

## The Benefits of Anachronism

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**Rewriting the history of Muslims in modern Europe while addressing current Islamophobia: historian Lucette Valensi has taken up a challenge that would have sent most of her colleagues running. But rather than eschewing the risk of anachronism, she chooses to face “the sin of sins” – and succeeds remarkably.**

Reviewed: Lucette Valensi, *Ces étrangers familiers. Musulmans en Europe (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)*, Paris, Payot, 2012, 25 €.

Lucette Valensi is a historian of the Muslim Mediterranean in what Anglophones call the “early modern period” and the French, “histoire moderne,” in other words the period running from the Renaissance to the French Revolution. Long associated with the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* and with the journal *Annales: histoire, sciences sociales*, L.Valensi is the author of a number of important studies ranging from *Fellahs tunisiens. L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (1977) to *Venise et la Sublime Porte: la naissance du despote* (1987: English translation, 1993). Valensi’s new book is at once something that might have been expected from her and something surprising. It is what we might have expected in the sense that in her latest book the author remains concerned with early modern Muslims from the Mediterranean world, though this time she follows them on their journeys to Western Europe, especially to Spain, France and England (she has virtually nothing to say about central and Eastern Europe). *Ces étrangers familiers* also offers a surprise, and possibly a shock, to readers who are already familiar with the author’s work, because the book is concerned to address problems of twenty-first century Europe, especially contemporary Islamophobia, through a study of the past, and so it embraces rather than avoids anachronism (“Je prends donc le parti de l’anachronisme” (p.7).

In effect, Valensi has decided to address two kinds of readers at once. She writes, as she has always done, for scholars, especially scholars in her field: witness the more than forty pages of notes at the back of the book. However, moved by concern for the rising wave of Islamophobia at a time when seventeen million Muslims live in Europe, she also addresses a much wider and more general public.

### Muslims in Modern Europe

*Ces étrangers familiers* might be described as a collection of connected essays, divided into seven chapters, each of which examines this group of Muslims who were “out of place,” to use Edward Said’s famous phrase, from a different angle. One chapter examines the alliances with the West made by Muslim ex-rulers or would-be rulers. Another deals with diplomats, the envoys that Muslim rulers such as the Ottoman sultan and the Shah of Persia sent to Western Europe, notably to Louis XIV at Versailles. A third is concerned with Muslims who converted to Christianity. Two chapters deal with slaves. Christians who were

enslaved by Muslims (among them Cervantes, who spent five years in Algiers) are remembered by European historians, but their opposite numbers, the Muslims who were enslaved by Christians, were more or less forgotten until Valensi brought them back to mind, focussing first on slave markets and the life of slaves and then on the recovery of freedom, by ransom or by escape. Faithful to Valensi's concern with people in all their varieties, with what she calls "*individus inclassables*" (unclassifiable individuals), the book includes a miscellaneous chapter, entitled *Des turcs de toute sorte* ("all sorts of Turks"), whether they played an important role in history or not. In similar fashion, one of the author's recent books is entitled *Mardochee Naggiar. Enquête sur un inconnu* ("Investigation of an unknown person"). English readers in particular will relish learning about Sake Dean Mahomet, who opened an Indian restaurant in London early in the nineteenth century.

### **The Uses of Anachronism**

It is the first chapter of this study that will probably impress non-specialist readers the most. It is a study of what the author calls "ethnic cleansing" in Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The phrase "ethnic cleansing" came into use in the context of the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. What happened to the Spanish and Portuguese "Moriscos" (Muslims who had officially been converted to Christianity) was known at the time as "expulsion" (in Spanish, *expulsión*), an operation that was carried out between the years 1609 and 1614.

Why then does Valensi wish to speak of "ethnic cleansing" – or indeed of a "gulag" (p. 102), or a "*univers concentrationnaire*" (p. 115) – in a study that is concerned with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? The answer to these questions is that the author wants to make moral judgements about the past as she does about the present, to protest against inhumane behaviour in any period. She is of course aware of the problems of judging one period, or culture, from a standpoint in another. As she reminds us (p. 17), a leading French historian, Lucien Febvre, once described anachronism as "*le péché des péchés, entre tous irrémédiable*" (the sin of sins, the least forgiveable of all). All the same, Valensi makes a persuasive case for sinning in this way, or at least for what she calls "controlled anachronism" (p. 236), meaning (so I take it) a use of modern terms coupled with a warning to the reader that this is happening, a discussion of the terms that were actually current in the period under study and finally, on occasion at least, some explicit comparisons and contrasts between our time and theirs (contrasts that the author offers in the conclusion to the book).

Historians who are worried about anachronism often quote the phrase coined by an English novelist, L. P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there".<sup>1</sup> Their concern is to avoid assuming that people who lived in earlier centuries always thought in the same way as us, making the same assumptions as we do. As Febvre used to say, the inhabitants of the sixteenth century had a different "*outillage mental*" (mental equipment) from their twentieth-century successors. However, if we take Hartley's phrase seriously, it follows that historians should see themselves as translators: translators from the "language" of the past into that of the present. Like translators between languages such as French and English, historians have dual loyalties. They need to be faithful to the culture of the past but they also need to be intelligible to the readers of their own time. Like translators between languages, they walk or should walk a tightrope, performing a balancing act between faithfulness and intelligibility. What Valensi describes as "controlled anachronism" offers a way of doing this.

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1953, p.1.

### **Both scholarly and humane.**

As a work of scholarship, *Ces étrangers familiers* is memorable for its concern with cultural differences, from a fine analysis of the rules of the diplomatic game to an interest in the idiosyncrasies of individuals. In her chapter on ethnic cleansing, she notes the extent to which the Moriscos had become assimilated to Spanish culture, as well as the ways in which they, or at least some of them, preserved their traditional linguistic, culinary and vestimentary culture. Valensi does not hesitate to criticize historians of the calibre of Fernand Braudel and John Elliott, both of whom described the Moriscos as “unassimilable”, and she makes her criticisms stick.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, this is a humane book, addressed to non-specialists who are concerned with the problems of their own time, including the problems raised by the acceleration of immigration, especially immigration to Europe from the Muslim world. Not “the Muslim problem”, as Valensi reminds us (p. 50), but the problems that were raised for both sides by encounters between two cultures. Not a simple “clash of civilizations”, as the late Samuel P. Huntington asserted, but a range of reactions that include curiosity and tolerance as well as fear and hostility.<sup>3</sup> The personnel of both the British and French governments (among others) would be well advised to read this study. From the example of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they will not discover what to do in an age of rising immigration, but they may at least learn what not to do.

Published in booksandideas.net, February 21<sup>st</sup> 2013

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<sup>2</sup> Fernand Braudel, “Conflits et refus de civilisation: le refus d’assimilation des morisques au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle”, *Annales ESC* 2, 1947, 397-410; John H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, London, Arnold, 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996.