

Review - Orientalism

Written by Conor Heaney

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CONOR HEANEY, JAN 4 2013

Orientalism

By: Edward Said

New York: Penguin Classics, 2003

Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, published in 1978, is a discourse analysis and a genealogy of 'Orientalism'. It remains particularly pertinent and relevant in our contemporary context, not just because of the wave of postcolonial and poststructuralist literature which it sparked, but because the dictums and insights in the analysis exhibit themselves in much of the current mainstream attitude towards Islam, towards the Arab 'Other'.

Though what, we should first ask, *is* 'Orientalism'? To Said, it is that 'regular constellation of ideas' (p.5) by which the West, or the 'Occident' (p.28), not just knows and defines the Orient, nor just gives it 'intelligibility and identity', but '*creates* the Orient' (P.40). It is that disciplinary discourse which judges, confirms, corrects, and codifies the boundaries of the Orient (p.67).

The book itself is divided into three chapters:

(i) 'The Scope of Orientalism' relates to us an account of the genesis of Orientalism and leads us to Napoleon's

Review - Orientalism

Written by Conor Heaney

invasion of Egypt.

(ii) 'Orientalist Structures and Restructures' follows this post-invasion period, and in particular the development of Oriental knowledge in this post-Enlightenment era.

(iii) 'Orientalism Now' is Said's attempt to track us to modernity, arguing that America has absorbed the Orientalist mantle set by Britain and France.

I will extract the two central arguments Said provides in order to provide evidence for 'Orientalism'. The first is Said's application of a Foucauldian genealogy, using ideas of knowledge/power and discursive productivity; the second, the question of binary essentialism in Orientalist discourse.

I will also raise two criticisms of Said's account: the first relates to Said's self-imposed limitations, and the second is the perhaps problematic definition of 'power', which underlies *Orientalism*.

A Foucauldian Approach

Said's genealogy is particularly Foucauldian in that it is intended to show that 'a given system of thought [...] was the result of contingent turns in history, not the outcome of rationally inevitable trends.'[i]

If there is any particular historical episode that is crucial for Said, it is the (failed) Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798; both (i) the experiences which shaped its occurrence (textual, imaginative reality), and (ii) its academic results (knowledge).

On (i) – for Napoleon, Egypt was a 'project' that had, 'acquired reality in his mind...through experiences that belong to the realm of ideas and myths...not empirical reality' (p.80). For the first time, claims Said, the discipline of Orientalism was *used in preparation* for colonial conquest.

On (ii) – Napoleon had a desire to render the Orient know-able: 'Egypt was to become a department of French learning' (p.83). Before the invasion, Napoleon founded the Institut d'Égypte, and brought with him on his Egyptian expedition 167 academics, *savants*: his Occidental army of knowledge. These academics wrote the *Description de l'Égypte*, which was, 'published in twenty-three enormous volumes between 1809 and 1828' (p.84). There emerged, according to Said, a canon of Orientalist knowledge in the nineteenth century.

Central to this emerging canon is the beginnings and development of philology as a discipline. Philology functioned as a comparative discipline with scientific authority; indeed, it helped legitimise the assumption that the distinctiveness of language stemmed from some essential ontological distinction between 'types' of persons (p.233). Said characterises Romantic value-laden 'disinterested' science as, 'messianic', unaware of its own self-affirming realism, and of its 'egoistic will to power [which] feeds [its] endeavours and corrupts [its] ambitions' (p.116). Orientalism was a scholarly and public intellectual endeavour, the Orientalist scholar an authoritative figure: it was, 'not personal testimony nor subjective impression... [it was] Science' (p.191) Such a blind-sightedness paved the way for the latent Orientalism apparent in biological support being given by some scientists to apparent racial inequality and difference (p.206).

Works by Silvestre de Sacy, Ernest Renan and Edward Lane – to name just a few -were just a part of the academic construction of a Benthamite Panopticon of knowledge/power (p.127), which appears to complement Said's Foucauldian theses, where power functions through knowledge achievement and knowledge creation; the establishment of Oriental knowledge instantiates and cements Occidental power.

This canon helped form the grounding for all Orientalist work thereon – it helped set the scholarly boundary, the Kuhnian paradigm (p.275), within which Orientalism could be said to still exist today – 'Orientalism resorted mainly to citations of predecessor scholars in the field for its nutriment' (p.177). Said claims that this 'is the legacy...to which the twentieth-century has become inheritor' (p.197).

