

# Orientalism: An Overview

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**I**N MID-1982, AN INTELLECTUAL STOUCH BROKE OUT IN THE PAGES OF THE *NEW YORK Review of Books* between the British-born Orientalist and conservative political commentator Bernard Lewis and the Columbia University professor of comparative literature and pro-Palestinian activist Edward Said. In 'The Question of Orientalism', Lewis, an academic then based at Princeton University and a public intellectual who threw his weight behind various conservative American foreign policy decisions, charged Said and other anti-Orientalists with waging a defamatory campaign against Western scholars of the Middle Eastern and Muslim worlds. According to Lewis, the anti-Orientalists implied that the scholarship of Orientalists was a fraudulent conspiracy to subjugate the Oriental world, to justify historic British and French imperialism in the region, and to promote contemporary neo-colonial and pro-Zionist American foreign policies. Lewis focused his attack on Said, accusing him of factual errors in his criticisms of academic Orientalists; of arbitrarily selecting the works of French and British Orientalists which supported his argument while ignoring the works of German and Russian Orientalists which did not; of being ignorant of Oriental languages; and of neglecting the work of contemporary Arab and Muslim scholars. In short, Lewis contended, Said 'knew little or nothing about the scholars and field he presumed to criticize' and his thesis and accusations against the Orientalists were therefore 'baseless'. The singling out of Said was not unexpected; Said ('Shattered Myths', *Orientalism*) had previously criticized Lewis as an example

*par excellence* of an Orientalist scholar whose work was biased, misconceived in its premise and conclusions, and harnessed to the service of the neo-imperialist American state. In his response to the *New York Review of Books*, Said ('Letter to the editor') accused Lewis, who was Jewish, of being ideologically motivated by his Zionist sympathies, of 'suppressing or distorting the truth' about Orientalist scholarship on Arabs and Islam, and of 'ahistorical and willful political assertions in the form of scholarly argument'. The attack had descended to the level of the personal as well as polemical; Lewis ('Reply to Said's letter') rebutted Said's response with the disdainful dismissal: 'It is difficult to argue with a scream of rage'.

What motivated Lewis's initial critique in his 1982 essay was not merely that Said had attacked him and his fellow Orientalists, casting doubt on their objectivity, political motives, and scholarship. It was the fact that the very meaning of the word 'Orientalism' was in the process of being transformed. Before the publication of Said's highly influential and equally controversial book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), Orientalism had referred to the scholarly study of the languages and cultures of 'the Orient': a geographically nebulous region comprising North Africa and the present-day Middle East, ranging through South Asia and extending as far east as Japan. By the nineteenth century, Orientalism also denoted a particular genre of Romantic painting whose subject was the sensuous and exotic Orient exemplified by European artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Jean-Léon Gérôme, John Frederick Lewis and Ludwig Deutsch. After Said's book, however, Orientalism became a pejorative term connoting false, prejudiced and totalising European representations of the Oriental world produced by Orientalist scholars specifically to justify and secure European colonial domination over this region, especially from the late eighteenth century onwards. In its new guise, Orientalism was a discourse constituted of the various statements and representations—religious, academic, political, literary, aesthetic, commercial and psychological—produced by the West about the East, sustained and circulated through Western imperial power and cultural hegemony. To Said, Orientalism was much more than false or negative images about the Orient. It was a process by which the West deliberately 'Orientalised' the Orient or made the region seem 'Oriental', representing it in such a way that a dizzying heterogeneity of countries, cultures, customs, peoples, religions and histories were incorporated into the Western-created category, 'Oriental', and characterised by their exotic difference from and inferiority to the West. Orientalism permitted Westerners to make sweeping negative generalisations about, for instance, 'the Oriental character', 'the Muslim mind' or 'Arab society', subsuming all differences into a monolithic and racialising fantasy.

Said was not the first to challenge the Orientalists or to allege that Western scholarly knowledge was tainted by association with colonial governments, arguing that academic Orientalists produced a discourse about the Oriental that either justified European colonialism or was used to control colonial populations. But he was certainly the most famous and widely read of the anti-Orientalists. His book provoked much criticism and admiration, and continues to have an impact on research in the humanities to this day. This essay examines the historical context and impact of *Orientalism* and considers its legacy.

