

L'Oriente nella cultura europea del lungo '700

Rolando Minuti
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Rolando Minuti's *L'Oriente nella cultura europea del lungo '700* collects eleven articles previously published between 1995 and 2021, the majority in Italian, although three are written in French and two in English. Despite this, the book is eminently coherent, dealing in all cases with various aspects of the intellectual impact of 'the Orient' (a capacious concept that includes Russia and all of Asia as well as Islam) in Enlightenment culture. The concept of 'the Orient' is of course relativistic rather than intrinsic. Indeed, this is primarily a study of European discourses (or 'images', Minuti's preferred word), and therefore a dissection of Eurocentric categories rather than an example of entangled or connected history, if by that we mean one that gives equal weight to non-European sources, contexts and perspectives. Nonetheless, Eurocentric does not mean arbitrary, because Europeans observed and recorded carefully what they saw in various parts of Asia, and often translated texts written in Arabic, Persian, Chinese or other oriental languages. The book, therefore, helps to strengthen the case for the massive importance of engagement with Eastern civilisations in the European eighteenth century, and I would add, throughout the early modern period, against the old idea (now largely abandoned) that the Enlightenment might have been oblivious to other cultural traditions. Eurocentrism emerges as a far more complex and sophisticated attitude than mere cultural solipsism, and arguably the sustained intellectual engagement with many other cultural traditions had a transformative effect in Europe, an impact whose depth we are increasingly able to appreciate in the light of recent scholarship. In this respect this collection can be seen as complementary to Rolando Minuti's previous monograph on how engagement with the Orient helped shape the debates about religious tolerance in eighteenth-century France.¹ Although the articles in this collection are presented in chronological order of publication, it is possible to distinguish various themes: the opposition between civilisation and barbarism, the engagement with the history of Islamic cultures, and most notably (for the depth and

¹ ROLANDO MINUTI, *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza nella cultura francese del primo '700* (Florence: Leo O. Olshki, 2006). The book includes discussions of the debate on tolerance in relation to East Asia and Islam, as well as more specific chapters devoted to Boyer d'Argens and Montesquieu. An earlier work dealt with the idea of barbarism in relation to the Tartars: ROLANDO MINUTI, *Oriente barbarico e storiografia settecentesca. Rappresentazioni dei Tartari nella cultura francese del XVIII secolo* (Venice: Marsilio, 1994).

originality of the analysis presented), the interpretation of the religions of East Asia, notably those of China, Japan and Siam.

In the preface to the volume Minuti offers a series of reflections that help situate his work in the Italian tradition of intellectual history, with roots in philological methods of textual analysis. This tradition shares with the so-called Cambridge school attention to a wide range of texts rather than focus on a limited canon of great authors, the analysis of intellectual influences and interactions as opposed to the reconstruction of individual systems of thought, and an emphasis on mediations and transformative appropriations, for example through the study of translations and adaptations that are seldom ideologically innocent. This contextual approach, which is hard not to share, certainly invites moving beyond national contexts and paying attention to a variety of genres. Minuti also offers a useful distinction of the four dimensions of this intellectual engagement with Asia that he detects: through direct experience, antiquarian erudition, popular dissemination, and philosophical reflection. This is methodologically useful, and also helps draw a picture of the Enlightenment as not only porous and transnational, but also plural and multi-dimensional.

From this perspective, Minuti insists on distancing his analysis from Edward Said's, whose dual dichotomies tend to reduce the variety and complexity of European attitudes towards Eastern cultures. This is of course entirely consistent with Minuti's nuanced approach, although some readers might feel that it is nowadays unnecessary to make the point explicit, given how universally the criticism has been expressed. There might also be a case for considering the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries as a period that saw the hardening of negative stereotypes, in the context of a general shift in power relations that favoured Western nations and was felt everywhere in Asia. In fact, many of Minuti's essays illustrate this, by showing how the themes of despotism and superstition—a deadly combination—became pervasive in philosophical histories and popular encyclopaedias, paving the way for liberal and imperialist uses of radical ideas about politics and religion fostered by the debates of the previous century. One of the book's recurrent themes is the extent to which the all too often dichotomous Orientalism of the nineteenth century, imbued with a strong sense of the superiority of European civilisation, had its roots in the complex and ambivalent historiography of the Enlightenment. An impeccably researched essay devoted to the representation of the Orient in Condorcet's highly influential *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1794) offers a fascinating example of this fundamental paradox of modernity—the very idea of historical progress as a promise of liberation for all of mankind, including women and slaves, rested upon the celebration of how the enlightened European nations (and in particular the independent Anglo-American colonies and France) had mastered science, technology and political freedom against Church and the monarchical state, in a revolutionary project that stood in sharp contrast with the supposedly culturally static condition of

