
Constructing the Oriental Empire: Western Orientalism and the Fabrication of Ottoman Otherness

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Abstract

The Ottoman Empire occupies a distinctive position in the history of Western Orientalism. Unlike many societies represented as “Oriental,” the Ottoman Empire was not merely an object of European curiosity or colonial observation; for centuries it was a powerful sovereign empire that directly confronted, negotiated with, traded with, and influenced European states. Nevertheless, European intellectual, political, literary, and artistic representations repeatedly constructed the Ottoman world as fundamentally different from—and ultimately inferior to—Europe. This article examines how that representation developed from medieval Christian polemic to early modern diplomatic writing, Enlightenment political theory, nineteenth-century discourses of decline, and Orientalist artistic representations of the harem and Muslim sexuality. It argues that Ottoman otherness was produced through three interconnected registers: the political, in which Ottoman government was represented as despotic and arbitrary; the civilizational, in which the empire was increasingly described through the categories of backwardness, stagnation, and decline; and the aesthetic and bodily, in which the Ottoman world was associated with sensuality, excess, gendered domination, and the imagined harem.

The article introduces the concept of “terminal epistemology” to describe the cumulative structure through which these representations increasingly made Ottoman decline appear natural, inevitable, and historically predetermined. The concept does not suggest that European observers consciously agreed on the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, nor does it deny the empire's genuine political, military, and economic crises. Rather, it identifies an interpretive framework through which diverse historical developments could be incorporated into an already established narrative of decline. Drawing on

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Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, Ottoman historiography, European intellectual history, travel literature, diplomatic accounts, and postcolonial theories of representation, the article also examines Ottoman responses to Western representations. It argues that Ottoman actors were not passive recipients of Orientalist knowledge but actively engaged with, resisted, appropriated, and sometimes reproduced classificatory practices associated with European modernity. The Ottoman case therefore demonstrates that Orientalism was not a simple opposition between a powerful West and a silent East; it was a historically changing field of knowledge, representation, negotiation, and power.

Keywords: Orientalism; Ottoman Empire; Ottoman Otherness; Oriental Despotism; Eastern Question; Ottoman Decline; Harem; Gender; Edward Said; Ottoman Orientalism; Terminal Epistemology; Postcolonial Theory

1. Introduction: The Ottoman Empire as an Orientalist Problematic:

The study of Orientalism has been profoundly shaped by Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which demonstrated that Western representations of the "Orient" were not merely collections of mistaken images or isolated prejudices. They constituted a historically developed system of knowledge through which the Orient was named, classified, interpreted, and positioned in relation to the West. For Said, representation was inseparable from authority: the power to describe the Orient was also connected to the power to define its identity and historical position¹.

The Ottoman Empire presents a particularly important case for examining this process because it complicates any simple colonial model of Orientalism. The Ottoman state was for centuries a major political and military power whose territories extended across southeastern Europe, Anatolia, the Middle East, and North Africa. European states were therefore not simply observing a distant and powerless East. They were interacting with a formidable empire whose institutions, military organization, diplomacy, commercial networks, and political culture directly affected European history. Nevertheless, European discourse repeatedly transformed Ottoman difference into evidence of political irrationality, civilizational deficiency, and historical backwardness.

This article argues that the construction of Ottoman otherness developed through three interconnected representational registers. The first was political: Ottoman government was frequently described through the language of despotism, arbitrary authority, and unlimited rule. The second was civilizational: particularly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire was increasingly represented as stagnant, backward,

and incapable of adapting to historical change. The third was aesthetic and bodily: the Ottoman world was imagined through the harem, sensuality, gender hierarchy, luxury, and sexual excess. These registers did not operate independently. The supposedly despotic political system reinforced the image of a morally decadent society, while representations of sensuality reinforced the assumption that Ottoman civilization was incapable of rational self-government.

