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Leighton and the Middle East website: Empires and People

Attitudes to Race and Ethnicity in the British and Ottoman Empires

Ethnic suspicion – A Long History

For as long as humankind has existed, groups have viewed those different from themselves with an element of caution and suspicion. Language, ethnicity and skin colour are some of the most obvious factors in defining a group identity. It is exactly these same factors that come to the fore when issues of prejudice arise. Throughout history, world empires have used such prejudices to dominate other peoples and bolster their own sense of superiority. The British and Ottoman empires were no different. The British explorer and diplomat Richard Burton, who was a friend of Leighton, summed up Victorian thinking on race for many when he said ‘I believe the European to be the brains, the Asiatic the heart, the American and African the arms and the Australian the feet of the man figure’. As early as 1060 BCE a judge in Islamic Spain describes eastern Europeans in the following manner ‘the slavs, the Bulgars (Bulgarians) and their neighbours, lack keenness of understanding and clarity of intelligence and are overcome by ignorance and dullness, lack of discernment and stupidity’. The above comments should not however be taken to mean that prejudiced views prevented interaction and civility between different cultures. Historical evidence



*Arab slave merchant with a female slave,
Cairo, c.1864
(photograph © Michael Graham-Stewart)*

proves that people in the West and East were genuinely friendly and courteous to foreign travellers in their respective parts of the world. Prejudice, when it did occur, was rarely on an individual basis but more when thinking about a society at large for example the Arabs, the Africans, the Europeans etc.

The enslavement of Africa by the East and West

It is now estimated that over 11 million Africans were transported to the West during the height of the European slave trade. Around the same number also applies to those taken from Africa by the Middle Eastern slave trade. There were some differences in the nature of the slave trade conducted by the East and West. The Eastern slave trade had a longer history than the European. Starting in the 600's BCE it focused specifically on taking Africans into domestic as opposed to agricultural slavery. Due to this a higher proportion of slaves to the Middle East were women. They became servants, cooks and concubines throughout the region. Men also became domestic servants but most became soldiers for the sultan or local ruling official.



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The European slave trade though shorter in time-span (1600's – 1800's) was carried out more intensively to supply economic labour to western cotton and sugar plantations. For this reason African men were preferred over women. The trade in ivory and slavery was closely linked. Slaves were forced to carry the tusks of elephants with them to the African ports before they were all shipped to European or Middle Eastern markets. However, while the nature of the slave trade between East and West may have differed in some respects, the plight of the Africans was the same – brutally abducted from home and family and sold into an alien society.

Ideas of Racial Superiority – Religious and Scientific Excuses

Both Christian and Muslim slave owners could and did claim slavery was legitimate as it is mentioned in both the Bible and the Koran:

As for those of your slaves which wish to buy their liberty, free them if you find in them any promise.

(The Qur'an, Chapter 24, Verse 32)

Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But even if you can gain your freedom, make use of it.

(New Testament, Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians)

Slavery in the ancient world was considered an important element in the working of most cultures. Slaves were classified as property. It is therefore not unusual to find references to slavery in the texts of the pre-modern societies responsible for writing the Bible and the Koran.

There were many Christians and Muslims over the centuries who argued against slavery and other practices deemed acceptable by these early societies. The anti-slavery work of the Quakers is well known in the West. There were similar movements in the East. The Moroccan historian Ahmad ibn Khalid al-Nasiri (1834–97) wrote 'thus will be apparent to you the heinousness of the affliction which has beset the lands of the Maghrib (North Africa) since ancient times in regard to the indiscriminate enslaving of the people of the Sudan and the importation of droves of them every year to be sold in the market places in town and country where men trade in them as one would trade in beasts, nay worse than that'.

Science

Slavery was not only justified by references to religion, science was also used. The writings of the Roman physician Galen (129-216 BCE), in particular his comments on black people living in Rome were later widely translated in the Arab world and in turn influenced European thought. Galen wrote 'a great merriment dominates the black man because of his defective brain whence also the weakness of his intelligence'. This particular passage was commonly translated into Arabic and Latin and influenced scientific texts. It is therefore not unusual to see the Tunisian writer Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) state 'the negro nations are as a rule submissive to slavery because they have attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals'. Likewise, Victorian society had a deep-rooted belief that all races went through stages from being 'savages' to being 'civilised'. The Victorians believed that European, but particularly British culture was the best example of a



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civilised race of people. Cultures of the Middle East, while considered inferior in racial development, were still considered to be more advanced than peoples from the continent of Africa.

The idea of a hierarchy of races did not just apply to non-white populations. Towards the end of the century the writer and artist Max Beerbohm wrote of the Irish ‘the Irish people, unspoiled, in their own island have not merely their own charm, but that charm also which belongs to all exotics’. Terms such as ‘exotic’, ‘sensuous’ and ‘primitive’ were often used in relation to cultures that were considered to be not as ‘advanced’ as Victorian Britain. Even within England itself, debate raged over who could be classified as a true Englishman. In 1854 the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, ‘as you go north into the manufacturing and agricultural districts, and go to the populations that never travels, as you go into Yorkshire, as you enter Scotland, the worlds Englishman is no longer found’.

Many Victorian writers and theorists of the time tried to find a reason as to why they thought the ‘British race’ was so successful. Many of them felt the answer was to be found in the controversial book by Charles Darwin called ‘The Origin of Species’ published in 1859. Using Darwin’s idea of evolution, many academics came to the conclusion that the white man (usually British) was the most advanced of the human species in evolutionary terms. All other ethnic groups were perceived to still lag behind. This notion of ‘survival of the fittest’ became known as social Darwinism. Charles Darwin himself was appalled that his work was used to justify British rule over other countries and peoples.

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Other articles in this section:

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- ***Britain's relationship with the Middle East in the 1800's***
- ***Daily Life in the Middle East in the 1800's***
- ***Frederic Leighton's views on race***