Edward Said, *Orientalism*

Questions

1. Are the objections to *Orientalism* listed in the reviews by Beckingham and Manzalaoui (see below) and/or under points **A**) to **F**) (see below) justified in view of the chapters you have read? Or do Said’s texts contain their own defence against those objections?

2. Does Said’s faith in the “human agency” of interpreters of cultures (preface to *Orientalism*, xxii) also extend to a belief in the agency of the (literary) authors he analyses, or are those authors all – even unconsciously – Orientalists? Is he ‘kinder’ to some (literary) authors than to others, and why?

3. “The over-interpretation of selected works from [the] canon went nowhere in particular. Our attention has been misdirected … It is a foolish piece of academic snobbery to go hunting for faint hints of Orientalism in the classics of English and French literature, while neglecting the immensely popular novels of Sax Rohmer, Dennis Wheatley and Daniel Easterman.” (Irwin). Do you agree? Is Orientalist thinking still noticeable in current high and/or popular culture? Has it remained the same?

4. A new Dutch translation of Dante’s *Inferno* recently suppressed references to the Prophet Mohammed in the account of his tortures in hell that Said discusses in *Orientalism* (pp. 68-69). Does this decision do justice to Said’s purpose in writing *Orientalism*?

<https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210322_98057472>

<https://www.demorgen.be/tv-cultuur/mohammed-niet-in-nieuwe-vertaling-van-dantes-goddelijke-komedie~bed335ef/>

<https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2021/03/27/new-dutch-translation-dante-censor-mention-mohammed/>

+ Any question you want to raise.

*Orientalism*: early reviews.

From Mahmoud Manzalaoui, *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said. *The Modern Language Review* 75.4 (1980): 837-39.

“Dr Said’s meta-orientalism shows some of the faults he castigates in orientalism. He, too, over-polarizes; he omits much and over-emphasizes much, so giving a distorted picture. He disregards medieval orientalism, and begins his survey of modern orientalism with the Enlightenment, so omitting the seventeenth-century pioneering (politically innocent) of the great Dutch scholars. Again, in the nineteenth century he omits the politically relatively innocuous German-speaking and Russian scholars. By disregarding the southern European scholars, with their greater similarity of outlook to the world of the eastern Mediterranean, he has himself created a sharply contrastive picture of empire-builders and their misunderstood subjects. He has no word of those contemporary Spanish orientalists for whom the study of the East is precisely not a study of the Other, but a recovery of part of the Self. There is no recognition, either, of western scholars (e.g. Gyula Germanus) and imaginative writers (e.g. Pickthall) who themselves became committed Moslems.”

“Dr Said’s book seems to question the basic value of objective induction (‘the impersonal Western confidence that descriptions of general collective phenomena were possible’ (p. 176)) and attacks scientific taxonomies, and studies by outside observers, in terms which sometimes suggest that all of anthropology is false; in one Barthian passage (…) he expects us to agree that all ‘representation’ is untrue (this perhaps invalidates his own book?).”

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From C. F. Beckingham, *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 42.3 (1979): 562-64.

“European orientalism did not begin with a sense of power over the East. When the chairs of Arabic were established at Cambridge and Oxford no European state, certainly not England, would have asserted with confidence its superiority over the Ottoman Empire.”

“The author is rightly contemptuous of the facile generalizations about Muslims, Arabs and Semites sometimes found in the works of writers, even of scholars, who should have known better. But he does not seem aware that such absurd statements are often made about people other than orientals.”

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From James Clifford, *Orientalism* by Edward W. Said. *History and Theory*, 19.2 (1980): 204-23.

“There is no way to summarize the complex interweavings of Said’s critical method - associative, sometimes brilliant, sometimes forced, and in the end, numbingly repetitive. It succeeds at least in isolating and discrediting an array of ‘Oriental’ stereotypes: the eternal and unchanging East, the sexually insatiable Arab, the ‘feminine’ exotic, the teeming marketplace, corrupt despotism, mystical religiosity.”

“... while he cites Levi-Strauss and Barthes as well as Foucault, at the same time Said makes frequent appeals to an old-fashioned existential realism. In the multivocal world situation sketched above, this sort of uncertainty is crucial. Should criticism work to counter sets of culturally produced images like Orientalism with more ‘authentic’ or more ‘human’ representations? Or, if criticism must struggle against the procedures of representation itself, how is it to begin? How, for example, is an oppositional critique of Orientalism to avoid falling into ‘Occidentalism’?”

“... it is a general feature of humanist common denominators that they are meaningless, since they bypass the local cultural codes which make personal experience possible. Said’s resort to such notions underlines the absence in his book of any developed theory of culture as a differentiating and expressive ensemble rather than as simply hegemonic and disciplinary. His basic values are cosmopolitan.”

“Foucault’s work will not occupy any permanent ground, but must attack, pervert, and transgress the grounds of truth and meaning wherever they become formulated institutionally. Such discursive formulations always exclude, govern, ‘cure,’ and repress other truths and meanings; Foucault takes the side of the mad person, the prisoner, the artist/martyr, the colonized. The political utility of this kind of permanent diagnosis of the ruses of power is unclear. Foucault’s recent writings leave one with the impression of a brilliant bleakness, savagely pessimistic if, in some ultimate sense, true.”

“The aim here is not, of course, the one most usual in genealogies, a new legitimation of the present, but rather, like Foucault in *La Volonté de Savoir* and *Histoire de la Folie*, radical de-legitimation. A certain anachronism is openly embraced. Genealogy, like all historical description and analysis, is constructive. It makes sense in the present by making sense selectively out of the past. Its inclusions and exclusions, its narrative continuities, its judgments of core and periphery are finally legitimated either by convention or by the authority granted to, or arrogated by, the genealogist. Genealogy is perhaps the most political of historical modes. But it cannot, to be effective, appear too openly tendentious and Said’s genealogy suffers on this score.”

“[Marx describes how India’s] social life was brutally disrupted, ‘thrown into a sea of woes,’ by Imperialism. But he quickly reminds his readers that ‘these idyllic village communities’ have always been the foundation of ‘Oriental despotism.’ … Here Said skirts “unfairness” to Marx … Marx, we are told, at first expressed ‘a natural human repugnance’ to the suffering of Orientals; he felt a ‘human sympathy, a fellow feeling.’ This ‘personal human experience’ was then ‘censored’ by a process of Orientalist labelling and abstraction, ‘a wash of sentiment’ was repressed by ‘un-shakable definitions.’ (Said writes in the past tense as if this is what really happened in Marx’s mind.) … Said’s descriptions of Orientalist discourse are frequently sidetracked by humanist fables of suppressed authenticity.”

“Seen in this way ‘the West’ itself becomes a play of projections, doublings, idealizations, and rejections of a complex, shifting otherness. … If we adopt along with these perspectives a generally structuralist suspicion of all quests for origins (the origins of the West in Greece, or in Christianity), we are left with a totality in process, composed and recomposed in changing external relations.”

“Palestine is perhaps the twentieth century’s Poland, a dismembered nation to be reinvented. Said, like the Polish/English writer [Joseph Conrad] whom he admires and frequently quotes, recognizes that personal and cultural identities are never given, but must be negotiated.”