

The Politicisation of Orientalism: The Mutation of a Paradigm

Written by Jiayuan Wang

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

The Politicisation of Orientalism: The Mutation of a Paradigm

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/11/01/the-politicisation-of-orientalism-the-mutation-of-a-paradigm/>

JIAYUAN WANG, NOV 1 2015

At the time of its publication in 1979, Edward Said's *Orientalism* was primarily intended as a cultural and literary critique. The relevance of the term, however, has extended beyond that and relatively concentrated around its political connotations, which was not the primary subject of the publication. The aim of this essay therefore is to articulate the infiltration of Orientalism in the realm of politics, with a subject focus on events. Its main arguments are as follows: first of all that the politicised form of Orientalism in the foreign policy of the British empire and the United States towards the Middle East is derived from but different than the first-level orientalism presented by Said and requires further articulation of its working. In this process of mutation, a different form of power came to buttress the Orientalist narrative, and more moral and political paradigms come into play.

This essay is structured in three parts: The first part introduces and explains the main claims of Said's original theory of Orientalism. The second part builds on this to develop a politicised form of Orientalism, which has significantly contributed to policies, dilemmas and conflicts in Middle Eastern politics. I examine the arguments of Zionism in the founding of the State of Israel stipulated by the Balfour Declaration, the Bush doctrine on the War on Terror following the events of 9/11, and also more generally academic literature pertaining to a certain "clash of civilisation" argument.

One main argument I am making here is that the Orientalist mentality tout court does not constitute a moral or political malaise, and the critics who has spotted an equal degree of so-called "Occidentalism" in Eastern practices certainly have a point; but it is rather the second-order imperialist self-justification and appropriation of such mindset that is problematic and politically disastrous. And it is this difference that constitutes the most remarkable distinction between Orientalism and many other forms of largely harmless "culturalisms", and shows that Orientalism cannot be reduced to an epistemic misunderstanding but must be recognised as eventually a rhetoric weapon that induces conflicts between the West and the Orient it depicts, and thus one of the self-perpetuating mechanisms of imperialism in the 21st century.

Orientalism in Exposition

In Said's own words, to speak of Orientalism is to speak mainly of "a British and French cultural enterprise", and thus necessitates unexcusably in large parts an evaluation of the traces it has left in a vast bibliography of literature and art in the Western tradition. But the task of investigation does not stop there: Said's thoughts in "Orientalism" is also, as he himself acknowledges, greatly indebted to Foucault's theory of knowledge and power and in continuity with a grand tradition of structuralist narratives that most prominently include post-colonialism and feminism. This means that "Orientalism" also concerns itself with the exposition of a theory of "Orientalisation", which is the approach that has crafted the phenomenon. There are some key characteristics that define the Orientalist approach:

The Orient is first of all conceived as a passive construct. This passiveness is not only a property on the "Oriental", but manifests in the way it is known to the external world. The Oriental object always displays a kind of "inertia", which is an inability of self-representation: Flaubert's Egyptian courtesan "never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history", and instead, "He spoke for and represented her. (Said 1979, p. 14).

The Politicisation of Orientalism: The Mutation of a Paradigm

Written by Jiayuan Wang

This property recurs in Marx's remarks in "the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte": "Sie können sich nicht vertreten, sie müssen vertreten werden" (Said 1979, p. 29). The representation of the Oriental is therefore always premised on "exterioty", its content observed from an external point of view, laid bare by an external narrative which perpetually usurps that of its own. The other side of this passivity there is the ultimately self-regarding nature of Orientalist narrative: "Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object" (Said 1979, p. 30).

The act of "Orientalisation" is essentially an act of "othering", an act of metaphysical segregation that constructs intellectual and moral differences between the peoples of the "Orient" and the "Occident". But the Orient is not only part of aesthetic fantasy but subject to the relations of power and dominance. Said emphasises the political nature of such an act: "One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths which were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away" (Said 1979, p. 14). In other words, Orientalism is more than a system of representation clouded by epistemic misjudgments, but a self-conscious enterprise with remarkable consistency and durability. Orientalist knowledge belongs to the category of political knowledge that is infiltrated by mechanisms of power. Power, here, is to be understood in its Foucauldian definition: Power "is everywhere" and "comes from everywhere", it is "neither structure nor agency" but a kind of 'regime of truth' that penetrates society (Foucault 1998, p. 63). The resilience of the Orientalist enterprise could be explained by the power of culture hegemony: In the end, "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" (Said 1979, p. 15).