### **Background: the Orientalists**

European curiosity about Islam had developed in the context of the medieval crusades (both the lengthy process of Christian reconquest of the Iberian peninsula and the crusades to the Holy Land) but it was the increasing trade as well as complex military conflicts and alliances with the Ottoman empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that gave rise to European travelogues and scholarly tomes about the 'Oriental' world, focusing principally on Turkey and Persia. The eighteenth century saw further contact with other Oriental regions: conflicts with the North African 'Barbary' regencies of Tunis, Algiers and Tripolitania and the sultanate of Morocco; trade with various entrepôts in the Indian subcontinent; and attempts to establish trade, missionary and diplomatic links with China. Such encounters were accompanied by the rise of serious philological studies of Oriental languages and classical texts, particularly Sanskrit. Meanwhile, Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu began to use existing European knowledge about the Orient to compare and contrast different European and Oriental political systems. The study of the Orient became institutionalised when the philologist and Sanskrit scholar Sir William Jones established the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784, and when the School of Living Oriental Languages was established in Paris at the height of the French Revolution in 1795. Similar scholarly Orientalist institutions or organisations were established in other European countries as well as the United States in the early nineteenth century, giving rise to training centres for the Persian, Turkish, Hebrew and Arabic languages, among others.

The study of Oriental philology began before formal European colonial contact with the Oriental world, motivated by curiosity and admiration for Indo-Persian and other Oriental literature. Yet from the eighteenth century onwards, scholarly Orientalism developed in conjunction with the needs of expanding western European states, while colonial conquests in Oriental realms brought more opportunities to develop Orientalist scholarship and expertise. Perhaps the clearest example of how colonial conquest could be prompted by, and subsequently stimulate, Orientalist scholarship lies in Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. Napoleon's conquest was partly inspired and informed by the

comte de Volney's description of Egypt in *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie* (1787). The Bonapartist occupation of Egypt in turn enabled Orientalist scholars to produce the multi-volume encyclopaedic work *Description de l'égypte* (1809-1829), while the discovery of the Rosetta stone by Napoleon's army made it possible for Champollion and others to decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (Schar). As Zachary Lockman (ch.3) has shown, the pattern of Orientalist scholarship deployed particularly by the British and French in their dealings with their colonies in the Oriental world was firmly established by the mid-nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century, exemplified in the works of Silvestre de Sacy, Ernest Renan, Snouck Hurgronje, Edward Lane, Richard Francis Burton, Lord Cromer, D.G. Hogarth, T.E. Lawrence, and Gertrude Bell. All these Orientalists produced works which aided the policy development and administration of Muslim majority colonies by the French and British in the Middle East, and the Dutch in Indonesia.

Yet the relationship between Orientalist scholarship and colonial conquest was never straightforwardly complicit. As David Kopf has argued, British Orientalists in India during the 1830s defended Hindu cultures and peoples against the encroachments of British colonial administrators and their attempts to Anglicise the local population in order to facilitate colonial rule. Moreover, the scholarship of the British Orientalists also stimulated the revival of a modern Hinduism around which anti-colonial and nationalist movements would later coalesce—something which was recognised by Nehru (Kopf 496). Throughout the nineteenth century, Orientalists studying the Arab and Persian worlds such as Wilfred Scawen Blunt and Edward Browne also used their scholarship to pursue anti-imperial agendas, and to criticise British attempts to dominate these regions. These alternative voices, however, tended to be marginalised, drowned out by the overwhelming clamour among mainstream Orientalists and colonial administrators and policy makers that 'the Oriental'—that mythical person whom Maxime Rodinson ironically called *homo islamicus* (60)—was a being vastly and fundamentally different and inferior to Western man, shaped as he was by an unchanging 'Muslim mindset' that arose entirely from the Qur'an and other Islamic writings in the classical age of Islamic philosophy from the eighth to twelfth centuries.

The reciprocal relationship between Orientalists and the imperial or neo-imperial state continued to flourish in the United States during the twentieth century. The United States symbolically inherited the institutional relationship between imperial state and scholar when Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb moved from Oxford to Harvard in 1955 at the height of the Cold War. H.A.R. Gibb, author of *Modern Trends in Islam* (1947), co-author with Harold Bowen of *Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East* (1950, 1957) and editor of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*,

found a receptive audience for his views in America. Lockman has noted that mid-twentieth century American Orientalists, like their nineteenth century European counterparts, concentrated on philology and believed that the Islamic world was 'a distinct civilization now in crisis as a result of its confrontation with the more advanced and powerful modern West. A scholar with mastery of the main languages and classical texts of Islamic high civilization was still presumed to be able to pronounce on almost anything related to Islam, across vast stretches of time and space' (Lockman 102). Gibb made grand, sweeping statements about the 'Arab mind' or 'Muslim mind' and 'Oriental despotism' based on his study of medieval Islamic texts, and he fostered ties with the emerging discipline of 'area studies', particularly Middle East studies, but he did not attempt direct intervention in the political sphere as far as America's troubled relationship with the Middle East was concerned. That was left to area studies sociologists such as Daniel Lerner who, in his highly influential book *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958), argued that the contemporary upheavals and revolutions in the Middle East were due to 'traditional' Muslim societies making the tumultuous transition to 'modernity'—a process that left them frustrated and aggressive, and attracted to political extremism and violence. There was little room in Lerner's account for the explanatory role of the legacies of colonialism, foreign control of oil and other resources in the region, and American attempts to shore up corrupt anti-communist regimes. Likewise, former US diplomat to Egypt John S. Badeau, in *The American Approach to the Arab World* (1968), also urged the Johnson administration to support 'Arab moderates such as Jordan's King Hussein' who were launching 'progressive movements and liberal institutions' deemed essential for 'a gradual evolution to modernity'. Badeau also wanted the American government to strengthen trade with conservative countries like Iran, reasoning that if Iranians had access to American consumer goods, this would consolidate capitalism and stave off revolution (Little 196-198). Advice—solicited or not—on US foreign policy in the Middle East tended to be the province of the modernisation theorists until the intervention of Bernard Lewis who, like Gibb before him, made the move from the old imperial power to the new one in 1974 when he transferred from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) to Princeton University.

