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**The French Colonial Enterprise, A Case Study on the Discourse of Empire:
Inspired by the writings of Tocqueville, Said, and Gordon**

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Abstract

This essay explores the writings of Edward Said, Daniel Gordon, and Alexis de Tocqueville; each of these historians reflected on the concept of colonialism and its possible social, cultural, and political ramifications. Said is remembered as a prominent post-colonialist, and this is reflected in his criticism of European exoticization of the East in his book *Orientalism*. European notions of superiority, matched with a desire for intellectual accumulation of other cultures' knowledge, propelled colonialism forward in the nineteenth century. Alexis de Tocqueville's accounts on France's colonial mission challenge Said's notion of European superiority; Tocqueville was a civil servant, politician, and historian who held mixed feelings towards French colonial efforts. Tocqueville was concerned with French intentions and efficiency; it was important for colonizers to try to understand the people they sought to rule. Daniel Gordon, a critic of postcolonial scholarship, tries to dissect the language of colonial discourse employed by intellectuals like Said and Tocqueville, highlighting the contested space of reflections on colonialism in the twenty-first century. This work synthesizes the writings of these three intellectuals to craft a coherent understanding of colonialism, "civilization," and "Orientalism" concerning European interactions with non-Europeans.

Introduction to the Discourse Surrounding Colonialism, Orientalism, and Civilization

In modern historiography, the practice of colonialism (in particular, European colonialism) has been the focus of criticism. Most scholars believe that their criticism of the colonial enterprise is legitimate, an effort to correct the historical record; does this criticism find its origins in an academic inquiry or contemporary politics? And how is this distinction, between the academic and the political, related to the study of history? In the wake of colonial independence movements, historians crafted the field of 'post-colonialism.' Historians used a set of terms to accompany the field of post-colonialism, like "orientalism" and "civilization." These terms were "weaponized" to criticize colonialism, but their meaning and use in the academic discourse is contested. What do these terms, popularized with the rise of post-colonialism, actually mean? Why are they important to the study of colonial history, and how is it that terminology became "weaponized" in an academic space?

"Orientalism" is used by postcolonial scholars to refer to the romanticization of non-European cultures and peoples. Edward Said was a prominent post-colonial scholar who popularized the notion of "orientalism" in his book of the same name. Said's work is extensive; it sets out to explain the ideology and practices of European colonialism; the heart of the work is dedicated to undermining traditional European colonial rhetoric. How did Said deploy "orientalism" in the work? Was "orientalism" "good" or "bad"? Did it nurture or reject postcolonial narratives? Said is generally understood to be a critic of the West, and his elaboration of "orientalism" provides the basis for his criticism. However, Said's approach to European colonialism is more nuanced than simple criticisms; "orientalism" is complex, and as such, Said's theory on the modern origins of orientalism, which he attributes with the rise of colonialism, helps us to understand and analyze his broader criticism of the West.

“Orientalism” in the Eighteenth Century

Orientalism is not necessarily insidious, or disingenuous, but it is a euro-centric perspective, which Said and other post-colonists reject. For this paper, we will focus our analysis on the second chapter of Said's *Orientalism*, titled "Orientalist Structures and Restructures." In this chapter, Said expands his theory on the origins of modern colonialism, and more importantly, the perspective Europeans adopted when interacting with non-Europeans. Said places the turn in colonial practices with the emergence of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment encouraged exploration in numerous fields, such as philosophy and science; this spirit of exploration would form the basis of the colonial experiment, according to Said. As Said says early in the chapter, "European exploration of the rest of the world [...] had Europe firmly in the privileged center, as main observer [...] For even as Europe moved itself outwards, its sense of cultural strength was fortified."¹⁸⁸ What does Said mean when he refers to the fortification of Europe's "culture strength"? European exploration was a comparative endeavor, contrasting European values and ideals to those of the "Orient"; the Orient had served as the historic enemy of the Occident; The Middle East and Asia were centers of non-European cultures. The Middle East embodied the struggle between Islam and Christianity; where once the Orient was to be distrusted, the Enlightenment opened the possibility of the Orient as an academic subject. This desire to understand and redefine the Orient became prominent during the eighteenth century: "an eighteenth-century mind could breach the doctrinal walls erected between the West and Islam and see hidden elements of kinship between himself and the Orient. Napoleon is a famous instance of this (usually selective) identification by sympathy."¹⁸⁹ This begs the question, was

¹⁸⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 117.