The third theme in Orientalism is to do with civilisation. The imagination of the Orient, as a separate, distinct civilisation, has been marked by the West's own Auseinandersetzung with the concept. The traits that are deemed marks of the civilised man are excluded from the Oriental races: The Oriental's reasoning is "of the most slipshod description", his mind "just like the picturesque streets" of the Orient, is "eminently wanting in symmetry" (Said 1979, p. 46). In this description, it is because the concept of civilisation in Western philosophy has been so indispensably associated with the development of human rationality, that this quality is deprived from his Oriental counterpart, who presumably lives on the other side of civilisation. The Orient also sometimes reflects the angsts of the bourgeois society in the distantiation of the innocent and primitive state of existence, and in this depiction the representation of the Orient is not always derogatory. In French Orientalism in particular, for example in *Le Bain Turc* by Ingres, the Orient world is surreally caricatured as almost a paradis perdu with a highly aestheticised and eroticised state of life. This shows that although the Orientalisation of the Orient is always distorted, it is not necessarily mal-intentioned.

Orientalism Politicised

In the Introduction to "Orientalism" Edward Said makes the following clarification: "Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; not is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world- it is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts." I will not contend this observation about the scale and nature of Orientalism, but will instead argue that this also reflects one of the principle weaknesses about the form of Orientalism that Said developed. Said himself acknowledges a mutation in the form of Orientalism in 20th Century history: There has been a "British and French Orientalism", the rise of "an explicitly colonial-minded imperialism", and at last an "American Orientalism after the Second World War", whose connections Said set out to "elucidate" (Said 1979, p. 26).

However, subsequently, Said's analysis of Orientalism in history and political practices started out from and remained all the way down, through and through an analysis of texts. Said's effort devoted itself principally to a project of discourse analysis, breaking down statements from prominent figures in imperial history and political thought, but the scope and technique of this method remain bounded within the realm of literary analysis and is lacking to constitute a theory in political science. Malcolm Kerr made the following comment about the book: "This book reminds me of the television program "Athletes in Action," in which professional football players compete in swimming, and so forth... In charging the entire tradition of European and American Oriental studies with the sins of

The Politicisation of Orientalism: The Mutation of a Paradigm

Written by Jiayuan Wang

reductionism and caricature, he commits precisely the same error" (Kerr 1980, p. 544). Kerr's comments are certainly harsh, but they have a point in the observation of the inflexibility of Said's methodology when navigating in between the fields of literary criticism and political analysis.

Therefore, I now attempt to consolidate this form of Orientalism by re-relating the theory to political events and replenishing it with contemporary details.

One question Said asked in the introduction to "Orientalism" is "whether discussions of literature or of classical philology are fraught with-or have unmediated political significance". To imagine that a simple causal relation exists between philological and political developments is impractical, but developments in the Middle Eastern policies of Western powers certainly have shown continuity with the precedent forms of Orientalism found in European literature and philology.

The Logic of Zionism

The most outstanding nature of colonialism is not about the exploration and appropriation of resources in the economic interest of the coloniser, but the construction of a political space dictated by eurocentric political agendas and moral paradigms. The root of the Israeli-Palestine conflict traces to the repatriation of Jews from their European residences to a Jewish state constructed on Palestinian territories. The founding of the State of Israel, obviously represented a superficial interest in the livelihood of the Jewish population, but at its bottom was an episode triggered by events in the history of Europe, namely the massacre and persecution of Jews on a historic scale, and was most urgently a solution to a European dilemma. The Balfour Declaration of 1947 was motivated by two key agendas in British politics: first is the settlement of a large number of stateless Jews in on a territory that does not interfere with mainland Europe, and the second the existence of a regime that is sympathetic to Western Europe in the Middle Eastern space. This way, rather paradoxically, Zionism, which is an argument situated in Jewish history came from an entirely British political motivation.

Zionism, then, signifies the spillover of European history onto parallel "Oriental" history, where the Middle East was thrust into a causal chain of political events that do not have their origin in the Middle East. In context, it signifies a unilateral stipulation that assumes on the Palestinian people for a share of burden for the vindication of the crimes of European nations, that has been and can only be rationalised by an eurocentric value mechanism that assymetrifies sovereignty of respective political spaces in Europe and the Middle East.