Lewis was a philologist who began teaching Islamic history at SOAS in 1938 before serving in the British Army and then the Foreign Office during the Second World War. He resumed his career in SOAS after the war and his early scholarship focused mainly on medieval Arab history. After publishing *The Arabs in History* (1950, updated many times since), like Gibb, he served as an editor of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Unlike Gibb and other Orientalists, Lewis leveraged his expertise on medieval Islam to comment on contemporary political events in the Middle East. In 1953 he delivered a lecture on 'Communism and Islam' at

Chatham House, in which he used the traditional Orientalist concept of 'Oriental despotism' to argue that Muslims were used to autocracy from their sovereigns and religious leaders, and that 'A community brought up on such doctrines will not be shocked by Communist disregard of political liberty or human rights' (quoted in Lockman 131). Islam, asserted Lewis, shared much in common with communism: a totalitarian doctrine, a sense of belonging and mission to entice their followers, and a collectivist ethos. This explained the popularity of socialist movements in the Middle East and support for the Soviet Union (Lockman 131). Later at Princeton, Lewis would contribute a chapter on 'Islamic Concepts of Revolution' to P. J. Vatikiotis's edited volume *Revolution in the Middle East, and Other Case Studies* (1972), in which Lewis again demonstrated his belief that his interpretation of Islam from select medieval texts could explain an essential, unchanging Muslim character and mindset from the eighth century to the present day. He believed that this character and mindset, arising from religious beliefs, could shed light on all contemporary political and social changes in the Middle East. The problem was that Lewis attempted to explain complex historical events without recourse to the usual methods of analysis used to explicate other historical events in the Western world. Material factors, economic issues, local histories, external influences, changing political and sociocultural relations and ideas were all dismissed as less relevant than the unchanging sway a monolithic Islam held over its adherents' minds and behaviour. Lockman has critiqued 'Islamic Concepts of Revolution' and, in fact, Lewis's entire corpus of work from the 1950s to his inflammatory 1990 essay, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', and his post-9/11 writings in the following terms:

By deducing from a limited selection of classical texts the key principles which are presumed to govern the minds of all Muslims everywhere, this approach rendered unnecessary careful investigation of the many different ways in which, over the centuries and in various places, Muslims actually understood authority, legitimacy and the right to rebel, and what they actually did when confronted with impious or tyrannical rule. No serious scholar would today try to deduce what all Christians everywhere must believe about legitimate authority and the right to rebel by looking only at the Gospels ... and a few medieval texts. ... [T]he approach Lewis used to delineate what he saw as timeless and uniform 'Islamic concepts' of revolution and (more broadly) to demonstrate how the behaviour of even contemporary Muslims could best be explained in terms of what were deemed to be Islam's essential characteristics remained influential and would continue to surface in his work and that of others into the twenty-first century. (Lockman 132)

Lewis's views were not without impact. He was widely sought after as a media commentator, his highly accessible books were popular, especially after crises in the Middle East and the September 11, 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks on America, and he

has been credited with being 'the most significant intellectual influence behind the invasion of Iraq' (Weisberg). The US Vice-President Dick Cheney (2006) even lauded Lewis as the greatest authority on Middle Eastern history from the classical period to the modern day, adding that Lewis's views on the region had often been sought by President George W. Bush. Lewis thus followed in the footsteps of nineteenth-century Orientalists who lent their 'expertise' to shape and support government policies in the Middle East and Asia. It was against such nineteenth century Orientalist writings and 'late Orientalists' such as Lewis that anti-Orientalists began to wield their pens from the 1960s onwards.

