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How significant was the development of overseas empires in shaping the character of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century?

To an observer in 1815, it might have looked like imperialism was in retreat, as Blanning points out[1]. The French had been deprived of almost all their colonies, apart from the sugar islands and some other small possessions; the Dutch ones only survived thanks to British support; the vast Spanish and Portuguese empires had broken away and were asserting their independence. Only the British, who undeniably ruled the waves, could project their military and commercial power over the globe, and they seemed to be more interested in trade than in conquest. Yet the East India Company was steadily expanding its area of control; the French, after a taste of Egypt, were looking across the Mediterranean Sea at Northern Africa, and Russia was weighing up its Ottoman neighbour. In this age of scientific revolution, the world had become an object to study, to survey, as attested by the creation of geographical and ethnographical societies (of which Abbé Dubois[2] is a typical product); an objectification which Said would call "Orientalism"[3], and which would find an echo in the arts. It is therefore by looking in parallel at the development of colonial empires and the cultural – that is, scientific and artistic – responses that it becomes possible to analyse the significance of imperialism in shaping the European mind in the first half of the nineteenth century.

[1] Blanning, *Short Oxfort History of Europe: the Nineteenth Century*, "The European Empires in 1815", pp.218-224.
[2] Dubois, tr. Beauchamp, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*.
[3] Said, E.W. *Orientalism*, "Introduction", pp.1-28.

By 1815, only Britain had any significant colonies, mostly Canada, India and Australia, as well as quite a few outposts, for instance in South Africa, yet colonisation was not a priority; protecting trade and ensuring naval supremacy were far more important. Moreover, as Woodward underlines[4], the ideologies of free trade and utilitarianism, of Smith and Bentham, saw colonies as economical burdens. Australia was seen as a destination for convicts and Canada only as a source of furs and lumber. However, the East India Company was steadily expanding in India, to bring law and order without which trade was unprofitable[5]. Deprived of its European markets during the Napoleonic wars, Great Britain had developed its exports and imports with India: later, between 1834 and 1856, Indian exports increased by 188 percents and its imports by 227 percents[6]! Expanding trade was also the reason behind the "gunboat diplomacy" used in the First Opium war with China, in 1839[7]. As Blanning and Hobsbawm both argue, the rise of financial establishments with surplus capital to invest in foreign ventures also explains this steady expansion (although it would really boom later in the century)[8]. In addition, the push for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery would imply increasing involvement in foreign territories.

In Europe the Great Powers were faced with the "Ottoman question", the Muslim empire at its doors. The Greek rebellion which started in 1821[9] was seen as a clash of civilisations between the cradle of Western culture and the barbarous Islam. The decline

[4] Woodward, L., *The Age of Reform: 1815-1870*, Book III, Ch. II "The Colonies", pp.365-369.
[5] Ibid, Book III, Ch.III, "India", pp.403-406.
[6] Ibid, p.406.
[7] Blanning, p.221.
[8] Hobsbawm, Ch. 9, "Towards an Industrial World", pp.213-217.
[9] *The Age of Reform*, pp.213-221.

of the Ottoman empire, with the challenge of Mehmet Ali in Egypt, was also an opportunity for the Western powers to insinuate themselves into its affairs, with France trying to gain influence in Egypt and Lebanon, Russia in Turkey in the 1830s and 1840s[10]. The French were also confronting the Muslim world in Algeria; in 1827, using as a pretext an alleged insult of the dey of Algiers to the French consul, they invaded the city[11]. As Boime stresses out, Charles X also used this North African expedition as a diversion to domestic problems, appealing to the spirit of the Crusades and casting himself as a Christian king fighting the piracy of the Moor. The next regime, initially reluctant, soon bowed to military and commercial pressure and, disguising its enterprise as a civilising mission, pursued full-blown colonisation, despite British opposition. The system created by the Congress of Vienna had turned Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia and France into reluctant allies, which all had their own strategic goals. Since expansion was impossible in Europe, they were all looking at other possibilities, while carefully gauging the reactions of the others.

Said sees in Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 the start of modern Orientalism: inspired by Volney's *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie*, Napoleon, his army and his retinue of French academics set out on a military and fact-finding mission, not only to dominate Egypt but also to know it, to survey it (which would result in the encyclopaedic *Description de l'Egypte*, published between 1809 and 1828)[12]. As Anwar Abdel Malek asserts: "the Orient and Orientals [are considered by Orientalism] as an 'object' of study, stamped with otherness [...]. This 'object' of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-

[10] *The Age of Reform*, pp.233-240.
[11] Boime, *Art in an Age of Counterrevolution*, pp.231-233.
[12] Quoted in *Orientalism*, pp.76-88.

participating, [...], above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself"[13]. As Hobsbawm underlines[14], the revolution age saw a dramatic rise in the number of scientists, scholars and the output of science, especially for the social sciences such as philology, history or ethnology, although everything was measured against the European standard, considered as inherently superior. Jean-Antoine Dubois (1765-1848), in the preface of his scholarly study of Indian mores[15], makes it clear: "This colossal dominion, which a European Government has succeeded in establishing in India [...] has filled the people of India with admiration, and has fully convinced the Powers of Asia of the great superiority of Europeans in every way[...]"; this dominion was beneficial to the natives since it delivered them from their former barbarous rulers, and "educated" them. As he says: "it struck me that a faithful picture of the wickedness and incongruities of polytheism and idolatry would by its very ugliness help greatly to set off the beauties and perfections of Christianity". Of course, biased studies would themselves reinforce prejudices towards the "Orient".

