Among the “theoretical perspectives” that the modern academy expects us to take seriously is what is known as “post-colonial theory”—or “poco theory” in university slang. Like many academic theories claiming to be at the height of fashion and politically radical, it has been around for decades, and the bottoms of its leading practitioners rest on distinguished and well-funded chairs. Nor does poco theory present much novelty in the realm of thought. It blends its cocktail of theory from writers of the 1930s such as Antonio Gramsci, Mao Zedong, and the sesquipedalian sages of the Frankfurt School, then decorates it with brightly colored fruit and paper umbrellas supplied by the cultural Marxists of the 1960s. It argues, or rather asserts, that the experience of non-Western peoples under Western colonial rule can be comprehended in terms of Manichean opposites. Colonialists are the dominant power, imposing a hegemonic discourse of values, monopolizing “agency,” committing “epistemic violence” by suppressing native cultures, and claiming to represent progress and enlightenment while stripping wealth from its victims, who are reduced to slavery. The native peoples dominated by imperialists are the “subalternt”; they can only talk in the language of their masters, their own culture is branded as irrational and
barbaric, and they are without agency, incapable of truly autonomous action, forced to be servile, made strangers in their own country, shorn of their wealth and natural resources, lacking even a proper Starbucks. The goal of poco theory is to flip the switch on these polarities, turn on the light, and wake the oppressed from their nightmare of inferiority and powerlessness.

The cocktail of poco theory is intoxicating for some types of undergraduate, especially those already drunk on the approval of their own consciences but possessing little between the ears to absorb the vapors of theory. It does not, however, make for very good history. Old-fashioned Marxism—the sort that wanted to take over the country—produced some very creditable historical writing. In the English language one thinks immediately of E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Cultural Marxism, including poco theory—the sort of theory that wants to take over the English Department—still awaits its great historians. This failure is not really surprising. Poco’s little toolkit of ideas produces a Procrustean theoretical bed built more like a shoebox than a Sealy Posturepedic. When trying to fit the facts of history into it, the poco-Procrustes cannot simply lop off a toe here or stretch out a thumb there. The corpus of historical evidence tends to be far too large and often reclines in less than rectilinear shapes. Poco historians in consequence resemble more the bumbling murderers of dark comedy who dissolve bodies in bathtubs filled with hydrofluoric acid. The resulting soupy concoctions are then poured into partisan “narratives,” in the journalistic sense, not credible historical scholarship. Moreover, and despite their embrace of inflexible dogmatic systems, cultural Marxists are not remarkable for consistency of thought. While protesting against the West’s “essentializing” of non-Western cultures, they see no inconsistency in doing the same to Western civilization. They happily assign to it—as though it had a fixed essence or definition—predicates such as racist, sexist, capitalist, imperialist, and the like. But, as Nietzsche remarked, only that can be defined which has no history.

Imagine now a case in which the West is not dominant, but is itself threatened with domination and conquest by a non-Western power. Imagine if that power was actually defeating the West, taking away massive parts of its territory, conquering its capital cities, enslaving its citizens, undermining its confidence in its own religion and culture. Imagine a West terrified and bewildered by repeated military defeat. In that case, the predicates poco theorists impose on the West’s essence might turn out to be mere accidents of history. The West might turn out to have more complex, self-doubting, even admiring attitudes toward non-Western cultures, and its attitudes might well adapt and change over time.

In fact we don’t need to imagine such a case, since that was precisely the historical situation of the West for centuries in the face of an expanding Ottoman Empire. Noel Malcolm’s new book, Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450–1750, provides an indispensable guide to that encounter that combines deep learning, refined historical judgment, and an elegant authorial voice. Malcolm describes his book as “a study of Western political thinking about Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the early modern period,” roughly 1450 to 1750. But the book offers much more than that. In place of the crude dichotomies of poco theory, Malcolm gives us a detailed empirical analysis of hundreds of sources in many languages (I counted ten, including Hungarian, Serbo-Croat, and Turkish) that discuss Islam and the Ottoman
Empire. There are sixteen thematic chapters ordered within a wider chronological frame, enabling the reader to follow the evolution of Western debates about Islam and the Ottomans over a period when the power of the Sublime Porte first waxed, then waned. Though the focus is on political thought, broadly construed, one learns much along the way about the deep history of modern Western attitudes to Islam and about the Europeans’ evolving assessments of the Ottomans’ government, economy, society, and military strength. The reader acquainted with the contemporary Western literature on great power rivalries, especially the challenge of China to American hegemony in the world, will discover many parallels in these early modern predecessors.

