

THE

Edward Said

READER

EDITED BY

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Orientalism

(1978)

No other book of Edward Said's has enjoyed the attention of *Orientalism*. Since its publication in the United States in 1978, it has been translated into more than twenty-five languages with still more translations in progress. It has been the subject of countless conferences and impassioned debates. Perhaps more than any work of late twentieth-century criticism, it has transformed the study of literature and culture.

Yet for all of its success, *Orientalism* initially had difficulty finding a major publisher. Some publishing houses did not consider the book's idea groundbreaking; still others were unwilling to back a book whose politics were at odds with the mainstream's view of Palestinians, Arabs, and Israel. Of the few publishers that expressed an early interest in it, the University of California Press offered Said a paltry \$250 advance for the book. Eventually, however, Pantheon, renowned for publishing the works of radical critics like Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, sent *Orientalism* to press in late 1977.

Orientalism's impact surprised both publishers and even Said himself. For the topic of Orientalism—Europe's representations of the East—was not totally new; other scholars had addressed the subject before. In 1953 Raymond Schwab wrote *Le Renaissance orientale* (a fastidiously detailed study of Europe's nineteenth-century experience of the Orient); a decade later, Anwar Abdel Malek wrote an influential article

"Orientalism in Crisis" (a Marxist interpretation of Europe's representation of the "East"). In 1969 V. G. Kiernan wrote *The Lords of the Human Kind* (a history of European colonization).¹

But *Orientalism* differed markedly from its predecessors. It brought together the philosophies of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci to challenge the authority of Western knowledge of—and power over—the Orient. It examined an array of nineteenth-century French and British novelists, poets, politicians, philologists, historians, travelers, and imperial administrators: the voyages and travel narratives of nineteenth-century French authors such as Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Nerval, and Flaubert; the Indian journalism of Karl Marx; the writings of the first modern Orientalist Sylvestre de Sacy and of the French nineteenth-century philologist Ernest Renan; the adventure tales of Richard Burton and T. E. Lawrence; the speeches of Alfred Balfour; and the cables of British colonial governors in Egypt like Lord Cromer.

Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Said viewed this ensemble of writing on the Orient as a discourse. Together the writings of Renan, Flaubert, T. E. Lawrence, and others composed a discipline by which European culture managed and produced the "Orient." Their writings expressed "a will . . . not only to understand what [was] non-European, but also to control and manipulate what was manifestly different."²

Yet if Foucault offered Said a means of describing the relationship between knowledge and power over the Orient, Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provided a way of explaining how the influence of certain ideas about the "Orient" prevailed over others. The extensive influence of a particular idea, Gramsci argued, operated not through the brute application of force in nontotalitarian societies, but by consent—a tacit, unwritten agreement often

passed off as conventional wisdom or common sense. Hegemony, Said explained, was how Orientalism could remain an indefatigable cultural and political force in the Western media's representations of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims.

Yet Gramsci's writings suggested more to Said than the idea of hegemony; Gramsci offered him a way of conceptualizing his own predicament. The best and most effective critiques, wrote Gramsci, begin when writers understand themselves as products of the historical process, a process that leaves its traces without necessarily leaving an inventory of them.³ *Orientalism* was thus Said's own account, his own inventory, of "the infinite traces" that decades of dispossession and exile inflicted on him and other "Oriental" subjects.

Among the traces deposited by the years of dispossession was Said's experience of the June 1967 Arab-Israel War. As Said recounted in the documentary film *In Search of Palestine* (1998),⁴ the Arab defeat in 1967 had magnified his sense of national loss. Israel had come to occupy the West Bank and Gaza. In his early essay "The Arab Portrayed" (1968), written in the aftermath of the war, Said penned what later became the central theme of *Orientalism*:

If the Arab occupies space enough for attention, it is a negative value. He is seen as a disrupter of Israel's and the West's existence, or . . . as a surmountable obstacle to Israel's creation in 1948. Palestine was imagined as an empty desert waiting to burst into bloom, its inhabitants inconsequential nomads possessing no stable claim to the land and therefore no cultural permanence.⁵

Orientalism was thus "a history of personal loss and national disintegration," as he later wrote.⁶ Its aim was to "liberate intellectuals from the shackles of systems of thought like Orientalism."⁷

The apprentices of modern-day Orientalism responded fiercely. Leon Wieseltier, ironically one of Said's former students, wrote that *Orientalism* issued "little more than abject canards of Arab propaganda."⁸ In a riposte published in *The New York Review of Books*, Bernard Lewis accused Said of "poisoning" the field of "Oriental" studies. Calling Said "reckless," "arbitrary," "insouciant," and "outrageous," Lewis recounted how Said, along with other Arab, Muslim, and Marxist critics, had "polluted" the word "Orientalism." Said, Lewis argued, had attempted to denigrate the work of well-intentioned, disinterested Orientalists; he had politicized an innocent scholarship.⁹