From an Orientalist point of view, the Orient is not represented as the way it is, but rather in relation to the Occident. The Orient is otherwise incomprehensible, and irrelevant, unless it is defined by a set of properties that have their roots on the anatomy of the "Occident". In this case, Zionism views the potential territory which was to become the State of Israel not as a neutral land that was in fact at the time lawfully inhabited by a majority of Palestinian Arabs, but primarily as a section of British Empire that was potentially appropriable, reconstructible with respect to the British agenda. The territory was termed "the Land of Israel" - defined solely in relation to the concept "Israel", thus its usefulness to the political demands of European nations at the time of repatriating a large number of stateless Jews. The Zionist argument is thus, distinctly Orientalist, in the sense that it involves a narrative where European events and interests ubiquitously occupy the first person point of view, and the relational meaning of the Middle Eastern political space came to precede its immediate historical reality.

War on Terror

My second subject will be US foreign policy following the events of September 11. My argument here is that the War on Terror campaign represents both a discourse continuum with the long-standing cultural enterprise of Orientalism and a new form of political appropriation of it.

The War on Terror campaign involved the dichotomisation of the entire Western Wertekanon on an unprecedented scale. "The West", which is in itself part of the Orientalist construct, is now seen not only as to embody the values of liberty, rationality, enlightenment, and the question of authority, but has gone further to own these values: A society is

The Politicisation of Orientalism: The Mutation of a Paradigm

Written by Jiayuan Wang

“either against us or with us”, in other words, they would have to be “with us” in order to share these traits. In my opinion, this mutation is significant: prior to it Orientalism stayed on the level of a system of representation with self-sustained forces of bias; but now Orientalism becomes not just a manifestation of imperialism but its instrument, and in this mutation, Orientalism is politicised. The politicisation of Orientalism represents the evolution of a paradigm, and the re-coating of it with new contingencies: in this case, the geographical space and moral caricature of the Orient have both been altered: Although some suppositions on the Oriental character are still consistent with the classical stereotypes of inertia, staticity, and backwardness, the former assumption of irrationality has been replaced by the image of “the axis of Evil”, inability of calculation and organisation replaced by allegedly a well-formed strategy to destroy the Western civilisation and its freedoms.

If, in its first degree, Orientalism is merely a phenomenon found in discourses in the Western tradition, “a distribution of geopolitical awareness” into a variety of literary and social scientific texts, then in its politicised form it becomes the projector of such a distribution, a configurative mechanism itself. This form of Orientalism is distinctly political because it allows the targeting, antagonising, and alienating of the Orient based on its distorted rhetoric representations, or rather misrepresentations. In Bush’s address to Congress on 20th of September, 2001, a typically Orientalist narrative was employed: “Al Qaeda is to terror what the Mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money, its goal is remaking the world and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere” (Bush 2001). The concept of Al-Qaeda has been construed out of externally imposed normative judgments from the side of the US government, and its own origins, rationales and motivations irrelevant. Bush went further on to say: “They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (Bush 2001). Here, Orientalism is but an instrument in projecting political antagonism to the effect of justifying a declaration of war.

One absurdity that emerges in the War on Terror campaign is that while what it tries to establish was a more certain than ever association between the “civilised” values of rationality, question of authority, freedom of speech, diversity of views and so on with US political culture, at the same time this association itself is however taken for granted, is not questioned, is often propagated and believed without ground, and this confidence has grown more and more in a political culture of irrationality, ignorance, and xenophobia that is exactly contrary to the enlightened self-caricature that it fosters. The politicisation of Orientalism here involves at the same time a loss of consistency and a radicalisation of its underlying political will to hegemony.

Linguistic Imperialism

In my view the form of politicised Orientalism in US politics is part of a larger movement that does not solely concern politicians but the broader academic sphere of political science especially on the subject of development. The Modernisation theory of development, which has its roots in inherently racist social evolutionary theories and the Cold War campaign of polarising East and West stereotypes, has found its new relevance with a number of scholars in recent years. The gist of the modernisation theory of development is this: that modernisation impacts not only on an economical and technological, but also on an anthropological level, involving reorientation of values and affinities. Thus these values and affinities themselves become a benchmark for the demarcation between modernity and the unmodernised, between civilisation and the uncivilised, and it becomes a requirement to instantiate a certain set of values to modernise.