Europe first began to worry about the Ottomans in the late fourteenth century when Byzantine diplomats tried, with uneven success, to enlist the aid of Latin Christendom in the defense of their little Greek empire placed on the seam between Europe and Asia Minor. But the Ottomans well and truly exploded into Western consciousness with their conquest of Constantinople in 1453, and it is here that Malcolm begins his study. The fall of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Christian Empire—or what was left of it after the medieval Crusades—set off a burst of lamentations, terrified panics, feverish military preparations, and apocalyptic prophecies that echoed in the West for more than a century. Preoccupied as ever with its internecine wars, Europe was suddenly forced into awareness of a non-Christian power that could defeat its combined armies and which threatened to wipe out its religion. In the seventh century, Islamic armies had taken two-thirds of the old Roman empire away from its Christian rulers; now, in the fifteenth century, a new Islamic power that threatened to finish the job. For the next three centuries, while Europe helplessly continued its debilitating religious wars and dynastic struggles, it had to fight with its left hand against an aggressive and merciless opponent driven by an intensity of religious fervor that Europeans could not match. As Malcolm notes, there was no quarter century between 1450 and 1750 when some European power was not at war with the Ottomans. The chief markers of Ottoman rise and decline were great battles and sieges: the brief but terrifying Ottoman occupation of the southern Italian town of Otranto in 1480; the Battle of Mohács in 1526, when Suleiman the Magnificent’s armies defeated and subjugated the Hungarians, once the shield of Christendom; the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, where Christian navies, assembled under the aegis of the pope, prevented the Mediterranean from becoming an Islamic lake; and the siege and Battle of Vienna on September 11, 1683, one of the great battles of world history. After their defeat in the Battle of Vienna, the Turks were no longer a military threat to Europe, and the Habsburgs were able to begin the reconquest of Ottoman Hungary and eastern Europe.

One might expect that this long history of terror, blood, and violence would lead Western students of the Ottomans to dehumanize them or turn them into diabolical caricatures of hate and tyrannical oppression. That is certainly what readers of Edward Said’s famous study, Orientalism (1978), would be led to expect, but it is one of Malcolm’s main points that such a representation is far too simple, if not entirely wrong. It does not begin to capture the complexity of Western responses to the Ottoman threat. There were certainly some Westerners, like Martin Luther, who regarded the new Islamic empire as essentially evil, the Sultan as the Devil’s servant, and Islam as
a perverted religion of the sword. Such responses can be found throughout the three centuries covered by Malcolm’s book. But there were also many admiring responses both to the Ottomans and even to Islam.

Malcolm coins the useful term “shame-praising” to draw attention to one way that Westerners formulated positive descriptions of the great Islamic empire. To shame-praise means to praise a different culture or people as a way of shaming one’s own people and culture into better behavior. This practice has an old history in the West, going back to Xenophon’s praise of Persian monarchy in his Cyropaedia, meant to shame fractious Greek democrats, or Tacitus’s praise of barbarian virtue in the Germania, meant to shame his over-civilized fellow Romans for their lack of martial valor. The humanists of the Renaissance turned shame-praising into a light industry; the inferiority of Christian to pagan virtue was a regular theme in their pedagogy. Christian-on-Christian violence was a deplorable feature of early modern Europe, and the Ottomans, with their unswerving devotion to smiting the enemies of their faith, were constantly held up as better models of unified purpose and religious loyalty than any to be found in Christian Europe, torn apart as it was by selfishness and sectarian hatreds.

Shame-praising was one end of a spectrum of positive responses to Ottoman government and religion. At the other end was frank admiration for the superiority of Ottoman ways and a sense that Christendom, if it were to survive in its struggle against Ottoman power, had to discover and replicate the secrets of Ottoman success. Malcolm speaks of a “new paradigm” in Western understandings of the Ottomans that emerged in the course of the sixteenth century. In the old paradigm, in part inherited from medieval authorities, Westerners typically saw Ottoman government as a malevolent and oppressive regime inspired by an evil religion. But thanks to increased diplomatic and mercantile contacts between the Turks and the West as well as to figures like the humanist Guillaume Postel, who took the trouble to learn Arabic and Turkish, materials for a more positive assessment of the Ottomans began to be assembled by Western scholars and men of state.