¹⁸⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 118.

colonialism a sympathetic endeavor? How does this understanding fit into postcolonial scholarship?

Said is cynical of the European "sympathy" he observes in the eighteenth century "orientalists." Said takes a Foucauldian perspective, arguing that European intellectuals who studied the Orient only did so to empower themselves through the accumulation of knowledge. More than that, Said suggests that only by filtering non-European perspectives through European "experts" does the Orient become useful to Europeans. Said says, "the modern Orientalist was in his view, a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he had properly distinguished. His research reconstructed the Orient's lost languages, mores, even mentalities"¹⁹⁰ How did this specialization of the Orient explain colonialism? Implicitly, Said was laying the foundation for his main argument, that European notions of superiority, even if meant sympathetically, placed them in the ideal position for not only intellectual but political leadership. As Said suggests, this European sympathy for the Orient itself may have engendered notions of the necessity of intervention. Without Europeans, therefore, the Orient would not flourish; this was the basis of the scientific terminology familiar to modern colonialism. Orientalism of the eighteenth century ushered in "a systematic discipline of accumulation" which allowed Colonialism and Imperialism to flourish.¹⁹¹

Said uses the French academic Silvestre de Sacy as his example of the eighteenth century Orientalist. Sacy was an essential part of the French shift towards the Arabic world. He was a translator, and as such, acted as a sort of intermediary between conventional French

¹⁹⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 121.

¹⁹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 122.

understandings of the "Orient" and reality. How did Sacy's work, which brought the "Orient" back into the forefront of French intellectual thought, help to form modern colonialism? Said paints Sacy as a specialist interested in academic prominence by way of his newly formed field. Sacy made himself indispensable as an orientalist; only through his knowledge could Europeans make use of the Orient. On the surface, Sacy seems like an ally of Arabian people and culture, but Said characterizes this alliance as merely the cover for European empowerment: "Sacy defended the utility and interest of such things as Arabic poetry, but what he was really saying was that Arabic poetry had to be properly transformed by the Orientalist before it could begin to be appreciated. Even if one does go through the rigors of specialized training, much of the description in the poetry will not be accessible to Europeans "who have attained to a higher degree of civilization." Yet what we can master is of great value to us as Europeans"¹⁹² Sacy was the perfect model of the "sympathetic" European; one who advocates for the study and accumulation of knowledge on the Orient, but only as a form of cultural utility and domination. "In Sacy's pages on Orientalism - as elsewhere in his writing - he speaks of his own work as having uncovered, brought to light, rescued a vast amount of obscure matter [...] like all his learned contemporaries Sacy considered a learned work a positive addition to an edifice that all scholars erected together."¹⁹³ Sacy was a collector, then, and his collection came at the cost of the oriental cultures he professed to defend. Napoleon's expedition to Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century was not an endeavor of cultural exchange; no, to Said, Napoleon simply pillaged what he found useful, and returned to France. Is Said wrong to critique what he views as a false sympathy? It is undeniable that Europeans have accumulated artifacts from across the

¹⁹² Said, *Orientalism*, 128.

¹⁹³ Said, *Orientalism*, 127.

"Orient," storing them in museums and academic institutions, removed from their intended environment. This form of preservation is a symptom of the colonialist mindset.

The New Age of Colonial Empire: Tocqueville and the 19th Century

When the French first began their interactions with the "Orient," it was primarily with an academic function; to absorb the knowledge on the indigenous people and culture of a particular aspect of the "Orient." This knowledge provided French academics with expertise which allowed them to insert themselves into the world of the "Orient." The work of the academic was distinct and separate from the Orient; this was not the case during the rise of the French Empire in Africa. No longer were the French content with their domination through a cultural exchange; France desired territory. During the advent of this new empire in the 19th century, politician and intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville commented on France's position in the colonial enterprise. Tocqueville was critical of empire, at first. In 1833, just as the French began their expeditions into Africa, Tocqueville crafted a short letter that rejected the likelihood of success for colonialism. Tocqueville began his letter by explaining that empire, for any nation, is a difficult task, but for France, it may even be impossible. Tocqueville said: "even supposing that the territory that is to contain the colony has been discovered and that it combines the conditions necessary for the success of the enterprise, there still remain the difficulties of execution [...] The foremost of all, it must be said, is found in the French genius, which does not appear very favorable to colonization."¹⁹⁴ Indeed, the French seemed to be adverse to the type of colonialism employed by other European nations, like Great Britain or Spain. The work of early French colonialists like Sacy, academic in its foundations, contrasts greatly with the military occupation

¹⁹⁴Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*. Ed. And trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). 1.

and domination imposed by other nations. France had tried to emulate the colonial enterprise of Great Britain in the Americas; as Tocqueville explained, the French colonies were nowhere near as successful. Why? What was it about France that prevented it from colonial success?