The scientific – supposedly detached – observer is never very far from the voyeur: the Orient, exotic, primitive and sensual, was sure to excite the imagination of contemporary artists. Delacroix's *Scenes from the Massacres of Chios*[16] depicts the dark and lustful Turk dragging a naked white woman, a theme of ravishment which he repeats in *Greece Still Standing above the Ruins of Missolonghi*[17]; the erotic victimisation is

[13] *Orientalism*, p.97.
[14] *The Age of Revolution*, Ch.15, "Science", pp.336-358.
[15] Dubois, tr. Beauchamp, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, pp.1-13.
[16] Eugène Delacroix, *Scenes from the Massacres at Chios*, 1824, Musée du Louvre, Paris. In Boime, p.201.
[17] Delacroix, *Greece Still Standing above the Ruins of Missolonghi*, 1826, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux. In Boime, p.214.

flagrant when this work is compared to Vryzakis' painting, where women die fighting[18]. In the Orientalists' representation, we find the male themes: primitive virility, barbarous brutality; and the female ones: sensuality and submissiveness. In Canto VI of Don Juan[19], Byron, whose works were suffused with the Orient, describes the harem and the "Odalisque" Dudù (Oda meaning chamber in Turkish) in words which echo paintings like Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*[20], Guérard's *Life in a Seraglio*[21] or Gleyre's *Egyptian Modesty*[22] and *Women of the Harem*[23]. In Shelley's "Hellas", in the dialogue between the Turk Mahmud and Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, Mahmud praises his companion's wisdom, but adds: "I honour thee, and would be what thou art / Were I am not what I am", and foresees the impeding defeat of the Turks, despite their manly impetuosity[24]. This theme of doomed virility is also found in Decamps' *Hadji-Bey, Chief of Police in Smyrna Making His Rounds*[25], with the troops blindly following their arrogant leader, or Delacroix's *Combat of the Giaour and the Pasha*[26] (inspired by a poem by Byron), where the two fighters and their horses seemed to be locked in a mortal embrace.

To the Romantics the Orient was deeply appealing, since its exoticism and sensuality could be opposed to rationalism and bourgeois values; many travelled there, in

[18] Theodoros Vryzakis, *The Break from Missolonghi*, ca.1858, National Pinakothek and Alexander Soutzos Museum, Athens. In Boime, p.218.
[19] *Poems of Byron, Keats and Shelley*, pp.312-322.
[20] Delacroix, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, 1834, Musée du Louvre, Paris. In Boime, p.360.
[21] Eugène Guérard, *Life in a Seraglio*, 1853, Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. In Boime, p.366.
[22] Charles Gleyre, *Egyptian Modesty*, 1838-1839, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne. In Boime, p.373.
[23] Gleyre, *Women of the Harem*, 1838-1839, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne. In Boime, p.373.
[24] *Poems by Byron, Keats and Shelley*, pp.729-734.
[25] Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, *Hadji-Bey, Chief of Police in Smyrna Making His Rounds*, 1831, Wallace Collection, London. In Boime, p.371.
[26] Delacroix, *Combat of the Giaour and the Pasha*, 1835, Musée du Petit Palais, Paris.

the same way as eighteenth-century artists went to Rome: Byron went to Albania and to Greece, where he died in Missolonghi in 1824; Théophile Gautier travelled through Greece, Russia, Italy in the 1840s; Nerval went to Egypt. Delacroix, Vernet travelled to North Africa. Some did not go there, but imagined it based on the accounts of others, like Victor Hugo in *Les Orientales*, or Ingres in his painting: *Odalisque with Slave*[27]. In the literature of the time, the Orient, the Empire is often there, at the periphery. For instance, in *Vanity Fair* (published in 1848), it is the source of Joseph Sedley's fortune, the place where Dobbins retires from the world, the birthplace of Miss Swartz "the rich wooly-haired mulatto from St.Kitt's"[28], of Sambo the black servant. As Said notes[29], in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, the plantation in Antigua is also out there, crucial yet outside the scope, as if part of a collective unconscious mind, an "Id" in need of control and restraint.

In 1850, the Crimean War had not yet happened; the Scramble for Africa had not started, nor was the Great Game opposing the Great Powers in Asia. All the major events linked with colonisation were still lying ahead, but the ideological foundations, as we have seen, were already there: the sciences and the arts had dreamt up the Orient, a powerfully attractive vision of lands and peoples waiting, yearning to be explored, analysed, and possessed – in both intellectual and physical senses – by a confidently superior Europe. The opening up of the world through technology and trade may have spawned "Orientalism", but this ideology would justify and inspire colonialism.

[27] Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with Slave*, 1839-1840, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge. In Boime, p.381.
[28] *Vanity Fair*,
[29] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, quoted in *Beginning Theory*, pp.200-201.

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