Abstract

In his influential Orientalism Edward Said placed British statesman and writer Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) in the long line of the Western writers who cultivated particular stereotypes about the Muslim East, with the hidden intention of imperial subjugation. On the other side, Said’s critics Patrick Brantlinger and Mark Proudman asserted that Disraeli was not an Orientalist, but rather an admirer of the Arabic and Ottoman civilizations and determined defender of the Ottoman Empire.

However, Disraeli’s novels, correspondence and his policy in the Great Eastern Crisis give more complex evidence, which does not support any of these views. This paper emphasises the point that during his long career Disraeli was changing his views of the Turks and the Ottoman Empire, which even Patrick Brantlinger’s balanced approach to the issue of Disraeli’s Orientalism misses.

Key words: Benjamin Disraeli, Edward Said, Orientalism, Balkanism, Islam, Arabs, Turks, The Ottoman Empire, The Eastern Question.

I

Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), the British Prime Minister, one of the most prominent Western statesmen of the XIX century, and very well known novelist of his time, had very special relationship with the South-Eastern Europe. As a young adventurer, only a year
after the peace of Adrianople, he traveled through the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire. At the time of the Crimean War he was the leader of the Tories in the House of Commons. During his long career, Disraeli frequently came into direct contact with the Ottoman Empire and the states of the Balkan Peninsula, he wrote about them in his novels, and observed events there from a distance. In the end, as Prime Minister, during the Great Eastern Crisis and Congress of Berlin (1875-1878), he played a key role in the negotiations and drawing of South-Eastern European state borders, and made decisions which influenced millions of human Balkan destinies (Ković 2011).

In the Balkan historiography and collective memory Disraeli is remembered as a devoted turcophile, who protected the Ottoman Empire throughout the Great Eastern Crisis, even making jokes in the House of Commons about the Ottoman Atrocities in Bulgaria. He saved the Ottoman Empire and extended its life when, as the Russian armies were approaching the walls of Constantinople, he dispatched Indian Muslim troops to Malta and sent British ships sailing towards the Bosporus.

This is why, looking from the South-Eastern Europe, it is very curious that Edward Said in his influential Orientalism (1978) placed Disraeli in the long line of the Western writers who cultivated and spread particular, negative stereotypes about the Muslim East, with the more or less open intention of its imperial subjugation. Moreover, Said chose the sentence from Disraeli’s novel Tancred – “The East is a career” – for the motto of whole Orientalism. Thus, in this groundwork of the flourishing academical field of “post-colonial studies”, Disraeli earned special place, as one of the most important Western “Orientalists” (Said 2003).

This is how Said encapsulates Disraeli’s image of the Oriental peoples: “An Oriental lives in the Orient, he lives a life or Oriental ease, in a state of Oriental despotism and sensuality, imbued with the feeling of Oriental fatalism” (Ibid: 102). The construction of this kind of stereotype is, according to Said, only first step to the imposition of the Western political, imperial and colonial rule:

“To write about Egypt, Syria, or Turkey, as much as traveling in them, was a matter of touring the realm of political will, political management, political definition. The territorial imperative was extremely compelling, even for so unrestrained a writer as Disraeli, whose Tancred is not merely an oriental lark but an exercise in the astute political management of actual forces on actual territories” (Ibid: 169).
II

Said’s *Orientalism* was published in 1978, and in the next three decades it became one of the most important and cited texts in the 20th century humanities. But treating the huge amounts of the Western modern intellectual production simply as imperialist discourse, it still provokes mixed responses and polemical answers.

Two of these were entirely devoted to the topic of Disraeli’s ‘Orientalism’. Patrick Brantlinger, in his discussion *Disraeli and Orientalism* (1998), asserts that Disraeli’s orientalism was:

“...first, a less unified ideology than a mixture of hybrid, changing, often contradictory ideas, attitudes and poses, second, it was mainly positive rather than negative (that is, that it celebrated rather than denigrated things eastern); and third, that Disraeli was himself (as he insisted throughout his career) a hybrid character – both British and Jewish, and perhaps as much oriental as orientalist” (Brantlinger 1998: 91).

Less balanced and informed, but more interesting is Mark Proudman’s article *Disraeli as an “Orientalist”*, published in 2005. Its subtitle is very direct: *The Polemical Errors of Edward Said*. In contrast to Brantinger, Proudman’s severe criticism is directed not only towards Said’s interpretation of Disraeli’s orientalism; he also challenges basic ideas of the Said’s book, and contests method of discourse analyses, including whole area of ‘post-colonial studies’.