Lewis for example in “the Clash of Civilisations” wrote: “Islamic fundamentalism has given an aim and a form to the otherwise aimless and formless resentment and anger of the Muslim masses at the forces which have devalued their traditional values and loyalties and, in the final analysis, robbed them of their beliefs, their aspirations, their dignity, and to an increasing extent even their livelihood.” For Lewis, this is no less than “a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both” (Lewis 1990, p. 48). Lewis’s approach involves the familiar act of the assignment of traits according to an adversary framework that lies in the core of Orientalism, and which is staggeringly mirrored in Bush’s “War on Terror” address, where crude generalisation in the direction of religious conflicts was employed: “They (Islamic terrorists) want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa”, and “not merely to end lives but to disrupt and end a way of life” (Bush 2001).

The Politicisation of Orientalism: The Mutation of a Paradigm

Written by Jiayuan Wang

The scale of generalisation is magnified towards the end of the speech: "This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom" (Bush 2001). The state of War declared by the US government is a state of violence, but captured in the same state of violence, the "Oriental" front of belligerence is barbarised, while America stays firmly on the side of civilisation. The main difference between the two discourses, is that while Lewis still acknowledges the antagonised Orient as a force of civilisation fighting for its survival in what he admits as an "worldwide expansion" of its Western counterpart, Bush's use of the term "civilisation" has already excluded the Orient from its parameters, and this is the essence of what I call "linguistic imperialism". Linguistic imperialism is postulation of the ownership of the values and political virtues that one champions, so that it enables to universalise contingent geo-political interests by equalising them with universal philosophical concepts and moral paradigms. Linguistic imperialism is politicised Orientalism in its articulated form, and is the most sophisticated and powerful out of all techniques employed in the hitherto history of Orientalism.

Conclusion

So far, I have sought to present Orientalism in its varied forms from a cultural norm found in classical Western arts and discourses to a politicised instrument of rhetoric found in US foreign policy. I have emphasised the aspect of power and structuralism inherent in the Orientalist enterprise, and have tried to argue that the nature of Orientalism has undergone change in the process of its politicisation, most conspicuously demonstrated in the War on Terror campaign. In short, my discovery is that the politicisation of Orientalism signifies the state of power when it is recapitulated from its dispersed and pervasive forms to reconstitute episodic and sovereign acts that overtly voices coercion and domination. In this transformation, the magnitude and sophistication of the Orientalist enterprise has grown.

I will now finish by considering one major critique of Said, which is that he often ignores or even commits himself the errors of "Occidentalism" when making the accusations of "Orientalism" on the Europeans and Americans, which is a mindset of prejudice and groundless assumptions towards Westerners that is equally present in the Muslim population. A Pew Research Center report in 2006 titled "The Great Divide: How Muslims and Westerners View Each Other", which surveyed Muslims living in European has found a rather concerning level of anti-Western prejudice among European Muslims: 69 percent of those in Britain for instance attributed three or more negative traits such as "greedy," "selfish," "arrogant" or "immoral" to Westerners (Pew Research Centre 2006).

My short response to this is that even if there is indeed "Occidentalism" as such, there is no politicised form of Occidentalism that is on a par with politicised Orientalism: Occidentalism might have committed the same error of an irrational focus on structure and the overlook of individual agency in the making of culture, and has thus produced the same picture of unjustified negative stereotypes of the imagined "Other". Said's call for humanism, therefore should apply to both culturalisms. However, politicised Orientalism is not a weakness of observation but a weapon employed for clear defined targets. It does not only contribute to misunderstanding and conflicts, but is used to induce them. In the case of Orientalism, the awareness of this very "cultural and political fact" (Said 1979, p. 21), is not followed by a correction or even denial of its bias, but rather in the light of self-righteousness and hegemonic will, further propagation and aggravation of it. The politicisation of Orientalism is thus, in the end, a hijack of reason from the the discourse which is originally founded on the celebration of the West's relative advancement in the flourishing of enlightened human rationality.

References

Bush, G. W. (2001). "Address to a joint session of Congress and the American people". *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy*, Vol. 25, pp. [xviii]-[xxv].

Foucault, M. (1998) *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. London, Penguin.

Kerr, M. (1980). "Review: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*". *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12,

The Politicisation of Orientalism: The Mutation of a Paradigm

Written by Jiayuan Wang

No. 4, Dec. 1980.

Lewis, B. (1990). "The Roots of Muslim Rage". The Atlantic Monthly (September 1990), pp. 47-60

Pew Research Centre (2006). The great divide: how Westerners and Muslims view each other. Washington.

Said, E. (1979). Orientalism. New York: Vintage, 1994

*Written by: Jiayuan Wang
Written at: Universität zu Köln, Germany
Written for: Edward Lloyd
Date written: March 2015*