the 'despotic' states of the East.² Of course Condorcet, a true humanitarian idealist, did not espouse the colonial exploitation of savage nations, which Raynal and Diderot had denounced as a manifestation of Spanish greed, but the mission to civilise did imply the mission to create the conditions that would lead other civilisations to progress along a European path understood as universal, an obvious secular appropriation of the Christian missionary spirit of men like Las Casas, who had sought to bring salvation to all of mankind without accepting the legitimacy of violent imperialism. However, while the Catholic friars had exported new superstitions, revolutionary Europe, Condorcet believed, would teach universal truths about utility and human rights for the benefit of servile Orientals, barbarous Africans and ignorant savages elsewhere. The vast empires of the East, however civilised in the ancient and medieval past, now stood as examples of stalled progress, and indeed, of structural decline—a deviation from the universal history of progress driven by reason and *lumières*.

A case like Condorcet, eventually tragic victim of his own French Revolution, does not however simply invite a condemnation of western cultural hypocrisy (much as it manifested itself in some contexts), but more interestingly, also a reflection on the paradoxes of the Enlightenment commitment to the analysis of cultural diversity through the lens of the moral unity of mankind. Nuance is always important in intellectual history, and in other essays Minuti is careful to note the persistence of these contradictions. We can here consider an essay devoted to the discussion of Japan in *Il costume antico e moderno*, a large ethnological encyclopaedia (or, we could say, a cultural history of the world) in twenty-three volumes published in Milan between 1817 and 1834 by the Milanese Giulio Ferrario, with this section penned by the *liceo* teacher of history Ambrogio Levati—a more obscure author than Condorcet, but nonetheless representative of the liberal adaptation and dissemination of Enlightenment culture in various national contexts.³ Here Minuti draws attention to the fact that before Commodore Perry's famous intervention in 1853, European knowledge of Japan was limited to the use of a rather short list of early modern accounts, because the Tokugawa regime continued to impose a closed country policy. He thus pays attention to how Levati's far from recent sources (mostly dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) shaped his interpretations in different directions: while the always ubiquitous Montesquieu, with a touch of Beccaria, provided the fundamental lens through which to consider Japanese legislation as an example of cruel despotism that disregarded human suffering or, indeed, the value of human life, authors like Varenus and especially Kaempfer made it possible to admire many other aspects of Japanese culture, such as their industriousness, social discipline and knowledge of agriculture. The resulting image of contrasts did not in fact differ substantially from the early Jesuit accounts written by authors like Alessandro Valignano, and still echoed decades later

² Interestingly, for Condorcet the driving engine of the great divergence in the progress of civilisation was the history of science, combining technological and political factors (the printing press and freedom of thought in non-despotic contexts), not economic history. *Lumières*, rather than productive capacity, were the measure of decisive change through various epochs.

³ Interestingly, however, the Milanese publishers also produced in parallel a French translation.

by Daniello Bartoli, one of Levati's sources, who were often very praiseworthy of the Japanese nation in some particular respects, while puzzled by others.

An article on how Boyer d'Argens assessed Peter the Great's Russia also pays attention to how authors who were often popular synthesisers and philosophical interpreters, rather than direct observers or erudite researchers, used their sources. Although the marquis d'Argens is best known for his defence of religious tolerance in his *Lettres Juives*, which prompted a Jesuit response, in this case Minuti's main focus are the subsequent *Lettres Chinoises*, a work of enlightened propaganda written in the tradition of fictional oriental travellers inaugurated by Marana and Montesquieu, and extensively cultivated by d'Argens in the 1730s. Not unlike Fontenelle and later Voltaire, d'Argens participated in the celebration of Peter the Great's efforts to civilise barbaric Russia according to the higher standards of polite Europe, but also expressed doubts about its lasting efficacy. He was in any case an apologist for the enlightened use of despotic power: in the context of Russia, whose orthodox Church was both extremely traditionalist and xenophobic, this was a necessity, even if the methods could be at times brutal and the results doubtful. Montesquieu, a believer in gradual reform but not in the efficacy of despotism, would differ.

