

Orientalism

E.Said

June 18-25, 2006

Orientalism is about Western subjugation of non-Western people and their cultures. Thus this book should be an indictment of Colonialism and its modern version - Globalization. This is not quite true, although this has actually been the common reception of the book in the West and East alike, and the source for its wide-spread popularity¹. Yet it certainly has an element of truth, notwithstanding the protestations of the author to be found in his afterword, after all the writer being a Palestinian, writes from a partisan point of view as a representative of a people dispelled by the forces of Zionism, which by an irony of history and language can be seen as yet another manifestation of anti-Semitism! But the true intellectual content of the work fits in the Post-Modernist fold, to which the author places himself from the start through references to Foucault. It is about the impossibility of a true representation of a culture, and thus the book is not supposed to be concerned with the study of the ostensible subject matter - Oriental Culture, per se, for which no objective characterization can supposedly be formulated, but with the particular specious characterization itself as formulated and pursued by the West and referred to as Orientalism². Thus the very notion of an Oriental culture can be called into question, but not presumably its characterizations, which then become legitimate objects of study³.

Objective or nor, it is fair to claim that different groups of people have different interests, which cannot always be reconciled, thus leading to intractable conflicts, only resolvable through dispossessions or downright extinctions. Thus human history is a sorry catalogue of wars and conquests, throughout which certain people have prevailed and established supremacies, usually only of an ephemeral kind. This is a fact however regrettable. Cruel and unjust as those may be from the point of view of the individual victim, on the general level of abstract history we are simply talking about a seemingly random motion with no discernable sense or purpose, and thus hardly anything that would excite the disinterested observer; it is only when those waves of history directly relate to ourselves they acquire a compelling interest.

Although strictly speaking West and East are not well-defined notions, one nevertheless can talk about rough geographical areas the respective populations adhering to different religious beliefs, in our case Christianity and Islam respectively. The former area is the inheritor of the Roman Empire, the latter the result of a spectacular explosion taking

¹ In an afterword the author expresses surprise that a recent Swedish translation made it to the bestseller lists

² occasionally ingeniously called 'area studies'

³ The Post-Modernistic rejection of objective reality, seductive as it may be, not to say occasionally appropriate, becomes somewhat absurd when applied consistently. Logically the next step would be second order Orientalism, as studied by Said, against which similar objections can be levied, constituting third order Orientalblism, of which this review should be a sample

place when the Roman Empire had already disintegrated. Those areas are not in equilibrium with respect to each other, the latter initially gobbling up large portions of the former threatening to annihilate it completely. Admittedly pretty soon some kind of truce *wi* achieved, although repeatedly challenged (the Crusades), and the Muslim world, be it in different political incarnations⁴, would provide a formidable threat to the Christian world until the 18th century.

One may argue that there are only individuals and that larger groups of people (of which individuals are to be seen as mere representatives) are only artefacts of the imagination. Yet interests unite people, and interests are only identified as such when confronted with conflicting ones. Thus the notion of 'us' requires a notion of 'them', and as regrettable such bipolar classifications may be they are the inevitable consequences of conflicts. One should also bear in mind that those demarcations lines between 'us' and 'them' are never fixed, within each group there are other divisions often even more bitter and pervasive. One may only be reminded of the religious wars in Europe during the 17th century, or the division of Muslims into Sunni and Shiites. Thus one may be tempted to censure the Protestant conception of Papism in the same way as one may fault the Occidental view of the Orient. True, the emergence of a specious and stereotyped Occidental view of the Orient is nothing remarkable, in fact something only to be predicted; but a history which is conceived too abstractly and general tends to be insipid and sterile, only by the discussion of a specific historical example is life breathed into the subject with exciting, if implicit, conclusions to be drawn. The author chooses to discuss the particular form the Occidental view of the Orient developed in the last three centuries, ultimately criticizing not so much its lack of veracity, as no alternate proposal is even attempted, but the very notion of its feasibility.