The cumulative effect was more significant than any individual representation. European observers did not always predict the imminent collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and many admired Ottoman military organization, administrative practices, architecture, or social customs. Yet over time, the categories used to interpret Ottoman history increasingly made decline appear inherent to the empire's political and civilizational character. This article describes that cumulative structure as terminal epistemology: an interpretive framework in which political defeats, internal reforms, social tensions, financial problems, and even attempts at modernization could increasingly be interpreted as manifestations of an underlying and supposedly irreversible decline.

The concept is analytical rather than a claim that “terminal epistemology” was a universally recognized category among historical actors. Its purpose is to identify how a discourse of decline could become self-reinforcing. The article therefore does not argue that Ottoman decline was simply fabricated by Europe. The nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire experienced real military defeats, territorial losses, fiscal pressures, nationalist movements, and institutional difficulties. The argument concerns the interpretation of these developments and the ways in which European categories transformed historically contingent crises into evidence of a supposedly essential civilizational weakness.

The article proceeds chronologically and thematically. It first examines medieval Christian representations of Islam and their transformation after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. It then explores the emergence of “Oriental despotism,” the nineteenth-century Eastern Question and the “Sick Man” discourse, and the gendered and aesthetic construction of the Ottoman harem. Finally, it considers Ottoman responses, the concept of “Ottoman Orientalism,” and postcolonial critiques that complicate a purely binary understanding of East and West.

2. From Crusading Polemic to Renaissance Otherness:

Western representations of Islam long preceded the emergence of the Ottoman Empire. Medieval European descriptions of Muslims were shaped by theological controversy, military conflict, pilgrimage, crusading ideology, and limited forms of intercultural knowledge. Norman Daniel has

demonstrated that medieval Christian representations of Islam were not simply products of ignorance; they were structured by inherited theological and polemical categories through which Islam was positioned as a religious and moral challenge to Christianity². John Tolan similarly shows how the figure of the “Saracen” became a flexible representation of religious difference, military threat, and moral otherness³.

The Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 transformed these inherited representations. The fall of the Byzantine capital to Mehmed II generated a new political anxiety in Europe because the Ottoman Empire was no longer simply a distant Muslim power. It had become a major actor within the European political order. Renaissance humanists consequently represented the Ottomans through a combination of historical memory, Christian polemic, political anxiety, and classical categories of civilization and barbarism. Nancy Bisaha demonstrates that Renaissance constructions of “East” and “West” were deeply connected to the encounter with Ottoman power, while Margaret Meserve shows how Ottoman expansion affected Renaissance historical thinking about Islamic empires and European identity⁴.

The significance of this discourse lies in its ability to transform political conflict into civilizational difference. The Ottoman conquest could be represented not merely as a military victory but as the displacement of a supposedly legitimate Christian order by an alien and barbarous power. Thus, political geography became moral geography: territories occupied by the Ottomans were increasingly incorporated into an imagined opposition between European civilization and Oriental domination.

Yet early modern representations were not uniformly negative. European diplomats, merchants, travelers, and military observers often expressed admiration for aspects of Ottoman organization. Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, for example, combined criticism with considerable appreciation for Ottoman military discipline, administrative efficiency, and social organization. Such ambivalence is important because it demonstrates that Orientalism cannot be reduced to a simple conspiracy to produce falsehood. Knowledge of the Ottoman Empire emerged from practical interaction as well as ideological representation.

Daniel Goffman emphasizes that the Ottoman Empire and Europe were deeply interconnected political and economic worlds rather than isolated civilizations⁵. Europeans depended upon diplomacy, trade, military intelligence, and negotiation with Ottoman institutions. This practical interaction created a tension within European discourse: the Ottoman Empire had to be treated as a powerful and sophisticated state while simultaneously being represented as fundamentally different from Europe.