The connection between religion, civilisation and political despotism constitutes a thread that connects many of the contributions in this collection. Another article that clearly goes into the first half of the nineteenth century concerns the views of Islam elaborated by the Genevan historian and economic thinker Sismondi. Interpreted in the light of his enthusiasm for French intervention in North Africa in 1830, Minuti's analysis here again reveals the enlightened assumptions behind some forms of liberal imperialism. The capacity of Islam for industriousness and civilisation was not, for Sismondi, in question, and in fact it was even romanticised by reference to the achievements of the Abbasid Caliphate and medieval Islamic Spain. Like others who at the time debated the question of intervention in the *Revue Encyclopédique*, Sismondi therefore believed that the French in Algiers could arrive as liberators, freeing the untapped cultural and economic potential of Moors and Arabs from the negative effects of the oppressive rule of brigands—yet again a *mission civilisatrice*, one that the Swiss historian understood as perfectly compatible with the defence of the national interest.⁴ However, Rolando Minuti emphasises in this context Sismondi's positive view of Islam *as a religion*, when separated from despotism, a position distinct from that expressed for example by Volney, or (more subtly) by Gibbon. In Sismondi's reconstruction, Muhammad's pure, simple and tolerant monotheism, well adapted to the social needs of the Arabs, had been perverted for political reasons, in a context of

⁴ Sismondi's 'brigands' were the Deys of Algiers, formally a Regency of the Ottoman empire, de facto an independent kingdom with an elective leadership, traditionally accused of harbouring corsairs and enslaving Christians for ransom. Although this practice continued, at the time of the French invasion European navies ruled the seas (the British had already bombarded the city in 1816 in order to free Christian captives), and the most immediate issue was the refusal of France to pay back the millions of Francs it owed to the Sephardic Jewish Bachri-Boujana company based in Algiers for the supply of Napoleon's armies.

imperial success and moral corruption, and as a consequence the orthodox clergy had imposed ever more restrictive interpretations of the Quran. In reality, the superstitious elements one could find in modern Islamic societies were not consubstantial to a religious tradition that shared many moral values with Christianity and was perfectly compatible with scientific rationality; hence, in Algiers all that was necessary was a political liberation orchestrated by the French. We know what that led to. It is hard not to hear echoes in Minuti's reconstruction of Sismondi's chain of thought of some of the naïve analysis or perhaps cynical rhetoric that almost two hundred years later sought to justify on supposedly liberal principles the invasion of Iraq, in order to neutralise an imagined threat and, at the same time, free the country from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein.⁵

Religion remains the key topic in some of the most substantial chapters of the collection. One is concerned with the depiction of the 'idolatrous' religions of China, Japan and Siam (essentially Confucianism and Buddhism) in the increasingly well-known compilation in eight volumes of European materials concerning the religions of the known world, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Amsterdam, 1723–1743). Minuti pays proper attention to the editorial interventions and prefatory material by the editor Jean-Frédéric Bernard, a figure whose crucial role in giving this encyclopaedic work a unique interpretative edge has sometimes often neglected in other studies that, instead, have placed more emphasis on the complementary visual work by the engraver Bernard Picart. What emerges in Minuti's analysis is a Protestant deism that was anti-clerical but not anti-religious, and only moderately anti-Catholic (hence Bernard questioned religious excess in all its forms, but also Bayle's defence of virtuous atheists: in his distinctively non-Puritan interpretation, an idolatrous religiosity was preferable, as it signalled towards the cult of God, however imperfectly). The *Cérémonies* thus offer an excellent example of the free-thinking use of the considerable Jesuit ethnographic corpus, indispensable for China for example (by contrast with the possibility of relying on Kaempfer for the history of Japan, and Simon de la Loubère for Siam, as alternative secular sources of information). This intellectual proximity is perhaps why the Jesuit Enlightenment that flourished in France during the first half of the eighteenth century, best represented by the team behind the *Journal de Trévoux*, sought to appropriate the *Cérémonies* by producing in 1741 in Paris a carefully modulated new edition prepared by the abbé Antoine Banier, best known for his euhemerist explanation of ancient mythology, and (perhaps more important in practice) the often invisible Jean-Baptiste Le Mascrier. Through a detailed analysis of those sections of this alternative edition of the *Cérémonies* devoted to the more intellectually developed 'idolatrous' religions of East and South-East Asia, Minuti shows how these Catholic editors lightened the critique of clerical institutions and religious rituals when it concerned their own Church, but also amplified some ethno-

⁵ Minuti does not make the connection, but the article was originally delivered in 2006 and published in 2007, at the height of the insurgency that shattered many of the promises of liberal interventionism.

graphic materials and tried to refute, rather than simply suppress, some of Bernard's ironic comments.