Yet the shrill protests from Said's critics revealed less about Said's work than it did about their own hypocrisy. Veiled in language of "scholarship" and "objectivity," their indignation was, as one reviewer put it, "an indication of the Orientalist attitudes that Said himself had described."¹⁰ Lewis merely "delivered ahistorical and willful political assertions in the form of scholarly argument, a practice thoroughly in keeping with the least creditable aspects of old-fashioned colonialist Orientalism," Said responded.¹¹

International publishers soon took notice. Within two years of its publication and a year after its debut in England (1979), numerous translations began to appear. In 1980 Editions du Seuil published the French edition with an introduction by the French-Bulgarian literary critic Tzvetan Todorov. In the same year, Kamul Abu Deeb, the Syrian poet and critic, published an innovative translation in Arabic. Translations in German, Turkish, and Persian soon followed. The Spanish and Catalan editions were published in 1991. There were translations in Japanese and Swedish in 1993, as well as others in Serbo-Croatian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Korean, Greek, and most recently Vietnamese and Hebrew.

Yet *Orientalism's* real significance lay not in its.

international acclaim, but in its method. After *Orientalism*, scholars in the humanities and the social sciences could no longer ignore questions of difference and the politics of representation. Art history, anthropology, history, political science, sociology, philosophy, and literary studies were all forced to confront its vision of culture.

"In a Borgesian way," Said wrote in his afterword to the 1995 edition, "*Orientalism* has become several different books." For some scholars and intellectuals, the book was read as a defense of Islam. Others found in the work the possibility of "writing back," of giving voice to their experiences silenced by the cultural hegemony of the West. Native Americans, Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and other colonized peoples and oppressed groups located in *Orientalism* a method to challenge a chronic tendency of the West to deny, suppress, and distort their cultures and histories. In the academy, this challenge has come to be known as postcolonial studies. *Orientalism* was seditious in its effects.¹²

INTRODUCTION TO ORIENTALISM

On a visit to Beirut during the terrible civil war of 1975-1976 a French journalist wrote regretfully of the gutted downtown area that "it had once seemed to belong to . . . the Orient of Chateaubriand and Nerval."¹³ He was right about the place, of course, especially so far as a European was concerned. The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over. Perhaps it seemed irrelevant that Orientals themselves had something at stake in the process, that

even in the time of Chateaubriand and Nerval Orientals had lived there, and that now it was they who were suffering; the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate, both of which had a privileged communal significance for the journalist and his French readers.

Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly). Unlike the Americans, the French and the British—less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss—have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. In contrast, the American understanding of the Orient will seem considerably less dense, although our recent Japanese, Korean, and Indochinese adventures ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic "Oriental" awareness. Moreover, the vastly expanded American political and economic role in the Near East (the Middle East) makes great claims on our understanding of that Orient.

It will be clear to the reader that by Orientalism I mean several things, all of them interdependent. The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism. Compared with *Oriental studies* or *area studies*, it is true that the term *Orientalism* is less preferred by specialists today, both because it is too vague and

general and, because it connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century European colonialism. Nevertheless books are written and congresses held with "the Orient" as their main focus, with the Orientalist in his new or old guise as their main authority. The point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental.

Related to this academic tradition, whose fortunes, transmigrations, specializations, and transmissions are in part the subject of this study, is a more general meaning for Orientalism. Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on. *This* Orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx. A little later I shall deal with the methodological problems one encounters in so broadly construed a "field" as this.

The interchange between the academic and the more or less imaginative meanings of Orientalism is a constant one, and since the late eighteenth century there has been a considerable, quite disciplined—perhaps even regulated—traffic between the two. Here I come to the third meaning of Orientalism, which is something more historically and materially defined than either of the other two. Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism. My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic disci-

pline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Moreover, so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. This is not to say that Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient, but that it is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity “the Orient” is in question. How this happens is what this book tries to demonstrate. It also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

Historically and culturally there is a quantitative as well as a qualitative difference between the Franco-British involvement in the Orient and—until the period of American ascendancy after World War II—the involvement of every other European and Atlantic power. To speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant, the Biblical texts and the Biblical lands, the spice trade, colonial armies and a long tradition of colonial administrators, a formidable scholarly corps, innumerable Oriental “experts” and “hands,” an Oriental professorate, a complex array of “Oriental” ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality), many Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use—the list can be extended more or less indefinitely. My point is that Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands. From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient, and approaches it as France and Britain once did. Out of that closeness, whose dynamic is enormously productive even if it always demonstrates the comparatively

greater strength of the Occident (British, French, or American), comes the large body of texts I call Orientalist.