Lucette Valensi's study of Venetian representations of the Ottoman Empire demonstrates how sustained political contact did not eliminate stereotypes. Rather, knowledge generated through diplomacy could coexist with representations of Ottoman political authority as despotic⁶. This coexistence would become one of the defining characteristics of Western Orientalism: proximity did not necessarily dissolve otherness.

3. Oriental Despotism: The Political Construction of Ottoman Difference:

Among the most enduring categories used to describe the Ottoman Empire was despotism. The term did more than describe a particular political structure. It provided a conceptual framework through which European political institutions could be defined as rational, constitutional, and free while Ottoman authority was portrayed as arbitrary, personal, and unlimited.

Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) played an important role in the European intellectual history of political comparison. The Ottoman Empire became one of the principal examples through which European thinkers discussed forms of monarchical and despotic government⁷. It is important, however, not to present Montesquieu as a first-hand observer of the Ottoman Empire. His knowledge was mediated through earlier historical and travel literature and belonged to a broader intellectual tradition of comparative political classification.

Thierry Hentsch argues that European representations of the Middle East were shaped by a conceptual geography in which Europe increasingly appeared as the space of rationality, political freedom, and historical dynamism, while the East became associated with arbitrary authority, passivity, and immobility⁸. The Ottoman Empire could consequently be transformed from a historically specific political system into an abstract example of "Oriental" government.

This distinction is crucial. Ottoman political institutions were considerably more complex than the European category of despotism suggested. Ottoman governance combined *şariat* (Islamic law), *kanun* (sultanic regulations), administrative institutions, provincial arrangements, taxation systems, military organization, and negotiated relationships with local elites. Halil İnalcık's study of the classical Ottoman age demonstrates the institutional complexity of Ottoman governance and the importance of law, bureaucracy, and administrative differentiation⁹. Karen Barkey similarly emphasizes the Ottoman Empire's flexible mechanisms of incorporation, negotiation, and imperial governance¹⁰.

European representations of Ottoman despotism nevertheless tended to compress these complexities into the figure of an all-powerful ruler. The Sultan became the embodiment of an allegedly arbitrary political system.

Such representations made Ottoman political life appear fundamentally different from European political development and implicitly established Europe as the normative standard.

The history of the capitulations further illustrates the problem. These agreements were complex legal and diplomatic arrangements that evolved through changing relations between the Ottoman state and European powers. They cannot simply be explained as the direct result of European belief that Ottoman law was irrational. Nevertheless, the unequal legal privileges increasingly associated with European commercial presence contributed to changing power relations between the empire and European states¹¹. The important point is not that Orientalist discourse alone created these arrangements, but that legal, economic, diplomatic, and representational processes interacted.

Said's formulation of Orientalism helps clarify this interaction. Orientalism worked by converting particular observations into generalized knowledge about "the Orient."¹² Once the Ottoman Empire had been classified as despotic, subsequent political developments could be interpreted through that category. Centralization could be described as tyranny; administrative flexibility could be dismissed as arbitrariness; political negotiation could be interpreted as weakness; and resistance to European pressure could be represented as irrationality.

The political category of despotism therefore performed a double function. It described the Ottoman Empire while simultaneously establishing a contrast through which European political modernity could define itself.

4. From Despotism to Decline: The Eastern Question and Terminal Orientalism:

During the nineteenth century, European representations of the Ottoman Empire underwent an important transformation. The empire that had once been feared as a powerful military rival increasingly appeared as a declining political body whose territorial survival had become a European problem.

This transformation was closely connected to the Eastern Question. The term referred broadly to the diplomatic and political problems generated by the weakening of Ottoman authority and the competition among European powers over Ottoman territories and influence. M. S. Anderson demonstrates that the Eastern Question was not a single policy but a long series of diplomatic crises shaped by the interests of Britain, France, Russia, Austria, and other powers¹³.

The transformation of Ottoman representation from "threat" to "decline" was historically significant. Earlier European discourse had constructed the Ottoman Empire as dangerous because of its strength.