This essay is yet another excellent example of Minuti's ambition to carefully analyse how the intellectual impact of significant works may have been transformed by editors and translators, offering a dynamic and plural view of the intellectual culture of the Enlightenment, especially in France and Italy. The same spirit inspires Minuti's analysis of the French translation of the *De religione Mohammedica* (1705) by the Utrecht scholar and Protestant antiquarian Adrian Reland. This book of what we might define as 'corrective erudition' was a landmark contribution to the knowledge of Islam based on real linguistic expertise, and therefore opened up new avenues to a less stereotypically hostile assessment of a religious tradition whose historical importance could not be brushed aside. It was, nonetheless, extremely technical. The French translation by the Huguenot refugee in England and historian David Durand on the other hand sought to make the text accessible to a wider public by lightening all the erudition in classical and oriental languages, and instead emphasising the ideological implications presented by Reland in a series of *Eclaircissements*, for example in relation to the theme of religious tolerance, thus reinforcing the role of Islam in anti-Catholic polemics (albeit not by undermining the ultimate superiority of Reformed Christianity). This study of a translator at work, in this case largely in line with the aims of the original but with the occasional hint of the additional influence of Pierre Bayle, offers a good example of how the philosophical culture of the Enlightenment was built around the vernacular popularisation of the previous philological work of humanist antiquarians, facilitating a powerful current of cultural transformation that connected academic erudition to an increasingly plural and well informed popular opinion.

On the question of religious encounters, while Japan had been a crucial field of Jesuit experimentation and confrontation with Buddhism in the second half of the sixteenth century, accounts of Siam, another Buddhist country, became important one hundred years later, at a time of enhanced French diplomatic and missionary opportunities, although (not unlike what had previously happened in Japan) everything collapsed into nothingness after the political revolution of 1688 that brought down Phrah Narai and his Greek minister Constantine Phaulkon. The story is well-known from the previous studies by Dirk van der Cruysse, Alain Forest, and others. Minuti's article on the subject, at the risk of some repetition with some of the other essays in this collection, explores both the theme of religious tolerance as a Siamese political principle that Catholics usually found abhorrent (whilst exploiting it as an opportunity for evangelisation), and the dangerous role of analogies with Christianity when analysing Theravada Buddhist practices and institutions. One thing that emerges as fascinating in this case study is the plurality of perspectives in the observations produced by French diplomats such as Simon de la Loubère, and by rival missionaries from the Society of Jesus, notably Guy Tachard, and the *Missions Étrangères*, with the work of Jacques de Bourges, Louis Laneau and Nicolas Gervaise particularly outstanding.

The impact of these rich materials in the radical culture of the Enlightenment is explored in a complementary article, which focuses in particular on how Pierre Bayle mobilised this information to develop his favourite theses on religious tolerance and the possibility of virtuous atheism, and against *consensus gentium*. Bayle's ruthless manipulation of accounts of religious traditions he could hardly aspire to know (although Minuti excuses this by reference to the errors contained in the sources themselves) stands in contrast to the more cautious but ultimately also ideological, and in this case deistic, strategy pursued by the editor of the *Cérémonies*, Jean-Frédéric Bernard, whose voice in defence of the relative value of multiple forms of religiosity (including those considered idolatrous) we have repeatedly encountered in this collection.⁶ Not so Boyer d'Argens, however, who instead used the same evidence about the religion of Siam to ridicule all religious traditions, and in particular any that could be satirically compared to Roman Catholicism—and here the Buddhist monks of Siam, the *talopains*, were a tempting opportunity for an anti-clerical excursus. Minuti's key conclusion is that the diversity of uses of the same body of evidence within the radical, or heterodox, Enlightenment, makes it necessary to explore this intellectual plurality rather than blur the differences under an overarching category of the 'Radical Enlightenment'—a not too subtle critique of Jonathan Israel's notorious thesis. Minuti tends to refer more approvingly of Paul Hazard's classic notion of the *crise de la conscience européenne* as a historiographical paradigm for the intellectual history of this period.