Tocqueville found his answer in the very political culture of France, and the character this engendered in its people: “besides, our national character displays a singular mix of domestic tendencies and passion for adventure, two things that are equally bad for colonization”¹⁹⁵

Tocqueville explained the domestication of the French as such: “It is almost impossible to convince the poor and honest population of our countryside to leave their homeland to seek their fortune. The peasant is less afraid of misery in his birthplace than of the risks and rigors of distant exile. But it is only with men of that sort that the core of a good colony can be formed.”¹⁹⁶

If the French were content at home, then they had no reason to leave and settle abroad; this was different from the English dissidents who often formed the basis of the British colonial missions. Without settlers, a colony was left only with adventures or explores, the sort like Sacy who did not desire to integrate with the indigenous people, but rather to exploit or learn. A successful colony could not thrive without a sedentary population.

Tocqueville detected another problem with French colonialism, emanating from the nation's political culture: the bureaucratic state. Bureaucracy was vastly expanded during the French Revolution, as those formerly excluded from direct participation in the affairs of state could now voice their opinions so that their needs and concerns were addressed. Even before the Revolution, however, Tocqueville imagined that the French structure of the state was always peculiar to others in Europe, in that it reached its hand into everything. This overreach, prompted

¹⁹⁵ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 2

¹⁹⁶ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 2

by centralization, could benefit the mainland provinces of a nation, but when it came to the characteristics necessary for a colony to survive and thrive, France would fail: "For several centuries, the central government in France has worked constantly to control every decision itself; today, we can say that it does not just govern but administers all the separate parts of the realm [...] The resulting legal obligations and political habits are not very favorable to the foundation, let alone the development, of a colony."¹⁹⁷ Centralization rejected the character of independence necessary for a colony; if the colony was reliant on the mainland for everything, it would not be able to sustain itself. Colonies needed to be adaptable and crafty; in Tocqueville's perspective, one of the flaws brought on by centralization was the lethargy it could place in the population.

If France failed in the colonial enterprise, it was because it lacked the political culture present in other colonial powers; contentment and centralization were essential aspects of the political character of France. Tocqueville concluded his letter by stating that "all the great colonizing nations exercise this minimal control. But we should note that none of them has centralized the government at home."¹⁹⁸ France and the notion of "minimal control" were incompatible.

How did the disposition to colonial failure affect France in Algeria? Algeria would become one of France's most important colonies; its character as part of the "Orient" would be nearly erased, as it was integrated into the governance of metropolitan France. Before it gained its independence, Algeria would be a department within the central government of France; this was an unusual situation in other colonial powers; almost all colonies were dominated from

¹⁹⁷ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 2.

¹⁹⁸ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 3.

above through occupation or oppression. The very fact that Algeria was so closely integrated into mainland France speaks to the characteristic of centralization which Tocqueville discussed; this centralization initially nearly made the colony in Algeria a futile effort.

In a letter from 1837, Tocqueville argued that the key to France's colonial success lay in its ability to learn the culture of indigenous peoples and integrate that knowledge into the governance of the colony. At the beginning of the letter, Tocqueville wrote "I take the popular view that in order to inform others about something, it is useful to know it oneself and that to know something well, it is not useless to have seen it. So I do not pride myself on not having been to Africa."¹⁹⁹ At this point, Tocqueville had not been to Algeria, but he was commenting on the troubles of the colonial mission more from a French perspective than an Algerian one.

Tocqueville learned a great deal about the history of Algeria before France's expedition there; he was interested to understand the nature of the relationship of governance and power in Algeria. Tocqueville described the character of each of the distinct groups present in Algeria: "I must tell you, sir, what were the Turks' principles and methods of government. This is necessary in order to understand everything that has happened since we took their place. The Turks, the greatest number of whom lived in Algiers, formed a militia there that, although not numerous, was very brave, quite turbulent, and had the right to choose the head of government. Most of the civil and all the military functionaries were taken from this group."²⁰⁰ He continued, saying "this is how it was, then: in the mountains were the Kabyles, more or less independent; in the plains the Arabs, quite incompletely subordinated; in the towns, the Turks and the couloughlis and a mixed

¹⁹⁹ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 6.