### **Anti-Orientalism and Said**

In 1963 Anouar Abdel-Malek published an essay in the journal *Diogenes* titled 'Orientalism in Crisis' in which he argued that academic knowledge about the Middle East was 'europeocentric' and tainted by its association with European colonial rule. Broadly speaking, Abdel-Malek voiced two principal objections to extant Orientalist work, one conceptual, and the other methodological. On the conceptual front, Abdel-Malek contended that Orientalism was an ill-conceived project because firstly, the Orient and Orientals were constituted as objects of study based on a notion of the Orient's/Oriental's 'otherness'. Secondly, scholars adopted essentialist notions of Oriental nations, cultures and peoples that categorised them along typologies of ethnicity which verged on racism. These objections would later be raised by Said as well. On the methodological front, Abdel-Malek raised two concerns. First, he pointed out that the work of Arabs and Muslims was ignored by Orientalists, thus Orientals tended to be excluded from or marginalised within the flourishing societies and institutions that perpetuated the study of the Orient. The second methodological objection was more far-ranging and spoke directly to the problematic assumptions about Oriental philology evidenced in Gibb's and Lewis's work. Abdel-Malek criticised Orientalist methodologies for an excessive focus on the Oriental past because of the assumption that historical knowledge of the far-distant past shed light on the present, and that the study of language and religion were sufficient to understand the Orient and the Oriental. He accused Orientalists of giving little regard to social and political change or the pressures of external forces on contemporary Arab and Islamic societies. Abdel-Malek's work was part of an attempt by French Marxist scholars such as Maxime Rodinson in the 1960s to move away from the heavily philological emphasis in Orientalism, and to engage with the views of anti-colonial intellectuals and activists instead, incorporating contemporary concerns into studies of the Orient (Lockman 149).

This early foray against Orientalism was joined by A.L. Tibawi's article 'English-Speaking Orientalists' in *Islamic Studies* a year later. Tibawi's grievances arose particularly from religious concerns. He contended that Western knowledge

about the Orient historically grew out of deep-rooted medieval Christian hostility to Islam and, over the centuries, had served the ends of denunciations of Islam and attempted conversions of Muslims. Even in the nineteenth century, he argued, Western scholarship about the Orient was tainted by collusion with Christian missionaries. Because of this religious bias, much Orientalist scholarship, when one strips away the apparatus of footnotes and sources, is simply speculation, assertion, and baseless judgement with little concrete evidence. He then suggested that because Western scholars do not treat the Qur'an with respect as the revelatory speech of God, and because they have little understanding or intuitive experience of the spiritual, they cannot truly understand Islamic history or cultures. It is perhaps because of this last point that Tibawi, although a respected Palestinian Arab historian, has failed to make as wide an impact as Abdel-Malek or Said, for Tibawi seems to be suggesting that a secular analysis of the Qur'an, Islam and Muslims can never yield accurate information or understanding.

At any rate, these early critiques of Orientalism were swiftly met with a resounding rebuttal by the Italian Arabist Francesco Gabrieli (1965). While he acknowledged that some Orientalists had colluded with Western imperialists, and focused too heavily on classical texts rather than engaging with the contemporary Orient, he argued that the majority of Orientalists were not agents of colonialism; instead, scholars such as Edward Browne, Louis Massignon and Leone Caetani were interested in acquiring true knowledge and understanding of the Orient for disinterested reasons of pure knowledge. Gabrieli suggested that the anti-Orientalists were politically motivated by their leftist sympathies because they attacked Western scholars while approving Soviet Orientalism, and he dismissed their claims to being marginalized with the assertion that everything worthwhile that had been developed in modern historical and scientific methodology and theory over the last four hundred years had been the sole province of the West. Finally, he accused anti-Orientalists of blaming the West for internal problems within the Middle East.

It was within this highly-charged context, then, that Edward Said began to produce his works attacking Western Orientalism. The first thing that needs to be said about Said is that he did not automatically despise and disparage all Western scholars who concerned themselves with Oriental matters. Indeed, he had great respect for the early twentieth century French scholar of Islamic history, Louis Massignon (*The World, the Text and the Critic*, 284) and he particularly admired Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance Orientale* (1950). For Said, Schwab was not so much an 'Orientalist' as an '*Orienteur*' who showed that 'the Orient, however outré and different it may at first seem, is a complement to the Occident' and richly productive of, and integrated into, Western pre-Romantic and Romantic culture ('Raymond Schwab and the Romance of Ideas',

152).<sup>1</sup> However, by the 1960s Said was discouraged not only by the general state of scholarship about the Middle East, but also by the American media coverage of events in that region. He was dismayed by the reportage of the 1967 Six Day War and of the emergence of Palestinian national movements in the late 1960s and 1970s, the most prominent of which was the Yasser Arafat-led Fatah which seized control of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and brought it to international recognition as the voice of the Palestinian people.