Nineteenth-century discourse increasingly constructed it as dangerous because of its weakness. In both cases, however, the empire remained an object to be interpreted and managed by European powers.

The phrase “Sick Man of Europe” became particularly influential in this context. Although its precise origin and subsequent usage are more complicated than popular accounts often suggest, the expression condensed a larger discourse in which the Ottoman Empire was imagined as a political body suffering from chronic weakness. The metaphor of illness transformed geopolitical change into a diagnosis of civilizational condition.

The Ottoman Empire undoubtedly faced serious problems. Territorial losses, nationalist movements, Russian expansion, fiscal pressures, military defeats, and administrative challenges were genuine historical realities. M. Şükrü Hanioğlu's account of the late Ottoman period demonstrates the complexity of these transformations, while Donald Quataert emphasizes the empire's economic, institutional, and social dynamism even during periods commonly described as decline¹⁴.

The problem therefore lies not in recognizing Ottoman crises but in treating “decline” as an all-encompassing explanation. Once decline became the dominant interpretive framework, contradictory evidence could be absorbed into it. Reform could be interpreted as evidence that the old system was incapable of survival; military modernization could be treated as proof of technological dependence; economic integration could be described as European domination; and political resistance could be represented as an expression of instability.

This is the point at which the concept of terminal epistemology becomes analytically useful. The term identifies a discourse in which the empire's future was increasingly interpreted through the assumption of historical exhaustion. Decline became not merely an event but a mode of knowing.

The Eastern Question consequently transformed Ottoman sovereignty into an object of European management. European powers could present diplomatic intervention, territorial rearrangement, minority protection, or economic pressure as responses to an already diagnosed Ottoman incapacity. The language of humanitarianism sometimes intersected with this political structure. Cemil Aydın has shown how nineteenth-century debates concerning Muslims and the “Muslim world” were deeply connected to changing global power relations and imperial politics¹⁵.

William Ewart Gladstone's denunciation of Ottoman atrocities in Bulgaria, for instance, involved genuine humanitarian concerns, yet the political uses of such representations cannot be separated from the larger geopolitical environment. Humanitarian language and imperial interests could coexist.

The Ottoman Empire was thus increasingly represented as a political body whose internal problems justified external observation and intervention. The discourse of decline did not mechanically produce the empire's collapse, but it helped establish the intellectual conditions under which Ottoman sovereignty could increasingly be treated as provisional.

5. The Aesthetic Other: Harem, Gender, and the Orientalist Imagination:

Political representations of Ottoman despotism were reinforced by an aesthetic and gendered construction of the Orient. Few images became more powerful in European Orientalist culture than the harem.

The harem occupied a special position in Western imagination because it could simultaneously signify political power, gender domination, sexual secrecy, luxury, and Oriental excess. Meyda Yeğenoğlu argues that the harem was not simply an ethnographic subject but a site through which colonial and gendered fantasies were produced¹⁶. The imagined harem allowed European observers to transform social and domestic arrangements into evidence of a broader Oriental mentality.

Reina Lewis similarly demonstrates how Orientalist representations were deeply connected to constructions of gender and racial difference¹⁷. The Oriental woman became an aesthetic object through which European artists and writers could imagine an apparently passive, eroticized, and secluded East.

European painters such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, and Jean-Léon Gérôme contributed to this visual construction. Their works did not necessarily reproduce the actual conditions of Ottoman domestic life. Instead, they produced an imagined Orient in which sensuality, luxury, confinement, and spectacle became central visual themes.

Linda Nochlin's influential discussion of the "imaginary Orient" demonstrates how Orientalist painting depended upon the unequal relationship between the European observer and the represented Oriental subject¹⁸. The image of the Orient was therefore not simply a neutral record of cultural difference; it was a product of a particular gaze.