Said makes some basic observations. First the existence of a gradient. It is the West that penetrates into the East, not the other way around. Western scholars are motivated by a curiosity of Eastern culture, a similar curiosity on the part of Muslim scholars is apparently not the case. This asymmetry is also shown in matters political, military and economic. Thus the Western penetration is not only virtual but very palpable. Secondly the West conceives of the Muslim world as monolithic and unchanging, and thus an object of study to be explained and represented, the hidden assumption being that the Muslim world is incapable of explaining and representing itself. As a consequence of this the individual disappears only the type or the essence remains. This is the most fundamental intellectual objection that can be made against Orientalism, from which all the secondary ones flow. The author makes a distinction between latent Orientalism and manifest Orientalism. The latent refers to the very paradigm in which Orientalism is imprisoned, while the manifest undergo changes and developments, all of which are ultimately superficial.

But generalizations are inherent in any kind of systematic, let alone scientific, inquiry, and thus unavoidable. Hence even Marx for all his sympathy for the downtrodden cannot avoid to fall into the trap, as Said remarks regretfully. This expression of regret is somewhat ironic, because after all is not Marxism about radical simplifications dividing humanity

⁴ Its latest empire being of Turkish provenence, a nomadic people from Central Asia as opposed to the Arabian peninsula, reminiscent of the Mogul empire, and for that matter the final Chinese dynasty, although the latter was of course not Muslim

into a small number of anonymous classes. Does Said claim that sociology as a scientific discipline is impossible? Unless you want to abolish entirely the ambition of understanding, you have to resort to classification. Said concedes that certain aspects of such stereotyping can be useful, nay even effective, once one needs to handle specific problems that arise. This is true, every problem requires its own simplifications, but the point is that one should never forget that all such structures are temporary and relevant only in the appropriate contexts. After all all statistical analysis presupposes the adding of things of the same kind. What is conceived of as the same kind depending on the situation. Thus Said formulates here some very specific flaws of Orientalism, flaws that are not inevitable. Any kind of historical analysis needs objects of comparisons, and in the case of Orientalism the study of the Classics is an obvious one, or at least one invited by the Orientalists themselves. However, this leads us to another general objection of Said. While the student of the Classics appears to be in love with the subject, the Orientalist appears to hate it. Thus the study of the Classics is free of the sterile stereotyping that mars the discipline of Oriental studies, thus presenting a far more varied quilt whose contradictions are intentionally displayed in full view, not unintentionally part of the act of presentation itself. Of course the comparison is not really that appropriate after all, the Classics being part of the Occidental view of itself, hence sympathetically internalized.

As noted above, the division into 'us' and 'others' is a natural one, the line of demarcation depending on the context, and thus nothing to regret. With this division ensues the notion of the exotic and thus the stimulation of the curiosity, which after all is one of mens most distinctive drives. Curiosity, according to William James, is to look for the familiar inside the unfamiliar, and the Orient has had a strong attraction precisely because of its strangeness combined with an eerie familiarity⁵. Thus there have been many manifestations of genuine curiosity and sympathetic fascination of the Orient, a curiosity reinforced by the Enlightenment, with its general project of systematically accumulating and structuring knowledge. It is argued that the Muslim world has had no Enlightenment and that this is the basic explanation of its backwardness. Disregarding sweeping generalizations of backwardness, one may nevertheless profitably inquire into its specific aspects, because after all the gradient of which we have been reminded above is not entirely an imaginary thing, and as a social construction it has some objective existence. The attitude of condescension is not an effect of Orientalism, rather Orientalism is another manifestation of it, and thus its causes are worth looking for, something that Said refrains from doing⁶.

The 18th century did 'discover' the East. The East now not only encompassing the Arab world, but also the Indian subcontinent, which although mostly under Islam domination at the time⁷, presented a totally different world. The first contacts were superficial involving only trade, but concomitant with the merely commercial there was soon a penetration into the cultural. This was one of deep fascination, because after all

⁵ A Western visitor to India may be more disturbed by a Muslim mass prayer than by a Hindu religious manifestation, simply because the former is closer to his experience and thus fraught with more directly accessible meaning

⁶ He would probably argue that Orientalism is simply just that, namely an attempt at an explanation, alternatively a rationalization for the superiority of the West.