Said was born in the British Mandate of Palestine in 1935 but his family was displaced after the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 and moved to Egypt, from whence Said was sent to the United States to study in 1951. He became politically active in Palestinian affairs after the 1967 war and, ten years later, joined the Palestinian National Council, holding his position until 1991. In the early 1970s, disgust over media and academic coverage of the October War of 1973 led him to produce his first essay, 'Shattered Myths', articulating his thoughts on why the West could neither understand nor properly analyse and evaluate events in the Middle East. The West, he charged, was in thrall to 'myths' about Arabs which were 'preserved in the discourse of Orientalism, a school of thought and a discipline of study whose focus includes "the Arabs," Arabism, Islam, the Semites, and "the Arab mind"' (410). This was despite the fact that the category 'Arab society' is not a meaningful one since it encompasses 'over a hundred million people and at least a dozen different societies, and there is no truly effective intellectual method for discussing all of them together as a single monolith. Any reduction of this whole immense mass of history, societies, individuals, and realities to "Arab society" is therefore a mythification' (410). What it was possible to do, however, was to analyse the 'structure of thought for which such a phrase as "Arab society" is a kind of reality', and this is what he proceeded to do.

Said analysed the journalism and scholarship produced in the United States in response to the October War (Arab-Israeli War) of 1973, arguing that this discourse homogenised all Arabs and represented them as bloodthirsty, vengeful, irrational and unreasonable, untrustworthy, unjust and pathologically bent on the destruction of Israel. He then went on to establish his foundational idea that the discourse of Orientalism functions as a set of binarisms favouring Europeans: 'On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion and distrust, and so forth. Orientals are none of these things' (413). The West is also active and creative, possessing agency and capable of generating knowledge, while the

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<sup>1</sup> This is in fact what John MacKenzie would argue in his *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (1995), a book dedicated to refuting Said's thesis in *Orientalism*. The views of the two scholars were perhaps not as far apart as MacKenzie imagined, but there is no evidence that MacKenzie read Said's essay on Schwab.

Orient is passive and the object of Western study and, in fact, a concoction of the Western imagination. This argument would thread its way through his subsequent work.

By the time Said published 'Arabs, Islam and the Dogmas of the West' (1976) in the *New York Times Book Review*, the main lineaments of his thesis on Orientalism were in place. Orientalist scholarship on Arabs and Islam, Said claimed, was characterised and corrupted by the following four dogmas: (1) the West (rational, developed, humane, superior) was and still is absolutely and systematically different from the Orient (aberrant, undeveloped, inferior); (2) Orientalist abstractions drawn from 'classical' Islamic civilization are more relevant to present-day Muslims and Arabs than modern realities; (3) the Orient is uniform and unchanging, and can thus be objectified using a highly specialised vocabulary; and (4) the Orient is something fundamentally to be feared, in part because the Oriental never attains the status of a 'normal' human being in Orientalist discourse.

All these ideas were brought together and elaborated in *Orientalism* (1978), where Said argued that Western discourses on the Orient confirmed the West's beliefs about its own difference and cultural superiority, thus facilitating or strengthening domination over the Orient, especially during the age of European colonialism. The fantasy of Orientalism was crucial to Western self-definition. In all statements about the Orient, the West was placed in a position of superiority, mastery and control. The Orient was depicted as a place of violence, cruelty, corruption and despotism. It was a region of political and cultural stagnation or primitivism, outside the progressive march of historical development. These European-generated fantasies which had sustained colonialism in the region were still alive and flourishing in contemporary American entertainment and media coverage of the Middle East:

In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colorful scoundrel: these are some traditional Arab roles in the cinema. (286)

Such demonisation of Arabs and Muslims buttressed popular support for American policies in the Middle East which protected American oil interests and its support for Israel in Israeli-Arab affairs. This was why the seemingly arcane field of historical Orientalism still mattered to Said: it provides the structure and content of a discourse which is still being put to the service of the neo-imperial American state and the capitalist corporations whose interests it facilitates.

### **The impact of Said's *Orientalism***

The reaction from Orientalists was swift. In 1979, Donald Little published an article attacking Abdel-Malek, Tibawi and Said, accusing them of being motivated by ideological agendas, the political causes they espouse, a deep resentment against the West and bitterness about the exclusiveness of Western scholarship. It was for these reasons that they denounced Orientalism as being useless for apprehending anything about the Orient. Little pointed out that for every anti-Orientalist who denounced Orientalism as a body of scholarly work, there were many prominent Arab scholars who led the field: Philip Hitti, Albert Hourani, Muhsin Mehdi, Hisham Sharabi, Aziz Atiyeh, George Makdisi, and G.D. Anawati. Yet these were largely ignored by the anti-Orientalists. Little conceded that some of Said's complaints about the binaristic views of Orientalists were justified, but he argued that Orientalism and Orientalists were by no means a monolithic or static category; rather there had always existed a diversity of views and the discipline had changed over time. Indeed, he concluded, the very fact that Abdel-Malek, Tibawi and Said were being heard and their views discussed showed that anti-Orientalists and non-Western scholars were *not* marginalised.

