: A Famous Controversy”, in: *Catholic Historical Review* 3, 1917.

colonies in the Caribbean and the South American mainland; thus, this was not merely a theoretical question, but an urgent colonial administrative matter. What remained certain though, was that despite the manner in which the natives were orientalised, they were being coerced into the nascent theories of scientific racism via an already established racial hierarchy, in which they remained subject to European colonising powers.

Orientalism in Inventing Eastern Europe

Right around the time when Linnaeus would settle the Native American debate and affix them above the Africans but below the Asians, all of whom were beneath the Europeans, a new Oriental frontier was being discovered within the boundaries of Europe itself. As Larry Wolff notes, during the period spanning from the Renaissance – the golden age of Southern Europe – to the Enlightenment, the European centres of power underwent a radical shift. With the rise of new colonial and industrial centres in Britain, France, and the Netherlands, Europe reoriented itself so that the old South/North divide became obsolete, and the new dynamic of East/West emerged¹³. In his field-defining study *Europe (In Theory)*, Roberto Dainotto also highlights that Eurocentrism, which emphasises Europe's self-containment and independence of its identity from external entities, was also being birthed at that time, and required that the political theorists articulate Europe without referencing the world outside its borders. Such self-containment, in turn, resulted in the search for internal others, which became “Europe, but also the negative part of it”¹⁴.

Even as the Enlightenment saw the codification and systemisation of the European lore, imaginations, and fantasies of the East into “Oriental studies”, and financed expeditions and knowledge production about the East, properly so defined, it also discovered its internal Orient: the Russian Empire. What lured Western travellers to Europe’s internal East was their insatiable desire for the knowledge of the Other, of the mythical Scythians and Sarmatians living next door, of the proverbial barbarians at the gate. This appetite was further encouraged by geopolitical developments such as the rise of the Russian Empire under Peter I, the splitting of the

¹³ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 5.

¹⁴ Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (In Theory)*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, p. 4.

Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth by the European imperial powers, and perhaps most enticingly, Russian victory over Napoleon's army.

Much like how the inhabitants of the “West Indies” were predestined to be Orientals – despite what the travellers have actually found there – those who would become Eastern Europeans were fated to be Eastern. As Wolff candidly observes, “the Enlightenment had to invent Western and Eastern Europe together”¹⁵. Since East in the Western imagination had already been established as the realm of “Oriental despotism, Oriental splendour, cruelty, sensuality”¹⁶, the Westerners travelled to what used to be “Northern kingdoms” now in search of the Eastern excesses, and always found them, if not in splendour; then in cruelty. After the final Linnaean division of *Homo Sapiens* into six discrete human categories, they also travelled there fully expecting to find the inhabitants who would exhibit the features ascribed by the Swedish biologist ascribed to Asians – “sooty, melancholic, rigid, <...> severe, haughty, [and] covetous”¹⁷, and they never failed to find them, too.

The desire to find the Orient in Eastern Europe was so deeply ingrained that the Orient was recognisable from afar, even without setting foot on the land itself. One Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, travelling to Saint Petersburg to visit her sister in 1841, records her first impressions of the city from the boat thusly:

The mosque-like form of the Greek churches – the profusion of cupola and minaret – with treble domes painted blue with silver stars, or green with gold stars, and the various gilt spires, starting at intervals from the low city, and blazing like flaming swords in the cold rays of a Russian October setting sun, gave it an air of Orientalism little in accordance with the gloomy, grey mantle of snow clouds, in which all this glitter was shrouded.¹⁸

Seen in the sheen of gilded “cupola and minarets”, the Russian Empire cannot be conceived in any other way but as Oriental, especially as one travels from its Europeanised capital into its depths, where its true nature can be discerned.

¹⁵ Larry Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Edward Said, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, 2008, p. 32.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Eastlake, *Letters from the Shores of the Baltic*, London: J. Murray, 1841, p. 35.

Such determination to find the Orient in Eastern Europe can also be found in *Ten Years Exile* by French intellectual Madame de Staële, who recounts her travels after she has been deported from France by Napoleon's orders. While observing the same "Oriental" churches, clothes, and manners, she is most struck by the character of the local people:

I can readily believe that they are terrible when their passions are provoked; and as they have no education, they know not how to curb their violence. As another result of this ignorance, they have few principles of morality, and theft is very frequent in Russia as well as hospitality; they give as they take, according as their imagination is acted upon by cunning or generosity, both of which excite the admiration of this people. In this mode of life there is a little resemblance to savages.¹⁹

To ascertain that either of the travellers saw the Russian Empire of the early nineteenth century as the true Orient would be too strong of a statement; they rather saw and experienced it through an Oriental lens, which coloured and shaped their perceptions. This is especially pertinent to the European part of Russia where the "European" and "Asiatic" aspects shifted at every turn like glass shards in a kaleidoscope, and where travellers found themselves to be in "the curious space between civilisation and barbarism"²⁰.