II

I have begun with the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact-of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.

Having said that, one must go on to state a number of reasonable qualifications. In the first place, it would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was *essentially* an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality. When Disraeli said in his novel *Tancred* that the East was a career, he meant that to be interested in the East was something bright young Westerners would find to be an all-consuming passion; he should not be interpreted as saying that the East was *only* a career for Westerners. There were—and are—cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West. About that fact this study of Orientalism has very little to contribute, except to acknowledge it tacitly. But the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and the Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a “real” Orient. My point is that Disraeli's statement about the East refers mainly to that created consistency, that regular constellation of ideas as the pre-eminent thing about the Orient, and not to its mere being, as Wallace Stevens's phrase has it.

A second qualification is that ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied. To believe that the Orient was created—or, as I call it, "Orientalized"—and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony, and is quite accurately indicated in the title of K. M. Panikkar's classic *Asia and Western Dominance*.¹⁴ The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be*—that is, submitted to being—*made* Oriental. There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental." My argument is that Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.

This brings us to a third qualification. One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away. I myself believe that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient (which is what, in its academic or scholarly form, it claims to be). Nevertheless, what we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted-together strength of Orientalist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability. After all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign-service institutes) from the period of Ernest Renan in the late 1840s until the present in the United States must

be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies. Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture.

Gramsci has made the useful analytic distinction between civil and political society in which the former is made up of voluntary (or at least rational and noncoercive) affiliations like schools, families, and unions, the latter of state institutions (the army, the police, the central bureaucracy) whose role in the polity is direct domination. Culture, of course, 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. In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as *hegemony*, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, or rather the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far. Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe,¹⁵ a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter.

In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. And why should it have been

otherwise, especially during the period of extraordinary European ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present? 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. Additionally, the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections. If we can point to great Orientalist works of genuine scholarship like Silvestre de Sacy's *Chrestomathie arabe* or Edward William Lane's *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, we need also to note that Renan's and Gobineau's racial ideas came out of the same impulse, as did a great many Victorian pornographic novels (see the analysis by Steven Marcus of "The Lustful Turk"¹⁶).

And yet, one must repeatedly ask oneself whether what matters in Orientalism is the general group of ideas overriding the mass of material—about which who could deny that they were shot through with doctrines of European superiority, various kinds of racism, imperialism, and the like, dogmatic views of "the Oriental" as a land of ideal and unchanging abstraction?—or the much more varied work produced by almost uncountable individual writers, whom one would take up as individual instances of authors dealing with the Orient. In a sense the two alternatives, general and particular, are really two perspectives on the same material: in both instances one would have to deal with pioneers in the field like William Jones, with great artists like Nerval or Flaubert. And why would it not be possible to employ both perspectives together, or one after the other

Isn't there an obvious danger of distortion (of precisely the kind that academic Orientalism has always been prone to) if either too general or too specific a level of description is maintained systematically? My two fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a-localized focus. In trying to deal with these problems I have tried to deal with three main aspects of my own contemporary reality that seem to me to point the way out of the methodological or perspectival difficulties I have been discussing, difficulties that might force one, in the first instance, into writing a coarse polemic on so unacceptably general a level of description as not to be worth the effort, or in the second instance, into writing so detailed and atomistic a series of analyses as to lose all track of the general lines of force informing the field, giving it its special cogency. How then to recognize individuality and to reconcile it with its intelligent, and by no means passive or merely dictatorial, general and hegemonic context?

III

It is very easy to argue that knowledge about Shakespeare or Wordsworth is not political whereas knowledge about contemporary China or the Soviet Union is. My own formal and professional designation is that of "humanist," a title which indicates the humanities as my field and therefore the unlikely eventuality that there might be anything political about what I do in that field. Of course, all these labels and terms are quite unnuanced as I use them here, but the general truth of what I am pointing to is, I think, widely held. One reason for saying that a humanist who writes about Wordsworth, or an editor whose specialty is Keats, is not involved in anything political is that what he does seems to have no direct political effect upon reality in the everyday sense. A scholar whose field is Soviet economics works in a highly charged area where there is much government interest, and what he might produce in the way of studies or proposals will be taken up by policymakers, government officials, institutional economists, intelligence experts. The distinction between "humanists" and persons whose work has policy implications, or political significance, can be broadened further by saying that the former's ideological color is a matter of incidental