Other Orientalists followed suit, principally attacking Said for his ignorance of Oriental languages, histories and other relevant scholarship in the field produced by Westerners and Arabs or Muslims alike. David Kopf (1980) agreed that the work of anti-Orientalists was provoked by postcolonial resentment against the West and an identity crisis that was personal, cultural and political. He warned that Western scholars could not afford to ignore this problem—a problem apparently created solely by postcolonial 'others'. Bernard Lewis, of course, responded with the 1982 *New York Review of Books* essay with which this article began, and followed it with *Islam and the West* (1993) where Lewis again argued that Said's work was seriously flawed because he cherry-picked the types of Orientalists who suited his political agenda while ignoring scholars from Germany, Austria and Russia who did not fit into his categories so easily since they did not have substantial colonial dealings with the Oriental world. Lewis also suggested that *Orientalism* was popular in the West because it is reductive, simplistic, polemical, and identifies a clear group of scapegoats, but he pointed out that the book had provoked critique from within the Arab and Muslim world of scholars. Lewis also accused Said of being out of touch and out of date with his critique because 'Iranists', 'Indologists', 'Sinologists' and 'Arabists' had already rejected the term 'Orientalist' by the early 1970s.

Lewis did not appear to understand the substance of Said's critique of Orientalism as a *discourse* 'with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles' (Said, *Orientalism* 1-2); a critique which applied to area studies as well. In Foucaultian

terms, 'discourse' is a culturally produced, often politically determined system of statements which create a prevailing 'truth' about reality for both dominant groups and the dominated. Discourse not only shapes the way both groups apprehend the world through the availability of ideas in circulation at a particular historical moment, but it also produces reality for them by construing and constraining what can be articulated. As Lockman concluded,

Lewis was apparently never able to grasp (or cogently address) Said's treatment of Orientalism's defects as the product of its character as a systematic (and power-laden) discourse, rather than as a problem stemming from error, bias, stereotyping, racism, evil-mindedness or imperialist inclinations on the part of individual scholars. Nor could Lewis accept Said's premise that, like all human endeavours, Orientalist scholarship was at the very least partially shaped by the contexts within which it was conducted and thus that it was not hermetically sealed off from wider cultural attitudes about, and political engagements with, Islam and the Muslim world, for centuries Europe's (often threatening) 'other' and an ongoing 'problem' for the United States. (192)

Other critiques of *Orientalism*, somewhat more measured, appeared throughout the 1980s and 1990s. While many scholars agreed that the book was intellectually important, and that the sources of Orientalist ideas and the intellectual connections—whether intentional or not—with colonial projects deserved serious consideration, for others, the many weaknesses of the book detracted from its central thesis.<sup>2</sup> The book was criticised for its ponderous language and recourse to contemporary European theory, especially Foucault (Plumb); for the misapplication of Foucaultian discourse theory and Gramsci's notion of hegemony, which were deemed theoretically incompatible (Ahmad); for its sweeping polemical arguments and generalisations (Rodinson); for its misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the history of Orientalist scholarship (Irwin); for its focus on literary texts without sufficient care taken to situate individuals, texts and institutions in their historical contexts (of which more later); for its inability to understand that the development of different forms of European culture did not simply rely on absolute distinctions between the superior culture of the West and the inferior culture of the Orient but that, rather, various Oriental art forms were greatly admired and incorporated into Western art, thus the Orient served as a stimulus to creativity and innovation (MacKenzie); and for drawing the list of Western/Orientalist binarisms too rigidly without understanding that what seemed inferior to certain Europeans—such as the supposed sensuousness and corporeality of the Orient—could appear attractive to others (Behdad). Moreover, many realised that in his critique of

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<sup>2</sup> See the essays grouped under 'Orientalism Twenty Years On' in the special issue of *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000) for a detailed discussion of these views.

Orientalism Said had created another monolithic geo-fantasy—‘the West’. Sadik Jalal al-‘Azam called this process ‘Ontological Orientalism in reverse’ and worried that other Arab scholars in the Middle East were doing the same thing, particularly in the Iranian revolution where Western ideologies (whether nationalism, liberalism or socialism), practices, and political organization were comprehensively rejected as ‘other’ and alien; instead, a return to a mythical and reductive view of political Islam was being advocated. Others such as Lisa Lowe (1990) pointed out that Said’s Orientalism rested on ahistorical representations of the Orient as its political, cultural, social and sexual ‘other’, but since the working class and women had been Europeans’ internal ‘others’ long before European contact and representation of the Orient, Said’s thesis was problematic indeed. Lowe argued that in various Orientalist works of the eighteenth century, ‘the tensions between Orientalism and the numerous criticisms from competing narratives demonstrate that Orientalism is not a unified and dominant discourse; rather, Orientalist logics often exist in a climate of challenge and contestation’ (Lowe 141), which was something feminist scholars increasingly emphasised.