As Europe descended into religious war, some Western writers began to appreciate the relative tranquility and prosperity of Ottoman lands and to wonder whether Turkish autocracy was superior to Western royal and republican governments. They noted with unease the numerous Christians fleeing to Ottoman lands to escape religious civil wars, some of whom even converted to Islam. The Sultan, after all, allowed people of different faiths to practice their religions without molestation, whereas toleration of any kind was hard to find in Europe. Western humanists had long been critical of legal pettifoggery and endless delays in resolving cases in Western courts, but the Ottomans seemed to be able to deliver justice that was both swift and fair. Western governments were ineffective in part because royal power was shared with nobles and other intermediate and subordinate powers whose interests diverged from those of the crown. By contrast the Ottomans, some Western observers believed, had a meritocratic system where officials were appointed by the sultan on the basis of their virtue and accomplishments, not their noble descent. Such officials were not in a position to place their private interests before that of the
empire, and their loyal service made Ottoman government the best in the world.

This philo-Turkish strain within European thought came to a peak in the thought of Jean Bodin and above all in the utopian writing of Tommaso Campanella. In this chapter—perhaps the most brilliant of the whole book—Malcolm shows that Campanella’s *Città del Sole* (*City of the Sun*) incorporated many features of Ottoman society and Muslim practice derived from the “new paradigm.” Campanella feared the Ottomans but believed Christians would have to imitate them in order to defeat them. His proposed redesign of society was thus in part motivated by considerations drawn from the “reason of state” tradition, but more important was his apocalyptic theology. Campanella’s “republic of the Apocalypse” would introduce a higher and more universal form of Christian theology—long a dream of Renaissance theologians like Pico della Mirandola—that would lead Muslims to convert precisely because of its ecumenical resemblance to the ideals of Islam.

Campanella’s millenarian view of the Ottomans was an outlier, to be sure, although by no means unique. More commonly, the uses Western Christians made of their Muslim enemy were motivated by interests internal to European culture and statecraft. Machiavelli made the Turks into models of the correct use of religion for those who sought to acquire and retain power. Erasmus and Ludovico Vives saw the Ottoman threat as a call to improve the moral character and piety of Christians through humanistic studies. Luther saw Ottoman religious law as a parallel to the Popish religion of works as distinct from the Reformers’ religion of faith. In the era of religious war, the beliefs of Lutherans, radical reformers, Calvinists, and Catholics could all be stigmatized by likening them to those of the hated infidel. Political theorists who sought to moralize Machiavellian realism like Giovanni Botero or Justus Lipsius turned the existential threat of the Ottomans into an excuse for the violation of moral norms. Just war theorists like Grotius or Alberico Gentili used the Ottomans as a *corpus vile* for debates about the morality of war and conquest. Yet few theorists disagreed with the position, adopted already in the thirteenth century by Pope Innocent IV, that attacks on infidels like the Ottomans could not be justified merely because they were infidels; even religious war needed a legitimate *casus belli*. In controversies that sound strangely familiar, the real issue was whether atrocities and misrule, what today would be called human rights violations, could become grounds, or excuses, for offensive war and conquest of Muslim lands.

As Ottoman power became less formidable towards the end of the seventeenth century, a complementary tendency became evident in the globus intellectualis to regard Ottoman government, and Islam’s role in government, in a less positive light. It was in this period that the later Western view of Ottoman rulers as sensuous, feeble, and corrupt began to take hold. In part the more negative view of the Ottomans reflected the tendency in the West at the close of the wars of religion to be less sanguine about the use of religion as a social glue. Experience had shown that religion in the early modern world was more likely to be an explosive than an adhesive. Some of the old critiques of Islam as a human invention of wise or calculating legislators, a political religion designed to arm a nation for conquest, now began to be applied to Christendom. In addition to shame-praising, we begin to find what might be called “indirect blaming,” the sly
strategy of attacking Christianity indirectly by criticizing Islam for features it shared with the religion of Jesus. Since Marsilius of Padua in the fourteenth century, Western political theorists had called for the Church to be stripped of political power in order to save Christianity from the corruptions of power; now, in the seventeenth century, it was suggested by neo-Machiavellian realists and a growing band of atheists that orthodox Christianity, like Islam, had from the beginning been nothing but a political imposture. Friendlier critics concluded that Christianity could not become a true religion unless its political armature was completely dismantled and its teachings made to conform with reason.