⁷ The Mogul empire

those various culture contained in their past glorious civilizations flourishing at the time when the predecessors of the West were mere barbarians⁸. Thus there were new worlds so to speak, equivalent to those of the classical Greek and Romans, to be discovered and elucidated. To do so one needed to learn languages, study the historical documents, as well as the literature and the laws and customs. Those were grandiose projects so congenial to the Enlightenment as well as to its temporary reaction - the Romantics, who in the East thought that they had discovered an alternative to the Western tradition and thus a source of alternative wisdom. Naive and misleading as such enthusiasms may be, they are nevertheless commendable, and they also instigated real advances and insights. Not only were literary treasures unearthed and translated for the benefit of an educated western audience; but even the very structure of foreign languages revealed hitherto unsuspected links. I am of course referring to William Jones study of Sanskrit at the end of the 18th century and the discovery of the Indo-European language link. This eventually led to a split between the Aryan and the Semitic, and with the proposed links between race and language prevalent at the time, a concomitant split into Aryans, including a large part of the population of the East exemplified by Indians and Persians, and Semites constituted by the Arabs and the Jews. Although Said never makes the delineation of Orientalism consistent, it is clear that he essentially restricts it to its Semitic aspects, i.e. the Arabic. On the other hand he is explicit about initially restricting Orientalism to France and England, those being the two colonial players in the Orient, and only at the end of the Second World War involving the American coming into a troubled inheritance.

A crucial turning point of Orientalism, maybe even its official inauguration, was the Napoleonic Conquest of Egypt 1798. It was a conquest with ambitions beyond the narrowly military, and thus his army of soldiers was complemented with an army of experts and scholars. Thus, according to Said, it was acquisition of knowledge as an act of aggression. Clearly the ambition was to meddle into the English access to the Indian subcontinent which it had acquired in competition with the French, but also an attempt to revive the Orient and infuse it with a French civilizing spirit, continuing a missionary trend set by the heirs of the French Revolution. Thus not surprisingly Said credits the creation of Orientalism to a Frenchman Sacy, who almost singelhandedly building on the foundation provided by the Egyptian campaign set up the academic discipline.

An academic discipline, at least a humanistic one, is based on texts. Texts lead to commentaries, which in their turn inspire second order commentaries and so on. Often the point is re-evaluation, but such make no sense unless there is a common consensus against which to measure the degree of reposition⁹. A consensus the object of which is to be passed from one generation of scholars to another. As Said notes, a scholar is imprisoned in a tradition that is beyond his creation and which he has to accept in order to be able to do a contribution. With the study of the classics there already existed such a well-established tradition basically perpetrating itself through a huge secondary literature. Sacy, on the other hand, more or less had to start from scratch, and actually to a large extent create the context a scholar normally finds already laid out for himself. He made translations and published anthologies. His attitude was that Arabic literature did not really stand on

⁸ As was being realized, Sanskrit recorded a history older than that documented in Hebrew

⁹ Just as the astronomer needs the fixed stars to properly charter the movements of the planets

its own merit, but had to be buttressed by commentary and instruction in order to engage the outside reader. In particular he did not think it was worthy to be published in its entirety, only by fragmentatization into representative extracts could its exposure to the Western public be justified, setting a regrettable precedent of didactics. He was succeeded by Renan, another philologist, and a professor at College de France, who made it his study the Semitic languages. Philology, later to be known as linguistic, being the technical tool *par excellence* of humanism during the 19th century, was seen as the analogue of the physical and chemical sciences of the materialistic realm, and thus lending to the study of the spiritual a corresponding objectivity and legitimacy, not to say prestige¹⁰. One may keep in mind that Nietzsche started out as a philologist, only later to question the very foundations of any knowledge based on language; doubts approvingly quoted by Said. True to the tradition Renan hated his study, claiming the inferiority of the Semitic compared to the Indo-European. And of course as the spirit is expressed through language, an inferior vehicle of thought, could both be seen as resulting from a racial defect as well as making up a cultural liability, explaining as well as excarbarating inferiority.