²⁰⁰ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 10.

population without any fixed character”²⁰¹ The French had very little idea of Algeria before they invaded; the academic expertise of the “Orient” that those like Sacy possessed was not utilized in the new colonial missions. In their ignorance, France destroyed the established governing institutions in Algeria, and in doing so, had no way of knowing how to replace these institutions. As Tocqueville argued in his previous letter, the centralized nature of France was incompatible with colonial governance; the disastrous state of affairs in the early years of French Algeria proved Tocqueville correct. The French invasion and military conquest placed Algeria in a precarious position: “once the Turkish government was destroyed, with no substitute to replace it, the country, which could no longer run itself, fell into appalling anarchy [...] People sometimes submit to humiliation, to tyranny, to conquest, but they never endure anarchy for long. There is no people so barbarous that it escapes this general law of humanity.”²⁰² What was Tocqueville's solution to the problems faced by the colonial mission? Simply, that the French must start over, and not through military conquest, but enlightened governance.

The French had inadvertently brought anarchy to Algeria, but they also had the tools to destroy such anarchy. How could France change course? Primarily, through an integration of the knowledge learned during the expedition: “It can be said in just a few words that to the extent that our civilization permitted it, we simply should have put ourselves in the place of the defeated; that far from trying to substitute our administrative practices for theirs from the start, we should for a time have bent to their ways, preserved the political delimitations, taken on the fallen government’s officials, accepted its traditions and guarded its practices.”²⁰³ To rule a

²⁰¹ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 12.

²⁰² de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 17.

²⁰³ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 19.

people, you must know them; Tocqueville would have agreed with this sentiment, and more than understand, you must respect the people you mean to rule. When the French destroyed the previous institutions that existed in Algeria, they simply wanted to transplant the French political character to their new colony. Tocqueville knew that Algeria could thrive as part of France, but only so long as “in Algeria as elsewhere, the great task of a new government is not to create what does not exist at all, but to use what does exist.”²⁰⁴ Tocqueville emphasized that the character of France was not the character of Algeria: “above all, in Algeria we must take care to give up this taste for uniformity that torments us, and to realize that it would be as dangerous as it is absurd to apply the same laws to different beings.”²⁰⁵ Tocqueville, therefore, argued against equality in the governance of an empire; he understood that the only way it could succeed was through a policy of equity. The equity proposed by Tocqueville contrasts greatly with the domination perceived by Said.

The Misconception: “*mission civilisatrice*”

The history of European colonialism is complicated; it was not a monolithic project, and it was fraught with both successes and failures. Is there an academic consensus on Said's theories of colonialism? While Said sees the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century as the beginning of colonialism based on eurocentrism, Daniel Gordon, in his piece entitled "Civilization" and the Self-Critical Tradition," argues that it was from the Enlightenment itself that we can find resistance to eurocentric colonialism. It does not necessarily refute Said's claims of

²⁰⁴ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 23.

²⁰⁵ de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 23.

accumulation, but where Said is cynical of European intentions, Gordon is open to the ideological honesty of purported "orientalists."

Post-colonists often refer to the notion of Europe's "*mission civilisatrice*" (Said speaks of it often); the "Orient" was vulgar, Europeans thought, and so a vulgar people have to be reacculturated in the model of European Civilization. In the discussion of colonialism, civilization has become a loaded term; it references what Said considered the disingenuous European interactions with the Orient. While Europeans claimed to promote the cultural exchange of their civilization, post-colonists believe it was simply a cover in European domination. Was "civilization" actually evoked for colonialism, as post-colonists suggest? Or, was the notion of civilization used by European intellectuals as a form of academic comparison? Daniel Gordon is critical of the post-colonial attack on "civilization." Firstly, what does civilization even mean? According to Gordon, "from its inception, the term functioned as a tool for highlighting the achievements of one's society and for putting it on trial."²⁰⁶ Post-colonialists have used the term to embody the notion of European superiority and stewardship that Said theorized; this was not how the term was used during the rise of modern colonialism. The Enlightenment was a transformative moment for the intellectual thought of Europe; it was a period filled with criticism and praise of the successes and pitfalls of European civilization. Similarly to Said, Gordon relies on the writings of French intellectuals, but these writings were not monolithic in their approach to European civilization. On the origins of the term civilization, Gordon says "the first person to use the word "civilization," the eighteenth-century French economist, Mirabeau, spoke of "false civilization" and "the barbarity of our civilizations."²⁰⁷ Indeed, European academics were using

²⁰⁶ Daniel Gordon, "Civilization" and the Self-Critical Tradition (2017) Society. 109.

