



Transnational Orientalism

Henry Corbin in Iran

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Abstract. – A convergence of German, French, and Iranian interests cast the career of French Orientalist, philosopher, and theologian Henry Corbin (1903–1978). Corbin's Orientalism was in crucial respects a transnational project. This fact stands in contrast to Edward Said's thesis, which portrays Orientalism as unilateral imposition. The reality of collaboration in the construction of a "mystical East" is reinforced by another paradox: whereas "Corbinism" emerged in conjunction with the prerevolutionary polity in Iran, some of his pupils developed it towards Islamic Republican ideology. Thus, antihistoricist hermeneutics merged once more with indigenous representations of the self. [*Iran, Shiism, transnationalism, hermeneutics, Orientalism, representation*]

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Henry Corbin's presence in Iran from 1945 figured in a confluence of interests, ideas and passions, both French, German, Iranian, secular, and religious. The present essay explores the full complexity of "Easterners" and "Westerners" in the creation of Corbin's Orientalism, and thereby counters the paradigm that reduces the construction of "the Orient" to Western hegemony.

Two of Corbin's preoccupations in particular, the critique of the Western loss of "tradition"

and religiously inspired hermeneutic analysis, linked up seamlessly with Iranian concerns for the legitimacy of Shiism in the face of modernity. The modern construction of Shiism by Corbin and several Iranian intellectuals had Shiism as a mystical and essentially nonpolitical project. But since the Islamic revolution of 1978–1979, Corbin has paradoxically retained a presence in pro-regime representations of the self in the Islamic Republic. Thus, Corbin's transnational Orientalism assumed a second life after his demise in 1978.

These instances of transnational Orientalism elude the conceptualisation of scholarship on Islam by Edward Said (1991 [1978]). In his analysis, Orientalism has been conceived of as a Western discourse, which stems from an unequal world order, helps sustain it, and reflects its contexts of production rather than its object.

What has been termed "Orientalism in reverse" (al-'Azm 1981) – the representation of the self in "the Orient" in terms of Orientalist constructions – is a concept that similarly documents Western presence and Eastern absence. "Oriental Orientalism" thus constitutes a residual category that bespeaks precisely the terms of passivity and the defiance of "agency" (Ortner 1995) that Said confronted, as both projection and imposition, in Orientalism.

The denial of an interactive, constructive imagination in "Oriental Orientalism" as much as in the "Occidental" variety, compares to what critical anthropology posits – although with inverse political sentiments and implications – as the "denial of co-