The oldest article in the collection (written well before John Pocock started publishing his monumental study) seeks to locate Edward Gibbon's idea of barbarism in relation to his knowledge of Central Asia as learnt from, for example, Joseph de Guignes and his *Histoire Général des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols, et des autres Tartares Occidentaux* (1756–1758). In this way, not only are the French (as opposed to Scottish) sources of Gibbon's historiographical project given due recognition, but also the intimate connections between erudition, narrative and philosophical history—an aspect that some earlier historiography had sometimes missed. The remaining two pieces deal with topics that might seem more obscure to a majority of readers. In one of them, Minuti considers how the news of Nadir Shah's rise to power in Persia in the 1730s and 1740s were received in France. While his remarkable success in restoring the power of the Persian empire after the almost complete collapse of the Safavid regime gave hopes that he might be motivated by a patriotic agenda, this positive image clashed with ideas about the nature of despotism, and the fragility of his political legacy ensured that the negative connotations of the concept that Montesquieu had so effectively championed came to prevail. It was simply not possible, in the new political language of the late Enlightenment, to be both a despot and a true patriot, and the article on *patrie* in the *Encyclopédie* signed by Louis de Jaucourt made this clear. In any case, it is of interest to

⁶ My point here is not that Bayle was not conditioned by the limitations of his primary sources about Buddhism, but rather that his interpretative biases were systematic and not very respectful of the plurality of information at his disposal. On the interpretation of Buddhism in this period URS APP, *The Cult of Emptiness. The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy* (Kyoto: UniversityMedia, 2012) remains essential.

observe how closely were political events in Persia followed in France—perhaps Europeans did not fully understand many intricacies of the politics of Eastern empires, but they certainly were not always indifferent. In the other article, Minuti offers an account of a tragically failed attempt to publish Ibn Khaldun by the now obscure Piedmontese Gian Antonio Arri under the patronage of the king of Sardinia and Duke of Savoy, an effort cut short by his premature death in 1841.

To sum up, this rich collection of essays written over almost three decades offers some of the best fruits of a distinguished career dedicated to analysing European attitudes to the broadly defined ‘Orient’ in the long eighteenth century. English-speaking readers might be forgiven for only thinking of works like John Pocock’s voluminous *Barbarism and Religion*, a rich and digressive analysis built around the topics and sources surrounding Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as the most obvious point of reference for this subject, and it is indeed a regrettable fact that many of the works produced in Italian or in other European languages tend to have less impact than is warranted, unless they are also eventually translated into English (consider, for example, Jürgen Osterhammel’s excellent *Unfabling the East. The Enlightenment Encounter with Asia*, which appeared in English in 2018 but had originally been published in German twenty years earlier, in 1998).⁷ This is particularly unfortunate in this case, because over the years Minuti has pioneered much research and at a very high standard on topics that have of late become very topical. In this volume we can consider again, for example, his discussion of the religions of China, Japan and Siam in the various editions of Jean-Frédéric Bernard’s *Cérémonies*, before this work became more widely known as ‘the book that changed Europe’.⁸ This is in fact an article, originally published in *Rivista Storica Italiana* in 2009, that I myself should have read earlier—but of course, even those of us who regularly read Italian, Spanish and French often struggle to keep up with all the academic work that is being produced, and nowadays in particular, it takes time to sort out the significant and original contributions from the avalanche of often redundant academic overproduction. Minuti himself reflects on the changing academic environment throughout his career in the preface to this collection, when he observes that it is nowadays far easier to access primary and secondary sources digitally, by contrast, it is implied, with the need to travel to libraries and archives during many of his formative years. He also suggests that this revolution in the accessibility of historical information poses dangers as well as obvious benefits, something he politely refers to as a redefinition of ‘the criteria by which erudition is assessed’. Indeed, ease of access and rapid production are not necessarily conducive to quality. There is something of the old scholar seeing the

⁷ Osterhammel nonetheless substantially revised the English edition, so that it may be considered as a new version.

⁸ LYNN HUNT, MARGARET C. JACOB, and WIJNAND MIJNHARDT, *The Book that Changed Europe. Picart and Bernard’s Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); as well as the companion edited volume by the same authors: HUNT, JACOB, and MIJNHARDT, eds, *Bernard Picart and the Global Vision of Religion* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010). Both were published after Minuti’s original article.

passing of the world of yesterday in these comments, as well as in his elegant dedication of the collection to those students he taught over many years, and to whom he professes his indebtedness.