EDWARD SAID  
ORIENTALISM: WESTERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE ORIENT (1978)


Introduction

I

II

Said contends that the Orient, as much as the Occident, "is not an inert fact of nature" (4). It is, rather, an "idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence for the West" (5). All this is not to say that the Orient is "essentially an idea, or creation with no corresponding reality" (5). However, what Said is interested in is the Orient as a "regular constellation of ideas" (5). Acknowledging that "ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood without . . . their configurations of power being studied" (5), Said underscores that the discursive construction of the East is possible because the relationship between Occident and Orient is an asymmetrical one, a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5). The "discourse about the Orient" (6) (for example, how Flaubert "spoke for and represented" [6] his Egyptian courtesan and, in the process, "produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman" [6]) was enabled because of a "pattern of relative strength between East and West" (6).

Drawing on the Foucauldian notion of 'discourse,' rather than the familiar Marxist distinction between ideology or 'false consciousness' and scientific knowledge, Said stresses that Orientalism should not be thought of as a "structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away" (6). Said's point is that Orientalism is not merely some "airy European fantasy about the Orient" (6). It is, rather, a "system of knowledge about the Orient" (6), a created body of theory and practice in which . . . there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism . . . an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied . . . the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture. (6)

Said underscores Orientalism's "close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions" (6).

Said draws on Gramsci's distinction between civil and political society, the latter consisting in state institutions (the army, police, the central bureaucracy, etc.) and the former in voluntary affiliations like schools, families and unions. Culture, Said writes, is to be found operating within civil society "where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent" (7). In any society, certain "cultural forms" (7) and "ideas" (7) predominate over others: the "form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony" (7).

Said stresses that the discursive construction of the Oriental serves a vital purpose: it subtends the exclusionary process upon which European identity is predicated, that is, the "idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (7). The result is an "idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying 'us'
Europeans as against all those non-Europeans" (7). Said is at pains to point out that discourse on the Orient must be understood in relation to the "period of extraordinary European ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present" (7): the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader or the soldier was in, or thought about the Orient because he could be there, or could think about it, with very little resistance on the Orient's part. Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient, and within the umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character.

(7)
The 'Oriental world,' in short, 'emerged' out of the "unchallenged centrality" (8) of a "sovereign Western consciousness" (8). Significantly, these 'truths' were developed "according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections" (8).

Said wonders whether Orientalism should be equated with the "general group of ideas overriding the mass of material . . . shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism and the like" (8) or the "much more varied work of almost uncountable individual writers, whom one would take up as individual instances of authors dealing with the Orient" (8). These are "two alternatives, general and particular, are really two perspectives on the same material" (8), Said contends, which he intends to apply conjointly the mass of material under investigation, avoiding the possibility of "distortion" (8) by steering his way between the extremes of "too dogmatic a generality" (8) and "too positivistic a localised focus" (8). In so doing, he believes, he avoids the dangers of both "coarse polemic on so unacceptably general a level of description" (8) and "so detailed and atomistic a series of analyses as to lose all track of the general lines of force informing the field" (8). His goal is accordingly to "recognise individuality and to reconcile it with its . . . general and hegemonic context" (9).

III

1. The Distinction between Pure and Political Knowledge

Said points out that the prevailing assumption, especially in the humanities, is that knowledge is "nonpolitical, that is, scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan or small-minded doctrinal belief" (10). However, he argues,

no one has ever devised a method for detaching a scholar from the circumstances of his life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society. (10)

Arguing that the "political societies" (11) of the imperial powers inevitably imparted to their "civil societies" (11) a "direct political infusion . . . where and whenever matters pertaining to their imperial interests abroad are concerned" (11), Said contends that the British intellectual in the nineteenth century, for example, took an interest in British colonies "that was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies" (11). For Said, thus, the issue at hand is determining the nature of the relationship between the "big dominating fact, as I have described it" (11) and the "details of everyday life that govern the minute discipline of
a novel or a scholarly text as each is being written” (11). The fact of imperialism, that is, the economic, political and military involvement of Europeans and, later, Americans in the Orient necessarily shaped how seemingly apolitical institutions and individuals viewed the Orient. In short, like any discursive practice, Orientalism must be understood in relation to the imbalance of power, in this case, that which has existed between Europe and the rest of the world for the last few centuries.

