TO THE EDITOR

In an issue of *Diogenes* (No. 44, Winter 1963) an article appears by Mr. Anouar Abdel-Malek entitled "Orientalism in Crisis," on the subject of which I would appreciate the opportunity of addressing some thoughts to your readers. I myself have called attention several times to certain shortcomings in Orientalism and have undertaken work in line with some of Mr. Abdel-Malek's suggestions. I say this in order that I will not be suspected of being a priori opposed to his views. It would be strange for a professor of Moslem history, with almost exclusively Moslem students, to nurture any kind of hostility or contempt toward Islam in general or toward its modern representatives. I hope that if Mr. Abdel-Malek reads these lines, he will give me credit in this regard. This said, there are in my view several points to be discussed.

a) It is obvious that there could not fail to be differences between the way a modern Moslem approaches his history and the approach of foreign Orientalists. Certain differences result from the attachment some Moslems have to ancient forms of their culture, but others also arise from the fact that Western scholars, even if (and this in the majority of cases) they have not worked specifically in the interest of the imperialists, have naturally chosen objects of study and oriented their thinking in function of the needs, interests and mental habits of the social environments to which they belong. That our Moslem colleagues can and should complete, sometimes possibly correct, some of

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our ways of proceeding I would be the first to acknowledge. And I understand perfectly why they sometimes feel a kind of ill humor with regard to our intrusion into their domain. Still they know very well that in modern times it was European Orientalism that revived an interest in their own past, and that without it they would still be incapable of stating half of what they are stating in their own way. We also have an edge over them in that we are interested in the history of all peoples and not only our own, that is, we bring to the study of each a general historical sense, which, so long as the Orientals do not have (with the exception of the Japanese) "Occidentalists," they cannot match. Of course there are works of Orientals, and more specifically of Moslems, that are perfectly valid in the eyes of general science, and some of our colleagues have sometimes erred in taking so long to recognize them. But there are others besides these, and Mr. Abdel-Malek will concede this, that if we sin by omission, we sometimes have an attenuating circumstance in the mediocre caliber of the editing and distribution of catalogues of Oriental libraries.

At the point where we now are, we should banish the term Orientalism. There are not two humanities, there is only a necessary apprenticeship in certain languages, if one does not command them from birth. In the study of peoples who are from the East of Europe (and who is not East of someone else?), there are some among them, and others, who find themselves "Orientalists" with regard to them. In reality we are harnessed to the same task, and in the normal pluralism of efforts and conceptions, this discriminatory barrier should be broken down. Fortunately it has never really been insurmountable.

b) Mr. Abdel-Malek poses another question to which the answer is perhaps more delicate. According to him, Orientalism is guilty of not showing sufficient interest in the recent history of the "Oriental" peoples, and this shortcoming is believed to be tied to the fact that in recent history the so-called "Oriental" peoples have frequently found themselves in opposition to the Europeans. To write the history of this period would therefore be painful in view of the retrogressive policies of many among the latter, with the exception, of course, of scholars from the socialist bloc. I will first take the liberty of pointing out that

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although the Soviet Government called upon Orientalists, from the tribune of the Orientalist Congress in Moscow in 1961, to aid in the emancipation struggle of the Oriental peoples, there is no shortage of Orientalists among the most important Soviet scholars who study more tranquil pasts. Having noted this, which is a minor detail, two questions remain. Is it necessary to concede automatically a priority to more recent periods? And does the study of these periods have anything to do with Orientalism?

I readily agree with Mr. Abdel-Malek that Orientalists have too often concentrated their attention on certain periods of history which seemed to them more brilliant, and have neglected others, frequently the more recent periods, which from other points of view and for a better understanding of the modern world would have afforded as much interest. But we do not need an inverse systematism. To illustrate the methods of historical inquiry that are deemed the best, the richest examples are not necessarily the most recent nor those in which the application is immediately apparent (let us say: posing problems in function of the concept of classes). For the development of the national consciousness of a people and the rise of its new culture, the best springboard is not necessarily the recent past but the obliterated past. In the USSR I would assume that Avicenna, in Afganistan Al-Biruni, in Mongolia Gengis Khan would have in this regard more value than their heirs of the nineteenth century. And I do not think that in this respect Mr. Abdel-Malek places in his own country the Fatimides behind the Ottomans, nor even the Pharaohs behind the Fatimides.

Naturally, modern history must be studied. But is it Orientalism? I mean no contempt whatsoever, and I would think ill of an Orientalist who would deliberately ignore the modern heirs of the peoples whose past he is studying. But it is a question, technically, of the inevitable division of labor. There are specialists in ancient history and in modern history in all countries, and naturally there must be the same for the Oriental countries. But in these countries there is a more clear distinction between problems and methods. It would be inconceivable to write the ancient history of the Oriental peoples

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without knowing their language; but there are countries of the modern Orient whose history can be written fairly generally on the basis of French and English documentation. And it would be inconceivable to write the ancient history of the Oriental peoples without situating oneself at the heart of their culture; but there are many problems of modern Afro-Asian history which are an integral part of the evolution now intertwined with that of the whole planet, and for their study a knowledge of Marx or of Lenin is probably more useful than the study of Avicenna or of Confucius. There can be no question of not carrying out this study. But must it be done by the same men? We think not. The concept of Orientalism still retains, it seems to me, a chronological justification.

I would be happy if this question were to be discussed further.

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