One may argue that a purely academic Orientalism is in the end a rather inconsequential thing, but Said points out that early on, as exemplified by the Egyptian campaign, the academic study of the Orient was not confined to a purely intellectual enterprise but was enlisted by governments to aid in policy making, trade-contacts, and international diplomacy; and by claiming ultimate authority it did significantly affect the way even intrepid travellers were bound both to fashion and to interpret their forages into the Orient. Said seems more concerned with the presentation of the malignancy of the Orientalist viewpoint than a dispassionate analysis of its causes. Any sociological science is wedded into a context of what in the time of Flaubert was known as 'received ideas' and in our days referred to as the tyranny of political correctness. This means fixed, uncontested ideas, the justification of which it is the task of the designed science to provide. Thus the danger of corruption inherent in the desire to be useful and applicable. The danger is as great today as it was yesterday. The received ideas of the past of racial superiority may appear to us as singularly misguided, while the politically correct ideas of today strike us as commendable and impervious to challenge, this is why they are seen as correct after all¹¹.

But Orientalism was not only work in the armchair, apart from useful governmental

¹⁰ one may compare with the critical study of old texts, especially religious ones, that developed in an almost forensic manner in the 19th century. Furthermore it is a testimony to the growing sophistication of the field of philology that questions as to the origin of languages that had occupied people in the 1770's were by the early decades of the 19th century considered hopelessly naive and misguided.

¹¹ Racial science of the early decades of the previous century, now appear as laughable. The reason for that is that it was not free but required to find scientific justification for already held convictions. Everyone knows how easy it is to find justification, scientific or not for anything you wish to confirm. This is the point of Popperian falsification, namely to challenge your most cherished ideas. Thus given our present situation, one should not *a priori* condemn research whose object is to exhibit say intellectual differences between races, after all if our views are correct, such investigations are only bound to make our claims even stronger. Such a counterintuitive view is hard for Post-modernists to fathom, wedded as they are to the idea that perspectives corrupt. But who is going to be in judgement? This is the dilemma that arises whenever the possibility of an objective reality is discounted, forcing science to be replaced by

and commercial application, it also involved empirical study. The author dwells explicitly on figures like Lane, Burton and Flaubert. Lane published *An account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* in which his task was to present to the British public a detailed picture of the quotidian life of modern Egyptians. Such a task is of course fraught with prurient dangers of voyeurism catering not only to a healthy and symphathetic curiosity but also flirting with sordid fascination. Said gives Lane the credit for avoiding such pitfalls not calling into question the basic decency and integrity of the man; yet his position as an intermediate is in principle morally amibigious. He needs to penetrate into the foreign world, to learn the language and to imaginatively place himself therein, but only in the imagination. He has at the same time to stand aloof not to lose his basic link tying him to his audience and by this his authority as a reporter. This means that he has to win the confidences of the locals, but not for its own sake but for an ulterior purpose, thus ending up using them. Lane makes a point of drawing lines, he refuses e.g. in spite of ardent recommendations to marry. By this personal sacrifice he keeps himself apart and clean. The dilemma presented by a Lane is in no way specific to Orientalism, it only happens to be placable in that general matrix. It will be a dilemma that will persist in any situation of mediation, and nowadays even more pronounced with the present cynical medial exploitation of suffering for personal glory than in the past, when there at least were some (usually religious) sentiments to cover up the situation.

Flaubert on the other hand did not abstain from sexual penetration during his visit to the Orient. In fact he revelled in it. Here we encounter another universal predicament, namely the desire to personally expropriate the exotic, by turning its sexual allure into literal consummation¹². For Flaubert the journey was of course an exercise in personal phantasy, and only by his literary mastery was he able to transcend what otherwise may be seen as merely a forerunning of the sordid contemporary habit of sex-tourism. Burton on the other hand was no tourist, he still lived in the heroic age of the explorer, when it was still possible to really make discoveries and indulge in daunting adventure in the process, unlike the situation of the pale descendants of today, who have to be content with playing the sophisticated tourist. Burton was not only incredibly learned and accomplished, speaking fluently an impressive number of Oriental languages, but also as befits an explorer independant of mind (but still, according to Said, blinkered by Orientalist prejudices). His attempts, successful to boot, of getting to Mecca disguised as a Muslim Indian doctor, are reminiscent of the attempts of the Swedish explorer Hedin to smuggle himself into Lhasa. Burton too is made to fit into the Oriental matrix by virtue of his choice of location and timing, but the phenomenon of exploration clearly transcends the narrow confines of Orientalism and in particular cannot be reduced to being a mere manifestation of it. It is fruitless to view all of Western penetration as act of aggressions, even when they incidentally can be seen as such, the basic drives being of far more universal comport.