Said, however, rejects the notion that “‘big’ facts like imperial domination can be applied mechanically and deterministically to such complex matters as culture and ideas” (12). Undoubtedly all discourse on the Orient was politically-motivated but, he contends, “it was the culture that created that interest, that acted dynamically along with brute political, economic and military rationales” (12). Orientalism is accordingly not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious ‘Western’ imperialist plot to hold down the ‘Oriental’ world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an elaboration not only of a basic geographic distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of ‘interests’ which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxy and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what we do and what they cannot do or understand as we do). (12)

Said points out that most scholars would not deny that “texts exist in contexts” (13) and acknowledge the fact of “intertextuality, . . . the pressures of conventions, predecessors and rhetorical styles” (13). However, Said contends that most are unwilling to admit that “political, institutional and ideological constraints act in the same manner on the individual author” (13). Many are reluctant to give up their belief in the “principle of ‘creativity,’ in which the poet is believed on his own, and out of his pure mind to have brought forth his work” (13). In the same way that there is an “explicit connection” (13) in classic philosophers such as Locke “between their ‘philosophic’ doctrines and racial theory, justifications of slavery, or arguments for colonial exploitation” (13). Said acknowledges that much materialist criticism has been ‘vulgar’ or “crudely iconoclastic” (13), and has often failed to keep up with the “enormous technical advances in detailed textual analysis” (13). Gesturing towards the Marxist Base/superstructure model, he opines, too, that there has been little serious effort to bridge the “gap between the superstructural and the base levels in textual, historical scholarship” (13). Said is at pains to argue that such political influences “were productive, not unilaterally inhibiting” (14) or restrictive. In the case of Orientalism, however, “political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination and scholarly institutions – in such a way as to make its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility” (14).
In short, Said argues, nearly every nineteenth century (if not before) literary writer, he contends, “was extraordinarily well aware of the fact of empire” (14). It is in this light that Said views Orientalism as a “dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires – British, French, American” (14-15). From this point of view, Said believes that the following “political questions” (15) are the crucial ones:

- what other sorts of intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly and cultural energies went into the making of an imperialist tradition like the Orientalist one? How did philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economic theory, novel-writing and lyric poetry come to the service of Orientalism’s broadly imperialist view of the world? What changes, modulations, refinements, even revolutions take place within Orientalism? What is the meaning of originality, of continuity, of individuality in this context? How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another? In fine, how can we treat the cultural, historical phenomenon of Orientalism as a kind of willed human work – not of mere unconditioned ratiocination – in all its historical complexity, detail and worth without at the same time losing sight of the alliance between cultural work, political tendencies, the state and the specific realities of domination?

For Said, “humanistic study can responsibly address itself to politics and culture” (15) without establishing a “hard-and-fast rule about the relationship between knowledge and politics” (15). Each particular study must, rather, “formulate the nature of that connection in the specific context of the study, the subject matter, and its historical circumstances” (15).

2. The Methodological Question

3. The Personal Dimension

Chapter 1 “The Scope of Orientalism”

I. Knowing the Oriental

II. Imaginative Geography and its Representations: Orientalising the Oriental

III. Projects

IV. Crisis

Chapter 2 “Orientalist Structures and Resurctures”

I. Redrawn Frontiers, Redefined Issues, Secularised Religion

II. Silvestre de Stacy and Ernest Renan: Rational Anthropology and Philological Laboratory

III. Oriental Residence and Scholarship: the Requirements of Lexicography and Imagination
IV. Pilgrims and Pilgrimages, British and French

Chapter 3 “Orientalism Now”