Review - Orientalism

Written by Conor Heaney

Binary Essentialism

Having traced Said's narrative of the genealogy of Orientalism, I will discuss a key way in which Orientalism manifests itself in discourse – through an essentialist distinction between West/East.

Said argues that the very idea of 'Europe' is coterminous with the notion of an 'Orient' – a barbarous 'Other', an outsider beyond the limited bounds of civilisation, finding traces of this in Homer's *Iliad* (p.56). The continental distinction is not just a border; for the Orientalist, it is an essential distinction. One of the crucial manifestations of this 'essential' ontological division is in religion, and in the related stereotype of *homo Arabicus* (p.97).

Further, for Said, in the post-Enlightenment era Orientalism existed as an academic discipline that continuously reproduced work couched within these same epistemological and ontological frameworks, within what Flaubert calls *idées reçues*, 'accepted ideas' (p.94).

The twentieth century delivered new challenges emerging from the Orient. In a period which saw the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the 'Arab Revolt', Wilsonian self-determination, and the end of British and French colonialism, there was a new and unique challenge to the West, having to deal with *native* elites, *native* movements, *native* demands (p.248), which expressed 'cultural self-definition that transcended the provincial and the xenophobic' (p.257). The question emerges, therefore: has this shift spelled the end of Orientalism?

Said gives us an emphatic no: because America has replaced France and Britain as the dominant producers of *Orientalist* discourse, most clearly in foreign policy experts and social scientists who "apply" their knowledge to the Orient (p.290).

Further, social science, in combination with popular cultural images of "the Arab" and the, 'menace of *jihad*' are evidence of the essentialistic embedded Orientalism in contemporary Western thought (p.287). America today, Said argues, has repeated the reification process of the Orient, of Orientalism. The image of *homo Arabicus* remains: 'clichés about how Muslims behave are [used] with a nonchalance no one would risk in talking about Blacks or Jews' (p.301).

Criticisms and Conclusions

Said's *Orientalism* is a commendable piece of work. His genealogical account of the development of Orientalist discourse in France, Britain, and America, traces a line of connection between seemingly unconnected texts which is both rich and thought provoking. It successfully challenges us to consider to what extent seemingly benign or neutral disciplines, such as philology, science, or travel writing, can display, perpetuate, and indeed *be* colonialist, and enables us to engage with contemporary discourse about the 'Orient' with an appreciation of this. However, there are two issues to raise concerning Said's account.

The first is that Said's analysis is conducted largely with French and English (and later American) Orientalism in mind. Certainly, it would be difficult to deny the prominence of France, Britain, and the USA; they appear to be hugely implicated within Said's critique. However, had Said discussed German, Hungarian, Austrian or Dutch (to name a few) colonialisms and *Orientalisms* – it would have certainly added strongly to his argument. Whilst he argues that it would have been extremely difficult to be more expansive in his account (p.4), this surely weakens Said's case. Part of *Orientalism*'s power is its ability to illuminate us to presumptuous cultural generalisations, so it is certainly a fair point to argue that without a fuller account of Orientalism outside of France, Britain, or America, it is problematic to label it, as Said does, with a sweeping term such as 'European' or 'Christian'.

A second issue that could be raised is the contention that Said's model of 'power,' exhibits tension. Primarily, his focus is Foucauldian, where new textual representations are shaped by the existing discursive practices and texts, where continual textual production reifies the concepts and insights that are continually made. For Foucault, power is

Review - Orientalism

Written by Conor Heaney

everywhere, and it would be incorrect to say that power functions “top-down”.^[ii] In *Orientalism*, however, power functions from the West, eastward, and not vice versa – it *is* top-down. This tension is apparent throughout. Said neither discusses nor engages with the potential of examining the various potential avenues of cross-cultural power relations that may have occurred – in other words, discourse *about* the ‘West’, produced *from* the ‘East’. ‘Orientalism’ is viewed by Said as intimately connected with imperialism and colonialism. If this is so, then it seems quite plausible that a discussion of, for example, the Caliphate(s) and of Muslim Empires would be relevant in engaging with ‘Eastern’ discourse. However, I would concede that such a discussion would not cohere too easily with Said’s aims in *Orientalism*, and would not be likely to add much to his account.

Orientalism provides a rich and rewarding discussion, and is an interesting extension of Foucault’s writings. However, the aforementioned criticisms indicate that there may have missed opportunities for a deeper and more thorough text.

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[i] Gutting, Gary, ‘Michel Foucault’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault> [accessed 11/12/12]

[ii] Kennedy, Valerie, ‘Orientalism’, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) pp. 14-48, p. 26