Considering Disraeli’s imperial designs in *Tancred*, Mark Proudman insists that this novel “is no more a program for the conquest of the Levant than it is for the annexation of Attica” (Proudman 2005: 16). But Proudman’s main evidence for the Disraeli’s pro-Islamic stance instead of his ‘Orientalism’, comes from Disraeli’s policy towards the Ottoman Empire during the Great Eastern Crisis:

“The problem with using Disraeli as an archetypal Orientalist is that, far from seeing ‘Islam as militant hostility to European Christianity,’ he had a positive view of Islam, and for all his imperialism in other areas of the world, wished above all to preserve the independent power of the primary Islamic empire, Ottoman Turkey, against, among others, the French and the Russians. Though in Said’s view Disraeli is doubly damned as both a literary Orientalist and a political imperialist, as Prime Minister he followed a policy that consistently favored Islamic Turkey over Christian Russia, and he did so against significant domestic opposition. In the
1870s, atrocities committed by the Turks in Bulgaria became what a later age would have called the human rights question of the day. Liberals, led by Gladstone, held what they called—without irony—“indignation meetings” about the fate of the Eastern Christians, and it was the Liberals rather than Disraeli’s Tories who produced copious amounts of anti-Islamic invective” (Ibid: 558-559).

Patrick Brantlinger and Mark Proudman are right when they insist that Disraeli was not the Orientalist of the kind that Edward Said suggests. Indeed, Disraeli’s perception of the Muslim, Arab East was affirmative, leaving almost no space for the negative stereotypes. Brantlinger also gives very good evidence for the assertion that Disraeli considered himself to be an Oriental, as a result of his own search for his Jewish roots, and of his refashioning of his Jewish and Eastern identity. Indeed, in Disraeli’s case, it was perfectly feasible to be an Oriental and British, and ‘Oriental’ (considering one’s identity) and ‘Orientalist’ (imperialist in politics) at the same time. Proudman fails to take into account Disraeli’s Oriental identity, maybe because he constantly avoids Disraeli’s controversial racial theories.

But my main point is that none of these three writers, Said, Brantlinger and Proudman, notices that Disraeli’s attitude towards Muslim Arabs is not the same as his image of the Muslim Turks. Said and Brantlinger are much more focused on his perception of the Arabs, understanding that there are no essential differences in his attitude towards the Turks. Proudman looks at Disraeli’s perceptions of both Arabs and Turks, but he does not see these important differences. Needless to say, the closer scrutiny of the Disraeli’s attitude towards the Turks and Ottomans is of special importance for the understanding of the history of South-Eastern Europe and the Great Eastern Crisis.

III

Among the different types of the historical sources left by Disraeli to the historian’s curiosity about his strange personality and complex identity, his novels are, as Isaiah Berlin was first to notice, the most important. This is where his racial theories and his ideas about racial hierarchy were most elaborately exposed.

There is no dispute among historians about the existence of Disraeli’s Jewish identity. In fact, in the last few decades the topic
of Disraeli’s Jewishness became very fashionable (Kirsch 2008; Glassman 2003; Endelman and Kushner (eds.) 2002; Endelman 1998; Wohl 1995; Weintraub 1993: xi-xiv, 17–32; Rather 1986; Arendt 1994: 68-79; Endelman 1985; Berlin 1981). The only question is whether Disraeli developed his Jewish identity already during his Grand Tour, while visiting Holy Land and Jerusalem, as Robert Blake and Patrick Brantlinger think, or was it only the beginning of the transition, which took its full form in his novels, a decade later, as Tod Endelman asserts (Blake 1982: 109-110, 128–129; Berlin 1981: 268–275. See: Ridley 1995: 96; Sultana 1976: 63, 68; Endelman 1998: 119). With this transition his Jewish roots were transformed from a source of social insecurity, to the source of pride and self-confidence.

At the same time, he developed a split English and Jewish identity. His English identity was always combined with his imperialist ideas. He would remain faithful to the ideas from his early novel Alroy, so that, as a forerunner of future Zionism, he would entertain ideas of the creation of a Jewish national state in the Middle-East, with the assistance of Great Britain (Disraeli 1927a; Ković 2011: 35-36, 51-53). British imperialist and Jewish nationalist, in the future, he would be a determined opponent of nationalist ideas of ‘other peoples’, including Balkan nations.

In his novels Coningsby (1844) and Tancred (1847), and in his biography of his friend, Tory politician Lord George Bentinck (1851), Disraeli fully developed his racial theories. On the top of his hierarchy of races were Semitic peoples, “Arabian race”, or “Arabian tribes” as he calls them. It consisted mostly of Jews and Arabs - “Mosaic and the Mohammedan Arabs”. Because of the isolation of their desert life during the centuries, they are “unmixed race” of “pure blood”. “An unmixed race of a first-rate organisation is the aristocracy of Nature” - Disraeli concludes. Because it is “unmixed”, “Arabian race” is the best stock of the broader, also noble, but mainly mixed “Caucasian race”. This is where Indo-Europeans belong, including English (Disraeli 1904: 193-199).