politics. As a modern example of old racial research one may quote what seems to be a large part of so called gender studies. The fact that it concerns the glorification of women as opposed to the vilefication of dark-skinned races should not make us blind to the underlying principles. Justification pursued too enthusiastically and uncritically soon becomes merely ridiculous, and by then it might in some sense be too late.

¹² Similar sentiments have been expressed by Segalen visavi China

The field of Orientalism only becomes really depressing in the 20th century. While there certainly was a degree of heroism in the early practice, when entrance to the study presupposed extensive preparations in terms of language capabilities, by the 50's the field was instead swamped by people whose backgrounds were merely sociological. With American resumption the field became better funded and closer related to Government policy making. As a result excentricity dissolved into inanity. Said point out that it is rather remarkable what can still today¹³ be said of the Arab, stereotyped pronouncements which would be suicidal to make about Jews and Blacks. Said in particular singles out a certain Bernard Lewis, castigated for his laziness¹⁴ and confusing and contradictory prose, as well as the sheer boredom of the *Cambridge History of Islam*. But what is actually saddest about the whole thing is the Arab complicity in its own degradation. How the most succesful Arabic students are soaked into American academia paying for their financial and scholarly success by adopting Orientalists viewpoints themselves. Concurrent with this corruption of the elite there is a degradation of traditional Arabic culture through the paraphernalia of the American consumer society. Soon there will be no Orient to be Orientalistic about.

The paramount focus on the Middle-East is of course due to the Arab-Jewish conflict. It is of course ironic to observe that Hebrew and Arabic are as languages closely related, and although one should be wary of such easy conclusions, one is tempted to conjecture that as far as there is such a thing as a Jewish race it is very closely related to the Arabic. Culturally the Jewish and the Arabic are close in the sense of sharing a common environment and hence history, and one may view Islam not so much as a epigonic degeneration of the monotheitic Judaism, but as a sympathetic variation on it, this at least should be a fruitful perspective for a scholarly investigation. It is also said that Jewish communities traditionally found a more tolerant ambiance in the Muslim world than in the Christian¹⁵. It might be symptomatic that Strindberg speculated that the Jewish population in Scandinavia really were of Muslim origin, having figured that they would be more acceptable in a Christian setting by passing themselves off as Jews rather than Muselmans. The present Arab-Jewish belligerency gives the lie to a conjectured Semitic bond. Jews in Israels are seen not foremost as Jews but as Western intruders, in order to escape the contradictions involved and to evade the label of anti-Semitism, the notion of Zionism comes in very handy. I used to think it was a mere play on words, and to an Israeli the notion of anti-Zionism should be no more than a renaming of the politically impossible notion of anti-Semitism, but have recently seen its point, not only as a convenient term and excuse of abuse, but also as a clarifier. Thus one should perhaps be wary of seeing the Arab-Israeli conflict as the outcome of traditional antagonisms stemming from millenia back, but view it as the prosaic consequences of politics and policies practiced in the past half century.

¹³ The book was written in 1977 and published the year after; yet there is probably very little change in the matter for the better in the last twenty-five years, most likely for the worse, although in true post-modernist manner Said welcomes the recent multi-ethnic response with its varieties (of politically correct) viewpoints serving as an over-due anti-dote.

¹⁴ rehashing old articles with minimal changes

¹⁵ Relation between Turkey and Israel are said to be good unaffected by Arab hostility, thus one should discount a special Muslim anti-Jewish component

Clearly the bitterness of the conflict has escalated as the result of specific actions and not out of ingrained and mystic hostility. At least to Said the Mideastern conflict can be seen as the final funneling and subsequent focusing of Orientalism into a very specific area. Intellectually the book may be about the problems of cultural representation, but from the human point of view it is after all a personal indictment, not against representation as such but against Orientalism in particular.

June 25-26, 2006 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se