

Gender and Sexuality in (Neo-)Orientalism and Occidentalism:

An Entangled History of European & Middle Eastern Identity Discourses

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A Cooperation between Belgian, British, Dutch, German, Israel, and Swiss Researchers and Research Institutions

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Abstract

In the post 9/11 decade, debates on 'Islamophobia' have raised new research questions concerning patterns of exclusion. As in historical anti-Semitism, gender and sexuality play a pivotal role in topical national identity debates. In right-wing populism, "sexual nationalism" defines itself in opposition to the stereotype of the Muslim male as premodern, patriarchal, and homophobic, especially in the Netherlands. Conversely, Islamist intellectuals emphasize the degenerate Westernness of sexual licentiousness. To overcome the binary structure of this political discourse we pursue the research hypothesis of an entangled history of (neo-) Orientalism and Occidentalism, uncovering 'third spaces' of reflection in scholarly discourse, literature, and art.

In order to analyse how European and Islamist identity discourses mutually stereotype each other, experts working in the fields of history, religious studies, gender studies, and literature need to join forces. The reconstruction of a *histoire croisée* of (neo-)Orientalism and Occidentalism requires interdisciplinary cooperation. This need becomes even more pressing if we also want to compare Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Thus far, neo-Orientalist discourse has been studied by social sciences that only deal with the present. Taking its cue from the humanities, this project aims to correct this historical amnesia. It studies current Islamophobia from the historical perspective of 19th-century Orientalism, so as to unearth the intertwined history of sexuality, Orientalism, and anti-Semitism. Experts working on these new theoretical and historical approaches are scattered over many different countries, disciplines, and institutions. This project aims to unite these scholars in a network that will work towards a COST application.

Aims of the network

This network aims to develop historical approaches to the reciprocal processes of Orientalizing and Occidentalizing the Other. To reach this aim, it will compare anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim stereotypes, taking current Islamophobia as its point of departure. In right-wing populism, “sexual nationalism” defines itself in opposition to the image of the Muslim male as pre-modern and homophobic. Our core questions:

- What are the roles of gender images and tropes of sexuality in (post-)colonial nation-building processes in Europe and the MENA region?
- Which European anti-Semitic stereotypes are reiterated in current Islamist anti-Semitism?

Anti-Semitism studies reveal that Jews have been particularly vulnerable to stereotypical representations as decadent, hypersexualized, and culture-corroding enemies of European nations (Boyarin). As Edward Said already pointed out, there are structural similarities between Orientalism and Western anti-Semitism. In European imaginaries, the Diaspora “Jew” as “figure of the third (person)” (Holz) merged with the “homosexual” (Mosse). What are the similarities and differences between Orientalist discourse and the discourse of historical Anti-Semitism? Can we regard the Jews as the “internal colony” (Heschel) or the “inner Orient” (Rohde) of Europe? By concentrating on literary and artistic transformations of gender images, the network seeks to uncover ‘third spaces’ of transcultural knowledge.

The network is grouped around the following thematic clusters:

- 1) The function of gender in 19th century European national discourses (Foucault, Mosse) and in present-day “sexual nationalism”, and its connection with anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. This cluster focuses on literary and visual representations in Dutch and German culture.
- 2) Images of the sexualized other and patterns of exclusion in European nationalism and in current anti-Israel discourses in the MENA states. To what extent do these discourses reiterate old anti-Semitic commonplaces? This cluster works with case studies of the figure of the “beautiful Jewess” and of “Salome”. These stereotypes are crucial sites where the entangled history the Orient, the Jew, and ‘deviant’ sexuality of Western women materializes (Gilman, Garber). A third case study of sexualised anti-Israel discourse will reconstruct the reception of the transsexual Israeli singer, Danna International, in Egypt.
- 3) Tendencies in 19th-century Oriental and Jewish studies to position European Jews as the “inner Orient” (Rohde, Kalmar).
- 4) Images and narratives of the (male) Jew as the “third sex” in arts and sciences (medicine, sexology and psychoanalysis) around 1900 (Geller, v Braun, Brunotte).
- 5) Imaginary encounters and gendered topologies in travel literature and the role of transcultural self-fashioning and “imperial desire” (Holden) of travellers like Lawrence from Arabia. How does the (homo-)sexualization of the Arab in colonial discourse (Massad) compare to the (homo-)sexualization of the Jew in anti-Semitic discourse?

6) Current artistic reinterpretations of Orientalist tropes (e.g. Shahram Entekhabi) and of self-orientalization as an opening up of “transcultural spaces” of imagination, by Jewish artists like Feuchtwanger and Else-Lasker Schüler. (Liska)

7) How does contemporary Arabic literature (Dayf, R. al or Shaykh, H.) open up a “third space” of reflection concerning gender and sexuality in contrast to the sexual prudery of the present-day MENA states? (Enderwitz).

Based on methodological approaches from comparative memory studies, imagology (Leerssen), and discourse analysis, this project deconstructs the naturalized sexual tropes of (post-)colonial and anti-Semitic discourse, uncovering an “unconscious site of (neo-)Orientalism” (Yegenogly). The network unites scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and different countries in a concerted effort to analyse recurrent stereotypes and plot structures that may substantiate our hypothesis of an entangled history of sexuality, Orientalism, Occidentalism, and anti-Semitism.

Workshop I. The Role of Islamophobia in Sexual Nationalism/Anti-Semitism

2013

Taking our lead from new theoretical perspectives on “sexual nationalism” that have emerged primarily in the Netherlands, this workshop aims at a state-of-the-art overview of current debates on new and old anti-Semitism, gender, and Islamophobia. It will unite new approaches in Jewish, Islamic, and gender/queer studies while broaching the historical dimension that will be fleshed by means of the two case studies in the subsequent workshops.

Workshop II. Gender/Sexuality and Occidentalism

2014

Occidental discourses in the Middle East are not only highly sexualized, they also seem to have incorporated elements of European anti-Semitism. To what extent do Occidental discourses on Israel re-enact classic anti-Semitic imagery? We will highlight the role of gender and sexual tropes in Middle Eastern identity discourses from the 19th century until today, in literature and the mass media. How and why was the traditionally more tolerant attitude towards homoerotic relations in Arabic culture marginalized by the rigid moralism that derives from conservative readings of Islamic norms (EL-Rouayheb, Massad)? How does contemporary literature by Arab writers in foreign languages open up a third space of hybrid tropes on sexuality, gender, religion and nation?

Workshop III. Third Space/ (Self)-Orientalization

2015

This workshop is devoted to case studies that reconstruct tendencies in 19th-century Oriental and Jewish studies to position the European Jews as the “inner Orient”. Furthermore, it inquires into the ways in which imaginary encounters in scholarly texts, works of art, and literature open up new transcultural spaces. How are these discourses connected to the self-fashioning of travellers in Orientalist travel narratives focusing on a variety of settings spanning the 18th to the 20th century and including Turkey, Arabia, Egypt and Afghanistan, and to the self-Orientalization of Jewish artists around 1900? How do current (Arabic) artistic reinterpretations of Orientalist tropes enable new vista’s of an entangled history?