²⁰⁷ Gordon, "Civilization", 109.

an ideal notion of civilization to critique the one inadequate one that inhabited reality. There is nothing colonist about observing one's civilization; the problem comes about when a notion of superiority, based on "civilization", is presented to dominate a people. Europe alone did not craft a worthwhile civilization; even as colonialism took hold, those who were purported euro-centrists by post-colonialists saw the benefit of culture study and exchange: "Even more than academic anthropologists in Paris, colonial administrators forged the viewpoint that natives had valuable "civilizations" of their own. Between the two world wars, these ethnographically oriented colonialists advanced the hope for cultural exchange and the creation of a new multicultural personality type. To be sure, they envisioned this process as taking place under European oversight."²⁰⁸ Europe did not necessarily want to oversee this process because of its perceived superiority with the colonized, but simply because it could oversee such an endeavor. When French revolutionaries dreamed of a universal republic in 1790, it was not because France was inherently superior to others, but on the basis that it could free others from the shackles of tyranny. "Orientalism" and "Civilization" can be viewed in a similar sense.

The Contemporary Position of Empire?

Was superiority an essential aspect of colonialism? Post-colonialists believe so, but french intellectuals made the case that even if Europeans were somehow superior (an immeasurable value), it would not change the importance of positive exposure to cultural exchange. Said decried cultural exchange as "orientalism" because he equated it to inequality and domination, but as Gordon clarifies, modern french intellectuals like Roger Caillois "took equality to be a value whose meaning does not hinge on scientific conclusions. The concept of

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

equality has a force of its own; it would be compelling even if there were fundamental differences among human groups.”²⁰⁹ Tocqueville did not seem to believe that the superior french character allowed for the imposition of oppression; quite the opposite, he believed that mixing of cultures was necessary for any non-native government to succeed. Mixing of the sort Tocqueville envisioned could not be imposed from above; it had to be embraced from below. So, did the spirit of sympathetic cultural exchange and equality work to undermine notions of racial superiority? The scholarship on this topic should be expanded, as it seems to be lacking. How did people in the West, who were part of the civilization that imposed foreign rule, go about resisting and criticizing that very civilization?

Resistance to colonialism is a testament to European intellectualism of the Enlightenment and beyond, and it should be given more attention in post-colonial discussions. For all the wrongs that Europeans did in their colonial endeavors, the work of Sacy and other "orientalists" opened up a deeper study into the non-European world; this is significant, as it lends some agency to colonized people even when they were dominated by foreign rule. The historiography of colonialism has been dominated by a one-sided approach; with Edward Said at the forefront of post-colonial scholarship, it is hardly surprising that so many subscribed to his exceptional analysis. However, this one-sidedness has left the field with a gap in scholarship; is the accumulation of knowledge in cultural exchange wrong? How was this exchange used to support or subvert colonialism? Should societies support cultural exchange if it inevitably leads to the imposition of foreign rule, and is this form of colonialism particular to the West? Although many important questions are still to be explored, the scholarship of colonialism has helped to

²⁰⁹ Gordon, “Civilization”, 111.

complicate notions of cultural exchange, specifically in that it challenges the scientific notion of a superior culture, Western or otherwise. Tocqueville argued that not all people are the same; he did not mean this to be taken as a way to perpetuate colonial oppression but to explain the functional differences between one nation and another. This dichotomy, between colonial oppression or functionary efficiency, is an important distinction; "by the 1950s, however, Caillois no longer believed that appreciating other civilizations precluded highlighting valuable features of Western civilization. Caillois expressed agreement with Lévi-Strauss that the West is not absolutely superior. There is no process of evolution that subsumes all civilizations; hence, none is definitively ahead of the others. Civilizations, according to Caillois, are "concurrent," not part of a linear sequence."²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Gordon, "Civilization", 112.

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