Yet female European travelers complicated these representations. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's observations of Ottoman women during her residence in the Ottoman Empire challenged several male European assumptions about Muslim women's complete social exclusion. Her writings described aspects of women's sociability, property, domestic authority, and social interaction that did not fit the dominant European fantasy of the harem¹⁹. Such accounts remind us that Orientalist discourse was never entirely uniform.

The harem nevertheless remained powerful because it linked the political and aesthetic registers of Orientalism. The Sultan's alleged political despotism was mirrored in the imagined sexual domination of women. The luxury of the palace was connected to assumptions of moral decadence. The seclusion of women was interpreted as evidence of a broader social incapacity for freedom.

Thus, the Orientalist body became a political metaphor. The allegedly confined woman represented the allegedly confined civilization. The harem could consequently function as a visual shorthand for an entire theory of Ottoman society.

This relationship between sexuality, gender, and political power is central to understanding why Orientalism was so resilient. Political categories such as despotism could appear abstract, but the harem transformed them into emotionally compelling images. The political and the erotic reinforced each other.

6. Ottoman Responses: Counter-Gaze, Self-Fashioning, and Ottoman Orientalism:

A major limitation of a purely Western-centered account of Orientalism would be to treat Ottoman subjects as passive recipients of European representations. Ottoman intellectuals, diplomats, administrators, reformers, and political elites actively observed Europe and developed their own responses to European political and cultural power.

The nineteenth-century Tanzimat reforms were part of this transformation. Ottoman reformers sought to reorganize administration, military institutions, education, taxation, law, and political representation. Their objectives were not reducible to imitation of Europe. They also emerged from internal Ottoman debates about sovereignty, justice, state capacity, and imperial survival²⁰.

Carter Findley and Fatma Müge Göçek have demonstrated the complexity of Ottoman modernization and the role of intellectual, bureaucratic, and social transformations in reshaping the empire²¹. Reform therefore represented both an internal project and an international process. Ottoman statesmen increasingly operated within a European-dominated diplomatic environment in which the empire's legitimacy was continuously judged according to European categories of civilization and progress.

Selim Deringil's concept of Ottoman self-fashioning is particularly useful here. The late Ottoman state sought to present itself as modern, civilized, administratively capable, and internationally legitimate through institutions such as schools, hospitals, telegraph networks, railways, exhibitions, and official ceremonies²². These practices were not simply

imitations of Europe; they were strategies of state representation through which Ottoman sovereignty was publicly performed.

The empire was therefore engaged in a counter-gaze. Ottoman actors observed European institutions, categorized European societies, and debated what could be adopted, resisted, or transformed. The relationship between Europe and the Ottoman Empire was thus reciprocal, even though the two sides did not possess equal geopolitical power.

At the same time, Ottoman responses complicate the idea of a simple opposition between colonizer and colonized. Ussama Makdisi's concept of "Ottoman Orientalism" demonstrates that Orientalist patterns could also operate within the Ottoman Empire itself²³. Ottoman elites could represent Arab provinces and other peripheral populations through categories of backwardness, tribalism, and the need for modernization. The Ottoman center could therefore reproduce classificatory distinctions similar to those that European powers used against the empire.

This insight is theoretically important. Orientalism should not be understood exclusively as something Europeans "did" to Muslims. It was also a broader mode of producing knowledge about difference that could be appropriated by actors situated outside Europe.

Kemal Karpat's work on the politicization of Islam further demonstrates how Ottoman rulers responded strategically to European imperial power. Pan-Islamic discourse under Sultan Abdülhamid II was not simply an expression of religious sentiment; it also functioned as a political and diplomatic strategy through which the Ottoman state sought to mobilize transregional Muslim solidarity²⁴.

Ottoman actors therefore operated within a contested field of representation. They resisted European classifications, adopted selected elements of European modernity, reformulated Islamic political language, and sometimes reproduced hierarchical categories within their own imperial structure.