This is how Disraeli constructed his newly invented racial, aristocratic identity, quite possibly as defence against anti-Semitism that he had to deal with for whole of his life. However, for the topic of this article it is important to stress that he never draw precise line between “Mosaic and the Mohammedan Arabs”. Thus, affiliation to the Muslim Arabs was almost as important to him as affiliation to
Jews. After all, as he says, “the Arabs are the Jews on horses” (Disraeli 1927c: 261). Edward Said notices cynism in these words (Said 2003: 102), but it does not look like that at all. This is how Disraeli became Oriental, or how he re-Orientalised himself.

IV

But the Turks were different matter. During his Grand Tour (1830-1831), this young conservative was amazed by the self-confidence with which the Turks ruled over their possessions, while their brutal repression of any rebels inspired his romanticist imagination. With the respect for the Ottoman masters of the Balkans came a loathing for their lowly and disloyal Christian subjects. Along with a sense of class solidarity with the Turks, on his travels he also developed a sense of imperial solidarity with them. He believed that a nation whose empire was just dawning had a lot to learn from the example an empire which was at its dusk (Ković 2011: 14-28). In this sense, according to Maria Todorova scrutiny of Balkanism (Todorova 1997: 3–20. See also: Skopetea 1991; Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992; Goldsworthy 1998; Fleming 2000; Hammond 2004; Šijaković 2004), and especially of the English aristocratic sort of Balkanism, Disraeli was much more Balkanist than Orientalist.

However, from the time of his ‘Grand Tour’ to the beginning of the Great Eastern Crisis, Disraeli changed his opinion of the Ottoman Empire and the Turks. Having evolved his racial theories to their ends, in *Tancred* he placed the Turks within the despotic, ‘Tatar’ race, ‘lower’ than the ‘Caucasian’ race. British, Russians and Americans are of Caucasian blood, and Disraeli predicts bright future for their empires. But the Turkish “Tataric system” is something different, and the Arabian races of the Middle East have to “sweep away” its rule (Disraeli 1927c: 440-441). In *Tancred*, Disraeli was already toying with the idea of the partition of the Ottoman empire, while in *Lothair* (1870) he showed that he had lost his old faith in the future of the Turks (Ibid: 439-440, 443; Disraeli 1927d: 407). It seems that even Disraeli was influenced by the general disappointment of the British, especially liberal public opinion with its Crimean war ally, who proved himself incapable for the serious structural reforms.

From the beginning to the end of the Great Eastern crisis, Disraeli did not officially retreat from the proclaimed policy of protecting
the ‘integrity and independence’ of the Ottoman Empire. He made little effort, however, to hide the fact that in Turkey he saw merely a means for preventing the expansion of Russia into the Balkans as well as for maintaining the existing balance of power in Europe. In Parliament, he openly proclaimed that the goal of his government was not the defence of the Ottoman Empire but rather of the British Empire. At the beginning of September 1876, he wrote to Derby that the whole ‘agitation’ was based on the mistaken assumption that Britain was protecting Turkey, and that, as far as he was concerned, “all the Turks may be in the Propontis” (Disraeli Papers, Lord Beaconsfield – Lord Derby, Hughenden, 6 September 1876; Monypenny and Buckle 1929b: 925).

Disraeli still believed that the preservation of the Ottoman Empire was the best means of defending the British Empire, about which he spoke so often and which he tirelessly praised. If need be however, he was, judging from his correspondence, prepared to accept the partition of the Ottoman Empire. Should such a situation arise, he demanded a strategically important location for Britain, from which its fleet could threaten and halt a Russian advance to the south – he made reference to Varna, Batum, Aleksandretta, Lesbos, Crete, before taking Cyprus in the end. On the subject of the location of a strategic base, Disraeli constantly changed his mind, but he was consistent in his claim that, in the event of the partition of the Ottoman Empire, Britain should occupy Constantinople (Ibid., 4 September 1876; Ibid., 29 September 1876; Ibid., 30 September 1876; Monypenny and Buckle 1929b: 924-925, 946-947; Ković 2011: 246, 263).

After Congress of Berlin, where some of the most precious sultan’s possessions were portioned between “Caucasian” Great Powers, the most important ally of Disraeli’s government in the Balkans was not the Ottoman Empire anymore, but the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Berlin Disraeli proposed its military occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, against the will and with the active resistance of the Turks (Ibid., 275-276. 292-293).

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To conclude, Disraeli was indeed more Oriental than Orientalist, though he had his own imperialist designs for the East. He identified himself not with the “Muslim East”, but with the “Muslim
Arabs”. Disraeli’s perception of the Turks, was much more in tune with the Orientalist discourse. His positive political and cultural inclinations towards the Ottoman empire weakened with time. But this cannot be said of the disregard in which he held the Balkan nations. From that point of view, Disraeli was rather Balkanist than Orientalist.

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