I. Latent and Manifest Orientalism

Said begins this chapter by retracing the path covered in the first two chapters. The thrust of chapter one in particular was that Orientalism is, in brief, a “willed imaginative and geographic distinction made between East and West” (201). Said reminds us that his basic premise is that “fields of learning, as much as the works of even the most eccentric artist, are constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance, and by . . . schools, libraries, and governments” (201), that “both learned and imaginative writing are never free, but are limited in their imagery, assumptions, and intentions” (201-202), and that “advances made by a ‘science’ like Orientalism in its academic form are less objectively true than we often like to think” (202). He refutes as well the “mythology of creation” (202) which asserts that “artistic genius, an original talent, or a powerful intellect can leap beyond the confines of its own time and place in order to put before the world a new work” (202). The “work of predecessors, the institutional life of a scholarly field, the collective nature of any learned enterprise: these, to say nothing of economic and social circumstance, tend to diminish the effects of the individual scholar’s production” (202). The field of Orientalism has a “cumulative and corporate identity” (202) closely linked to “traditional learning (the classics, the Bible, philology), public institutions (governments, trading companies, geographical societies, universities) and generically determined writing (travel books, books of exploration, fantasy, exotic description)” (202) and the result of which was a “sort of consensus” (202). The Orientalist “has built his work and research upon them, and they in turn have pressed hard upon new writers and scholars” (202). The “Orient that appears in Orientalism . . . is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western Empire” (202-203), a “product of certain political forces and activities” (203). It is a “school of interpretation whose material happens to be the Orient, its civilizations, peoples and localities” (203) whose seemingly “objective discoveries . . . are and always have been conditioned by the fact that its truths, like any truths delivered by language, are embodied in language” (203). So far as it “existed in the West’s awareness, the Orient was a word which later accrued to it a wide field of meanings, associations, and connotations, and that these did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the word” (203).

Orientalism is, not only a positive doctrine about the Orient that exists at any one time in the West; it is also an influential academic tradition . . . , as well as an area of concern defined by travellers, commercial enterprises, governments, military expeditions, readers of novels and accounts of exotic adventure, natural historians, pilgrims to whom the Orient is a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, peoples, and civilisations. (203)

The “idioms” (203) of Orientalism “took firm hold in European discourse. Beneath the idioms there was a layer of doctrine about the Orient” (203) which was “fashioned out of the experiences of many Europeans, all of them converging upon such essential aspects fo the Orient as the Oriental character, Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality, and the like” (203). It is, as such, a "system of truths . . . in Nietzsche’s sense of the word" (204). As a result, “every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an
imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric” (204), a constellation of attitudes that is perhaps true, Said adds, of possibly all “human societies” (204) in their dealings “with ‘other’ cultures” (204). The ‘very presence of a ‘field’ such as Orientalism, with no corresponding equivalent in the Orient itself, suggests the relative strength of Orient and Occident” (204), Said avers, because Orientalism is “fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness” (204). “As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth and knowledge” (204). Orientalism is, in short, a “body of ideas, beliefs, clichés or learning about the East” (205). It is the deliberate “distillation of essential ideas about the Orient – its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness – into a separate and unchallenged coherence” (205). It seemed to be “morally neutral and objectively valid” (205) and to have an “epistemological status equal to that of historical chronology or geographical location” (205).

Said accordingly makes a distinction between what he terms “manifest Orientalism” (206), the “various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth” (206), and “latent Orientalism” (206), an "unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity" (206) about the Orient which served as a homogenising problematic or epistemological framework unifying various Orientalist writers. “Whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant” (206). Despite “manifest differences . . . in form and personal style” (206), there was rarely any differences in their "basic content” (206): every one of these "kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability" (206).

Said argues that theses of "Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West most easily associated themselves early in the nineteenth century with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality" (206) in the work of thinkers like Cuvier, Gobineau (Essay on the Inequality of the Races) and Robert Knox (the Dark Races of Man). Such ideas were coupled with "second-order Darwinism which seemed to accentuate the 'scientific' validity of the division of races into advanced and backward, or European-Aryan and Oriental-African” (206). The Oriental was also linked to other "elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien" (207):

Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or – as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory – taken over. The point is that the very designation of something as Oriental involved an already pronounced evaluative judgment, and . . . an implicit programme of action. (207) Moreover, “latent Orientalism also encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world” (207) in the way it painted Oriental males as objects of “contempt and fear” (207) and in the way Orientalism constituted an “exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders” (207). Oriental women are “usually the creatures of the a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing” (207).

II. Style, Expertise, Vision: Orientalism’s Worldliness

III. Modern Anglo-French Orientalism in its Fullest Flower
IV. The Latest Phase