7. Beyond Said: Rethinking Orientalism in the Ottoman Context:

Said's Orientalism remains indispensable for understanding the relationship between knowledge and power, but the Ottoman case also reveals the limitations of treating Orientalism as a homogeneous Western project.

Said defines Orientalism as a system in which the Orient is produced through representational practices, scholarly institutions, literary conventions, and political structures²⁵. In the 1978 edition, his discussion of "Knowing the Oriental" emphasizes how representation becomes connected to authority, while the section on "Imaginative Geography" explains how

conceptual boundaries between “East” and “West” are constructed rather than naturally given²⁶.

Said's argument is especially valuable for the Ottoman case because it allows us to examine not only what Europeans said about the empire but also how categories of knowledge acquired authority. The Ottoman Empire was repeatedly made intelligible through concepts such as despotism, sensuality, decline, and backwardness. These categories simplified a complex historical reality into recognizable forms.

At the same time, critics have warned against treating Orientalism as a completely unified or uniformly hostile Western tradition. Robert Irwin emphasizes the diversity of Orientalist scholarship and challenges interpretations that reduce all European study of the East to political manipulation²⁷. John M. MacKenzie similarly highlights cultural exchange, complexity, and forms of genuine intellectual engagement that cannot be reduced to a single imperial logic²⁸.

These critiques do not invalidate Said. Rather, they encourage a more historically differentiated application of his framework. Orientalism was not one discourse operating identically across five centuries. Its meanings changed according to political circumstances, scholarly institutions, artistic conventions, and European encounters with different parts of the Ottoman world.

Aijaz Ahmad's critique is useful in another direction because it draws attention to political economy, class, capitalism, and material structures that can sometimes be underdeveloped in purely discursive approaches²⁹. Oriental representations were embedded in material relations involving trade, finance, diplomacy, military competition, and imperial expansion.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of provincializing Europe offers another useful perspective. European historical experience increasingly became the implicit measure through which other societies were judged. Ottoman political and social development could consequently appear deficient because it did not follow the European trajectory of modernization in the same form³⁰. The problem was not simply that Europe was described as superior; European history became the universal historical standard.

Homi Bhabha's theory of ambivalence further complicates the picture. Colonial stereotypes require repetition precisely because they encounter evidence that contradicts them³¹. The Ottoman Empire could therefore simultaneously appear as powerful and weak, sophisticated and backward, dangerous and decadent. Such contradictions did not necessarily destroy Orientalist discourse; they could become part of its flexibility.

The Ottoman case thus suggests that Orientalism should be approached as a dynamic field rather than a fixed ideological structure.

8. The Ottoman Empire as an Epistemological Battleground:

The historical development examined above reveals a remarkable continuity within apparently different European representations of the Ottoman Empire.

In the medieval period, Muslim difference was predominantly articulated through Christian theological and military categories. Following the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, Ottoman power became increasingly central to European constructions of political and civilizational identity. Early modern diplomatic encounters introduced more detailed knowledge without eliminating stereotypes. Enlightenment political theory transformed Ottoman difference into the abstract category of despotism. During the nineteenth century, the language of despotism increasingly merged with narratives of stagnation and decline. Orientalist art and literature simultaneously transformed the Ottoman world into an aesthetic and gendered spectacle.

These transformations can be summarized through three interconnected registers:

8.1 The Political Register:

The Ottoman state was represented as despotic, arbitrary, centralized, and insufficiently constitutional. This representation established a contrast between supposedly European political liberty and Oriental political domination.

8.2 The Civilizational Register:

The empire was increasingly described as stagnant, backward, and unable to adapt. Ottoman military defeats and political crises became evidence of an underlying civilizational deficiency.

8.3 The Aesthetic and Bodily Register:

The harem, palace, gender relations, sensuality, and luxury became visual and literary symbols of Oriental excess. Political domination was projected onto the body and domestic sphere.