This barbarism or, as Madame de Staël records, savagery takes a specific form of excess, moody and unpredictable bouts of violence, largesse motivated not by charity but by whim, and a near absence of rationality. She, as well as the travellers who preceded and followed her²¹, saw it to be the essence of the Russian character and, by extension of the East European character. Whether these characters can be truly reformed, or only masked by Western education, remained for these travellers a debatable issue.

In fact, the advancements of Russian Empire (and thus that of the entire Eastern Europe) and its pro-Western reforms which threatened to erase the discernible internal boundary between East and West in Europe, were perceived as the most dangerous path in the development of Russia. Upon hearing of an imminent freeing of the serfs and the subsequent land

¹⁹ Germaine de Staël, *Ten Years Exile*, Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2007, p. 168.

²⁰ Larry Wolff, *op. cit.* p. 23.

²¹ Cf. Giacomo Casanova's *Memoirs*, John Parkinson's *A Tour of Russia, Siberia, and the Crimea 1792–1794*, Charles H. Pearson *Russia by a Recent Traveler*, et al.

reforms in Russia, the English intellectual Charles Henry Pearson set out to explore the country before the changes took place so that he could report to his fellow compatriots what these Western-like reforms may have meant for both Russia and Western Europe. In a series of letters written for *Continental Review* in the fall of 1858, he offered as even-handed of an appraisal as a Westerner was capable of, concluding with remarks about the possibility of a pan-Slavic alliance in Eastern Europe and beyond.

In this last letter, he fully articulates what was at stake, should such an entity be formed: “It is the certainty that such an empire, under Slavenophilic guidance, would form a mass of compact barbarism capable of counterpoising the whole civilisation of the West”²². As such, the Russian Empire with its wandering Kalmyks, drunken and vagrant peasants, boyars given to whim and violence, desolate forests and marshes inhabited by semi-savage locals clad in sheep skin and wood bark shoes, quite despite its reforms, advances, and progress, remained Europe’s internal antithesis, never fully European.

Conclusion

Edward Said remarked that Orientalism was first and foremost a hierarchical power relationship, which centred Western Europe as the knowledge producer, subjugating those whom its colonial gaze considered Orient. Therefore the fact that Western explorers mistook the American continent for India or invented the East within their own subcontinent in the large scheme of colonial logics did not matter. Their destiny as Western subjects subsumed into the hegemonic knowledge production of the West was sealed as soon as the first ships or carriages took off, if not earlier; when a wanton Western gaze turned towards the Other.

To claim that the Indigenous people of South America and East Europe were subject to exactly the same fate would mean to disrespect both contexts. They entered the colonial field of vision at different times and under different regimes. While the native peoples of South America have been subjected to slavery, genocide, violence, disease, and starvation – to the point of the obliteration of the entire tribes – East Europeans have

²² Charles Henry Pearson, *Russia by a Recent Traveler*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1857, p. 147.

been spared the direct effects of Western colonialism. Instead, they experienced a geopolitical hegemony which, especially in the case of smaller ethnic groups, determined who was fungible in the powerplay of empires, nation states, and regimes. Even though East Europeans are racialised by proxy when they are seen through an Oriental lens, this racialisation still happens within the boundaries of whiteness, which signifies the privilege of full humanity; in the meanwhile, debates over the placement of South Americans on the human spectrum formed the heart of theological and scientific deliberations.

What this paper points to is that Orientalism as Europe's civilising hegemony was perfected and worked out in the global arena, even in the least likely parts of the world – such as South America – and then translated into such a fine-tuned instrument of racialisation that it could invent difference even within Europe itself.

Received —— 2022 01 18

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Santrauka

Pasimetė tarp Rytų: vakariečių žvilgsnis į Pietų Ameriką ir Rytų Europą

Gražina Bielousova

Reikšminiai žodžiai: orientalizmas, Rytų Europa, Pietų Amerika, kelionių literatūra, kolonializmas, atradimų amžius.

Straipsnyje, pasitelkdama Edwardo Saido pasiūlytą orientalizmo sampratą, analizuoju, kaip kraštai, kuriuos Vakarų tyrinėtojai per klaidą ar aplaidumą palaikė „Rytais“ ir įtraukė į savo rytiškų vaizdinių visovę, per ši retorinį manevrą buvo įtraukti ir į kolonijinės pasaulio santvarkos hierarchiją, kurioje jie buvo subordinuoti Vakarams. Du regionai, kuriuose galima pastebėti būtent tokią ivykių seką, – Pietų Amerika ir Rytų Europa. Analizuodama pirminius šaltinius, tokius kaip kelionių žurnalai ir ispanų keliautojų bei užkariautojų laiškai iš Amerikos užkariavimo laikotarpio, britų ir prancūzų keliautojų užrašai iš kelionių į Rytų Europą Apšvietos laikotarpiu, atskleidžiu, kaip Vakaruose vyравę orientalistiniai vaizdiniai išliko gana stabilūs, nepaisant laiko tékmés, naujai atrastų kraštų ar geopolitinių pokyčių. Šie vaizdiniai ne tik kad neišnyko, nepaisant pokyčių, bet ir migravo kartu su keliautojais, kurdamai naujus „rytiškus“ kraštus, kuriuose vakariečiai atrasdavo savo priešingybes.