Feminist engagement with *Orientalism* was slow off the mark but began to gather pace from the late 1980s onwards. Said’s conception of Orientalism was always a profoundly gendered one because Orientalism was conflated with Western patriarchy (Teo, ‘Orientalism’). Said argued that Orientalism ‘encouraged a peculiarly ... male conception of the world’ because the academic discipline of Orientalism ‘was an exclusively male province’, and the focus of such studies was the Oriental male (Said, *Orientalism* 207). To Said, Oriental women were of interest insofar as they shed light on Western male fantasies of power and sexual access. In these discourses, Oriental women merely ‘express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing’ (Said, *Orientalism* 207). The silenced, passive, over-sexualised Oriental woman was a symbol of the pacified, feminised East embracing Western imperial penetration and domination. This argument was repeated in a number of subsequent works in the 1980s on Europe’s relation to the Orient (Kabbani; Alloula; Graham-Brown; De Groot) in which Orientalism was an overwhelmingly male enterprise; an extension of Western patriarchal and imperial politics. Oriental women served as passive sexual objects of desire while Western women were largely invisible. The few European women discussed were treated as ‘honorary men’ who echoed a primarily masculinist discourse. No attention was paid to how European women’s changing political, legal and professional status over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might affect their representations of the Oriental other.

Billie Melman was among the first feminist literary scholars to use gender to challenge the idea that Orientalism was a unified and monolithic European discourse in her ground-breaking study *Women’s Orients: English Women and the*

*Middle East, 1718-1918* (1992). Melman showed that Western women were actively involved in creating and shaping European ideas of the East, arguing that ever since women such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu began travelling to Oriental lands, they had developed alternative views of the Orient which often challenged male Orientalist assumptions and representations. This was because they did not regard Oriental men and women as Europe's sexual other, and they found affiliations between their own political and economic impotence and those of Oriental peoples. In the nineteenth century, Melman contended, middle-class Western women who travelled to the Middle East were more concerned with establishing similarities between their own domestic lives and that of the women they visited in the harem—which they represented as a family space analogous to the bourgeois drawing room—than in drawing sharp points of difference based on cultural or racial hierarchies. In other words, shared class interests and gender experiences were more important than racial or cultural differences. This was a powerful and persuasive argument anticipated by *Critical Terrains* (1991)—Lisa Lowe's reading of French and British female Orientalist writings—and reinforced by Reina Lewis's research into nineteenth-century European female Orientalist painters in *Gendering Orientalism* (1996). Meanwhile, Joyce Zonana's theory of 'feminist Orientalism' acknowledged the persistence of Orientalist discourse in female-authored British writings such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but she questioned the functioning of Orientalism in these writings. Zonana argued that when women writers employed Orientalist discourse, the intention was not to extend British colonial domination over the Orient, but rather to reform British political and domestic life by casting patriarchy as 'Oriental' and the equal treatment of women as 'European'. The discourse of Orientalism was therefore utilised to serve the goals of British feminism. Feminist engagement with Said's thesis of Orientalism thus turned away from earlier male scholars' complaints or criticisms about Said's lack of historical knowledge towards the task of producing new research into how European women encountered, interacted and represented the Orient, and the purposes to which these female Orientalist representations were put. *Orientalism* was raising new questions and generating new research in the various fields of the humanities.

Said's *Orientalism* has had an enormous influence on and beyond Western scholarship in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Many regard *Orientalism* as 'one of the most influential scholarly books published in English in the humanities in the last quarter of the twentieth century' (Lockman 190). It galvanised the field of postcolonial studies, particularly the analysis of 'colonial discourse': the various ways in which Westerners wrote about and represented non-Western cultures, especially those in regions under European colonial control. While Said might have initiated the practice of colonial discourse analysis, other postcolonial theorists have taken the concept in many different

directions. Among the most influential of these is Homi K. Bhabha, who, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), undermined the simple Western/Oriental, coloniser/colonised binaries suggested by *Orientalism* with his theorisation of mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity. At the heart of these concepts lies the idea that colonised subjects are never fully drawn into the belief system instated by Western colonial discourse, but neither are they always completely opposed to it. Rather, the colonised subject experiences both an attraction and repulsion towards the coloniser and colonial culture and thus fluctuates between complicity with and resistance to colonial culture and colonial rule. Where colonial domination desires to produce submissive subjects who assent to and 'mimic' the world-view—racial, cultural, political, economic—of the colonisers, ambivalence on the part of the colonised produces a new type of 'hybrid' subject and hybrid culture which destabilises Said's original coloniser/colonised binary and makes a mockery of colonisers' claims to 'pure' cultures and/or civilisations. Bhabha's critique of colonial discourse thus produced a discursive platform for empowerment and resistance of the colonised subject—something that had been lacking in Said's articulation of Orientalism as a discourse. Inspired in a large measure by these analyses of the knowledge/power nexus at the heart of colonial discourse theory, a host of scholars began to explore the ways in which European (and later American) scholars, travellers, officials, and others had perceived the non-Western peoples and cultures over whom Western power was increasingly being exerted during the colonial era and after, leading to a veritable explosion of innovative work in the disciplines of literature, history, art, film studies, gender studies and cultural studies.