These registers mutually reinforced one another. Despotism suggested political immaturity; political immaturity suggested civilizational backwardness; civilizational backwardness was represented through images of sensuality and excess.

This cumulative process is what the present study calls terminal epistemology. Terminal epistemology should not be confused with a conspiracy theory. European observers did not necessarily coordinate their representations or consciously seek the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. Nor should it be assumed that all European writers were hostile to the empire. Rather, the concept identifies the way in which a dominant

interpretive framework could progressively organize diverse evidence around an expectation of decline.

The power of such a framework lies in its capacity to absorb contradiction. Ottoman reform could be interpreted as evidence of weakness because reform was considered necessary. Resistance to reform could be interpreted as evidence of backwardness. Military modernization could be interpreted as dependence on Europe. Economic integration could be interpreted as loss of sovereignty. Territorial survival could be considered temporary rather than evidence of resilience.

This epistemological structure did not cause Ottoman collapse in a simple causal sense. The empire's transformation resulted from a complex combination of internal political struggles, nationalism, economic change, military competition, imperialism, diplomatic pressures, and global transformations. Nevertheless, the discourse of inevitable decline influenced how these processes were understood and how interventions were justified.

The Ottoman Empire was therefore not simply an object of European knowledge. It was an epistemological battleground in which different actors contested the meaning of modernity, sovereignty, civilization, religion, and political legitimacy.

9. Conclusion:

The construction of Ottoman otherness was a long historical process rather than a single ideological event. From medieval Christian polemic to Renaissance humanism, from Enlightenment theories of despotism to nineteenth-century narratives of decline, and from diplomatic literature to Orientalist paintings of the harem, European representations repeatedly transformed Ottoman difference into a system of political, civilizational, and aesthetic classification.

The Ottoman Empire is particularly important for the study of Orientalism because it challenges the assumption that the Orient was always a powerless object of Western observation. For centuries the Ottoman state was a major imperial actor that shaped European politics and possessed its own diplomatic, intellectual, and cultural traditions. Its relationship with Europe was therefore characterized by interaction, competition, appropriation, and mutual observation as well as inequality.

The central argument of this article is that three representational registers despotism, decline, and sensualized otherness gradually reinforced one another. Together they contributed to an epistemological framework in which Ottoman political and civilizational decline increasingly appeared inevitable. The concept of terminal epistemology captures this cumulative logic without reducing Ottoman history to European invention or assuming a deliberate European conspiracy.

At the same time, Ottoman actors actively responded to Western representations. Reformers, diplomats, intellectuals, and rulers sought to redefine Ottoman political legitimacy, demonstrate administrative capacity, engage with European modernity, and construct alternative forms of imperial identity. The phenomenon of Ottoman Orientalism further demonstrates that classificatory practices were not exclusively Western; they could be appropriated and reproduced within the Ottoman imperial order itself.

The broader implication is that Orientalism should be understood neither as a collection of false images nor as a completely unified European ideology. It was a historically changing system of knowledge in which scholarship, diplomacy, literature, art, political theory, and material power interacted. The Ottoman experience reveals how representations could survive contradictory evidence because they were embedded in broader structures of authority.

The study of Ottoman Orientalism therefore requires moving beyond the simple opposition between “West” and “East.” What must instead be examined is the historical production of categories through which societies came to be classified as modern or backward, rational or despotic, dynamic or stagnant, civilized or Oriental. Such an approach does not merely reverse the hierarchy by idealizing the Ottoman past. It reconstructs Ottoman history in its complexity and restores historical agency to Ottoman actors while recognizing the unequal structures within which they operated.

Ultimately, the Ottoman Empire demonstrates that the struggle over history is also a struggle over knowledge. To understand how the empire was represented is therefore not simply to study European images of the East; it is to examine how political power, cultural imagination, and historical interpretation became mutually constitutive. The Ottoman case makes visible the enduring relationship between representation and sovereignty, knowledge and power, and historical difference and the politics of civilization.

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