

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage 1979)

What if all of the received knowledge concerning the Middle East was fatally flawed? Have centuries of bias, categorization, generalization and vilification produced a discourse about the Middle East that has limited our academic horizons and become enmeshed with imperialism, colonialism and racism? This is the hypothesis argued by Edward Said in his provocative *Orientalism*. Drawing upon a range of literary, historical, philological and other texts, he analyzes the broad field of Orientalism to conclude that Western academics and authors created a discourse about the East that was founded more in their own cultural expectations and fears than any empirical reality. Moreover, the results of their work came to be used as tools of an expansionist Western hegemony that continues to dominate the East to the present day.

Said begins his work by examining the scope of Orientalism and the roots of the field in pre-modern Europe. Unlike other fields of scholarship, he maintains that Orientalism is unnaturally broad, covering aspects of history, geography, sociology and anthropology among others. What unites it is the conception of the Orient as the “The Other,” a single unit to be studied, known and controlled. He argues that this emerged out of medieval fear of the Islamic Middle East and their attempts to deal with what they could neither know nor understand. By creating an imaginative history and geography of the Orient, they assigned virtues beyond the empirical to produce a limited and limiting vocabulary to describe the East, a discourse full of crude stereotypes. As these textual imaginings on the Orient gained in number and authority, they became embedded in scholarship even when the reality could not match the construct. As the nineteenth century began, academia became increasingly secularized and focused upon the “scientific,” yet the set of structures of Orientalism already created were merely reformulated and laicized.

Examining these structures in Chapter 2, Said initially focuses upon two prominent Orientalists to illustrate his argument. Silvestre de Sasy, “the father of

modern Orientalism,” and Ernest Renan were philologists who used language as a tool to create categories that had a notionally scientific basis. Within such categories as “Semite,” they linked language and anatomy to create broad cultural generalizations. Said notes that these usually emphasized the inferiority of the other races in comparison to the cultures of the West and had a dehumanizing effect on entire peoples. The resultant ethnocentric and racist stereotypes imposed by Orientalism then suffused both academic and literary efforts. These, Said illustrates with critical analyses of such authors as Lane, Chateaubriand, Flaubert and Burton.

Yet, academia did not alone shape Orientalist structures. As Britain expanded into the East, the colonizing efforts of France remained limited. British Orientalism, therefore, took on a political and imperialist nature while the French discourse emerged as one of loss. By the 1870s, Said avers, Orientalism had moved from academic constructs to “a new sense of worldly mission in the service of formal colonization.”¹ A new dialectic had emerged in which Orientalists employed knowledge to propagate Western cultural values and to justify imperialism. Not only did Orientalist scholars such as William Robertson Smith used the language of Orientalism to influence discourse but those such as T.E. Lawrence or St. John Philby acted as the agents of empire. Their Orientalism was not merely manifest, written Orientalism but also latent: a doctrine of racism, social Darwinism and ethnocentrism that emerged from the texts and gave a sense of the White Man’s burden, the obligation to civilize and control the backward and static Orient.

Even as the colonial project faltered in the twentieth century and nationalist movements arose, scholars could not or would not move beyond Orientalist dogma. Despite the caliber of scholars such as Louis Massignon and new techniques in the social sciences, Said asserts that Orientalism remained retrogressive. While this would be

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 205

unfortunate in any scholarly field, governments continued to utilize Orientalist scholars as policy advisors. In particular, Arabists have advised the US government on policy, displaying an unconscionable hubris in their characterization and dehumanization of their subjects. The dogmatic belief that the Orient is undeveloped, backward, irrational and static in comparison to the vibrant, modern and rational West continues to negatively influence US and European policy to the Middle East. Indeed, so powerful and authoritative is Orientalism that Said sees modern Arabs themselves buying into it, “The modern Orient participating in its own orientalizing.”²

Opening the eyes of modern “Orientals” to the “formidable structure of cultural domination” that is the legacy of Orientalism is one of Said’s stated aims for the book.³ He admits that *Orientalism* is, nor was never meant to be an encyclopedic history of Orientalism, but rather a means of challenging the assumptions upon which modern scholarship of the region consciously or unconsciously depends. Although critics have characterized Said as having thus discounted Western scholars from working on the Middle East because of their cultural background, this is not his argument.⁴ Rather, he suggests that only by understanding the body of Orientalist literature, by recognizing that their own culture can create a set of often-erroneous assumptions and through rigorous self-examination of their methodology can modern scholars hope to avoid the same pitfalls. Said cites Clifford Geertz and Maxime Rodinson as examples of scholars who have been able to thus move beyond Orientalism. Neither is the common accusation that Orientalism is “anti-Western” or “pro-fundamentalist” fair. Although Said is critical about one aspect of the Western cultural and academic experience, he is nowhere in this work an apologist for extremists. In fact, as he notes in his epilogue, to be “anti-Western” would be to assume there is a unitary corporate body “the West,” and just as he rejects the notion of an Orient he also rejects the notion of an Occident. However,

² Ibid., 325

³ Ibid., 25

⁴ For example, see Bernard Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism,” in *Orientalism: A Reader*, edited by A.L. Macfie (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

Orientalism is an indictment of the scholarship that emerged out of the West concerning the East and as such, it is bound to evoke strong responses.

Certainly some of the sources that Said utilizes support his thesis. His close textual analysis of such authors as Lane or Webb points to an egregious racism, a condescension towards their subject that is undeniable. Yet, in other cases, it appears as though Said pushes his point beyond the text. His analysis of a passage by Bernard Lewis, for example, as having sexualized undertones is particularly strained.⁵ One must also wonder about Said’s selection of sources itself. While the sources he does use tend to support his argument, he himself admits to omitting a large part of the body of Orientalist thought. Lewis points to the absence of analysis of German and Russian Orientalists as especially troubling and Said’s own explanation of that omission seems rather thin.⁶ Furthermore, Said fails to mention prominent twentieth century Orientalists such as Marshall Hodgson. This leaves the reader to question the objectivity of Said’s selection. Did he merely choose those sources that would support his thesis while ignoring those that did not? This puts a pall upon the book that is difficult to ignore.

Nevertheless, *Orientalism* remains an interesting, provocative work and often-powerful work and one that should at least fulfill its stated purpose to cause readers to think upon the history of interpretations of the Middle East. As such, it is of particular use to graduate students in the social sciences and the humanities, who may not agree with all its conclusions but hopefully will at least reconsider their own potential influences upon their own studies. Additionally, in a period when Western, and particularly American, attitudes to Arabs and to Islam are so fraught, it may serve a more general reader well in causing him or her to consider from whence those impressions come and whether they are valid. Read as critically as the texts Said analyzes, *Orientalism* becomes a significant part of an essential modern discourse on culture.

⁵ Said, 314.

⁶ Lewis, “The Question of Orientalism”