More important for the history of Western political thought, however, was the concept of “oriental despotism” that first emerged in the sixteenth century. It became a major analytical category in Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois*, the most important treatise on politics of the eighteenth century (and a major influence on the American Founding Fathers). According to Malcolm, who devotes three chapters to discussing its evolution, the concept of oriental despotism had its roots in Aristotle’s *Politics*, where its theoretical role was marginal, but it was “revived and developed specifically in order to describe the power wielded” by the Ottoman sultans. Despotism for Aristotle differed from tyranny in that tyrants used armed force to exercise arbitrary rule over free men, while despots commanded their subjects as masters commanded slaves.

It was Luther’s learned follower, Philip Melanchthon, who first associated despotism with the Ottomans in his commentary on the *Politics* (1530). The concept crystallized later in the century in the work of Giovanni Botero and René de Lucinge. These writers further distinguished tyranny from despotism by using the Ottomans as an example of the latter. Their presentation of Turkish government, despite the “new paradigm,” was purely negative, hardly more than caricature. The sultan was an autocrat who treated his subjects like slaves and even animals, whipping them into absolute obedience with cruel discipline. Yet he held his office by a legal process of succession and ruled by means of fixed laws. The Ottoman Empire was peaceful, but its peace came from subjects too slavish and terror-stricken to disobey their rulers. The sultan allowed no rivals to his power and thus ruled through officials rather than a hereditary nobility. The great men of his kingdom had no independent political rights. Unlike the absolute sovereign described by Bodin, the Sovereign of the Sublime House of Osman regarded the property of his subjects as his own. He discouraged letters and sciences as such studies tended to make men independent and gave them dignity. “Ignorance,” wrote one Spanish diplomat, “is the main foundation of the Ottoman Empire.”

As time went on, further details involving the physical extent of Asiatic empires and their climate were added to this basic profile, and the epithet of “oriental despotism” began to be applied to the Mughal Empire in Northern India and Safavid Persia as well as to the Ottomans. It could also be applied as a term of abuse to kings like Louis XIV who deprived their nobles and other intermediating institutions of their traditional political roles or who made arbitrary inroads on the private property of their subjects. Montesquieu, though often taken as the inventor of the concept, in fact provided, as Malcolm says, only “a kind of *summa* of earlier ideas and assumptions” about
the “oriental” form of autocracy. He also added ripe new errors, such as the view that the oriental despotisms discouraged agriculture, were constitutionally corrupt and lawless, and deprived their subjects of the right to hold property.

At the end of his book Malcolm points out that the widespread caricature of Asian governments as despotic did indeed encourage some later Western imperialists to justify their conquests as acts that liberated oppressed peoples. But at the same time—and in stark contrast to the dogmas of post-colonial theory—the West also produced the first principled criticism of its own deep-rooted prejudices against “slavish” and “barbarous” eastern peoples who deserved to be dominated or treated with contempt. Malcolm allows the last word in his book to a fierce critic of Montesquieu’s theory of oriental despotism, one Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805), “a scholar with a direct and deep knowledge of conditions in a so-called despotic empire.” Anquetil-Duperron saw Western ideas of oriental despotism as “a convenient pretext for Western interference” in the Middle East and Central Asia, and felt it was “his moral duty to show what a falsehood it was.” If barbarism entailed that “when a poor man is crushed by the weight of injustice and the rich criminal is honored . . . what a lot of barbarians there are in the world!” Barbarism is as barbarism does, and if the ancient Greeks whom our civilization so much admires were to reappear in our world, Anquetil-Duperron wrote, they would treat us Westerners as the real barbarians. True civilization requires justice, tolerance, and mutual understanding. “Let us believe that every people, even if it differs from us, can have a real value, and reasonable laws, customs, and opinions.”

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