The discipline of anthropology has had a far more ambivalent engagement with Said's theory. As Michael Richardson has pointed out, the attack on Orientalism immediately affects and, indeed, undermines anthropology because it critiques the very ability to distinguish between self and other, and to represent the other. For Richardson, if Said can claim that some representations are 'false', then there must be others which are 'true'; yet there is no way of determining which these are. Ultimately, Richardson contended, Said could not resolve the problem of how the self can represent the other; he could not accommodate the possibility of reciprocity in this relationship; and he could not explain how representations are related to and function in reality. Despite these misgivings, Said's thesis has been broadly adopted and refined by anthropologists such as Christopher Miller, Robert Inden and Johannes Fabian, while others such as Nicholas Thomas have used their critiques of Orientalist discourse as a launching pad to develop new areas, theories and methods of anthropological investigation.

Since the 1990s, this latter pattern of engagement with *Orientalism* through critique, refinement, historical contextualisation and reinterpretation has become the norm for scholarship in the humanities. Scholars analysing the

functioning of Orientalism in European history and culture—whether Shakespearean theatre (Ballaster), Byron’s poetry and the work of other Romanticists (Leask; Sharafuddin), European and Ottoman travellers’ encounters with each other (Matar), European fantasies about Oriental harems (Kabbani; Grosrichard; Yeazell; DelPlato), European crime fiction and spy novels set in the Middle East (Simon 1989 and 2010) or romance novels (Teo, *Desert Passions*), among many other subjects—have grown increasingly attentive to the historical contexts in which various kinds of Orientalist discourses were produced, the purposes for which they were intended or which they served, and how these changed over time. The same is true for studies of Orientalism in the United States. Said’s work has either generated or stimulated two very fruitful lines of inquiry: (i) representations of Arabs and Muslims in twentieth and twenty-first century American culture, spearheaded by Jack Shaheen’s work on television (*The TV Arab* and ‘Network TV’), film (‘The Hollywood Arab’; *Reel Bad Arabs; Guilty*), and comic books (‘Arab Images in American Comic Books’), and joined by others such as Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, and T.J. Semmerling; and (ii) historical studies examining the political, economic (Douglas Little; Lockman; Oren) and cultural (Edwards; Nance) interactions of the United States with the Middle East from the Revolutionary period to the present day, and media representations of the same (McAlister).

One of the most recent and significant developments among historians has been the call to make connections between the study of Orientalism and the study of Jewish history because, as Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar (2004) have argued, ‘the Western image of the Muslim Orient has been formed, and continues to be formed in inextricable conjunction with Western perceptions of the Jewish people’ who have been regarded historically as both Occidental and Oriental (xiii). A study of Orientalism and Jewish people would focus on how Westerners have represented Jews as Orientals, but also how Jewish people have self-Orientalised or distanced themselves from such representations. Kalmar and Penslar have made a case for the urgent study of Jewish people as a topic within Orientalism because this would also emphasise the extent to which ‘orientalism has been not only a modern Western or imperialist discourse, but also a “politico-theological”, Christian one’ (xiii). Eitan Bar-Josef has begun this process with *The Holy Land in English Culture 1799-1917: Palestine and the Question of Orientalism* (2005), but this strand of scholarship interrogating the Judaeo-Christian roots of Orientalism and the place of Jewish people within this discourse—is still emerging.

While recognising the many flaws and weaknesses in Said’s original thesis, therefore, the impact of *Orientalism* on scholarship in the humanities has been enormous. This germinal work still continues to stimulate new projects today as scholars test the thesis of Orientalism by looking at how it functioned in different

historical periods, by analysing how it is constituted or challenged in various forms of cultural production (e.g. literature, theatre, film, art, etc.), or by using it as a starting point for research into how Europeans and Americans have interacted with and represented various types of 'others'. In many ways, it is precisely because Said's work was so intellectually exciting but so flawed that it has generated so much new research. Said's was not the only voice critiquing European and American Orientalism but it was certainly the loudest and most substantial, the one which echoed around the world. Previous critiques of Orientalism had been published in journals which were important in the scholarly community but obscure outside it; Said's *Orientalism* was published and disseminated by a major American trade publisher and bolstered by his stature as a public intellectual who commented on American literary and political affairs. In summing up Said's importance to scholarship in the humanities the American historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who originally focused her historical research on France but was inspired by Said's work to turn her attention to colonial encounters, suggested that the 'gift' of Said's *Orientalism* was to raise 'the large question of how one represents other cultures'. Said prompted academics to consider 'whether the idea of separate and distinct cultures is even a good one', and to question 'how scholars have studied and interpreted peoples different from their own in a context of conflict in power and belief, of imperialism and colonialism', thus making us aware of the broader implications of our scholarship beyond the pages of our publications. That is no mean legacy indeed.

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