

# WHY INFLUENCE SHOULD NOT BE EQUATED WITH IMPERIALISM. REFLECTIONS ON SAID'S CONCEPT OF ORIENTALISM

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**Abstract.** *The concept of Orientalism correlated with the name of Edward Said is a fundamental landmark for the field of International Relations. Orientalism draws the attention to the constructivist approach of world order depicted as a Western product. Yet the main critique of the notion is related to the idea that Orientalism is in fact an Occidental product that it does not address the reality, but the imagined Orient by the Western culture. This article revises the debate over the Western perspective in interpreting the Oriental space, highlighting the lack of an objective approach as the concept of Orientalism is included in the sphere of competitive cultural identities and ideologies.*

**Keywords:** *identity–alterity; power–knowledge relation; Orientalism*

## **Introduction**

The concept of *Orientalism* correlated with the name of Edward Said informs us about the Western perspective in interpreting the Oriental space. The notion of *orientalism*, primarily depicted as a valuable concept of International Relations by the cultural critic Edward Said in his homonym book appeared for the first time in 1978, resized and meanwhile revitalised the Oriental Studies and subsequently, the postmodernist thoughts in this field of study. Indeed, “few books have at the same time stimulated so much controversy or influenced so many studies” (MacKenzie 1995: 4).

The persistent critique of the concept *Orientalism* is that of a fake-reality, the representations of the Orient being and artificial product of the West, an Occidental product, which in fact does not address the reality, but the imagined Orient by the Western culture. Although the term *Orientalism* is polysemantic, the main contested meaning is the one correlated to imperialistic policies.

The main aim of this article is to uphold the idea that in the realm of symbolic geographies there can be no *objective approach* envisaged by the critics to the importance of Said's concept of Orientalism. By briefly defining its features and offering an outlook over its background, this article presents the value of Said's aforementioned concept for the field of International Relations, while outlining its main criticism.

## **1. Orientalism as a landmark of the Occident**

According to Bryan Turner, Orientalism can be defined in three main ways: “firstly, orientalism can be regarded as a mode of thought based upon a particular epistemology and ontology which establishes a profound division between Orient and Occident. Secondly,

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orientalism may be regarded as an academic title to describe a set of institutions, disciplines and activities usually confined to Western universities which have been concerned with the study of oriental societies and cultures. Finally, it may be considered as a corporate institution primarily concerned with the Orient” (1994: 96).

The subject approached within the framework of identity formation highlights the temporal and contextual identity construction. Edward Said reveals the very idea of identity configuration by actors. The constructivist scholars assume that identities are contestable by definition. The nature of identities depend on contexts and on representations.

However, Edward Said approaches Orientalism in terms of imperialism, depicting it as a landmark of the Occident that has envisaged the concept as part of the *alter ego*. Indeed, the author regards his thesis as a “discourse by which European culture was able to manage - even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said 1978: 3).

Hans Morgenthau when writing about the theme related to imperialism in his book entitled *Politics among Nations* (1948), devotes a special chapter to the subject of what is not imperialism. The author argues that a fundamental common mistake the political elite makes is to confuse a *status quo* politics with an imperialistic one (Morgenthau 2007: 111).

The Western cultural framework may have a *natural* cultural identity, an inclination to perceive the world using specific lenses without having the correlate meaning that the lenses are instruments of colonial power production. The distinctions between the two civilizational spaces can be perceived as two variants of social orders, without necessarily being contraposed. Actually, when nowadays there are discussions related to cognitive warfare, the cultivation of specific cultural identity represents an inner architecture of the Self.

Highlighting the same idea, John MacKenzie argues that the comparative analysis leads to the polarisation of distinctions between the two cultures (1995: 9) while Edward Said claims the creation of so-called *binary vision* (1978: 46). Orientalism as discourse of power was assigned only to Britain and France which primarily exercised such power from the late eighteenth century to 1914, the concept being essentially the product of these two western cultures (Said 1978: 18).

The constructivist approach of IR places in centre of the debates the identity concept that encompasses the *Orientalism*, emphasizing its emancipated and sophisticated meaning revealed and developed mainly in the post-Cold War period. Indeed, the identity theory highlighted the complexity and the multiple dimensions of the *Orientalism*.

According to John Mackenzie, a central point of Said’s argument is that Orientalism is not just a historical phenomenon, but a ‘continuing political actuality’ which no less conditions the West’s approach to the East in the late twentieth century as in the nineteenth century. The only difference is that the prime actor has become the United States rather than Britain or France (1995: 10).

The continuing political actuality may be correlated naturally with cultural identity traits, a manifestation of the Western Self, acting upon and modifying the cultural architecture of the East. The idea of the constructed character of the Orient by the intervention of the West has no other mirror than the constructed character of the West by the lenses of the East.

Niall Ferguson (2011) has written one of his books having the subtitle *the West and the Rest*, suggesting that the rest occupies an inferior position. Yet the inferiority positioning relies as well on the attitude the other adopts. The Westernization has success not because it is imposed, but because of its *soft power*, the power of attraction.

## **2. Resizing the concept of Orientalism**

Edward Said plays an important role in the theory of Oriental studies, as a subdomain of International Relations, by resizing the concept, an added value confirmed by MacKenzie as well: "it transformed 'orientalism', in which the Orient is appropriated by the Occident by being turned into a structure of myth prefabricated for western use, into one of the most ideologically charged words in modern scholarship" (1995: 4).

Edward Said is a rational researcher whose obedience to the ancestors occupied in the past by empire turned out to be a veritable research on the way the imperialism is still keeping its dominant structure in the post-colonialism period. Yet the process of Westernization should not be perceived as being driven by power interests and invested with maleficent objectives.

For instance, the Orientalism seen as a scientific discourse modifies the accent on power interests: the analysis of knowledge - power relation as a discourse of difference in which the apparently neutral Occident/Orient contrast is an expression of power relationships.

The scientifically dimension of the paradigm of Orientalism represents an outpost of post-colonial scholarship. MacKenzie identifies Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci as the underpinning sources of Said's re-evaluation of Orientalism: "He took Michael Foucault's concept of the discourse, the linguistic apparatus through which the articulation of knowledge becomes an expression of power and linked it to Antonio Gramsci notion of cultural hegemony through which elite control is maintained over the masses" (1995: 3-4).

The concept of power and knowledge or will to knowledge is designed by Foucault as it "relies on institutional support (...) it is probably even more profoundly accompanied by the manner in which knowledge is employed in a society, the way in which it is exploited, divided, and in some way, attributed" (1971: 11). Said generalises this aspect by offering the perspective of the dominated as the mirror of conquerors' will, an eternal competitor ready to show its defects.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony involving power-knowledge relation (Gramsci 1935) is taken by Said from its socialist context and updated with another range of features. As MacKenzie remarks "where Gramsci dealt with class in a European context, Said transferred his hegemonic principles to racial representation and control in imperial frame" (1995: 4).

Based on his assumption that knowledge is to subordinate, Turner considers that "the task of orientalism was to reduce the endless complexity of the East into a definite order of types, characters and constitutions" (1994: 21). Practically, the Occident has tried to judge the Orient through its own western system of values and exactly this tendency has intrigued Said.

## **3. Said and his apologists' response to critics**

Said's revolutionary approach to the study of Orient leads to several criticisms, aspect confirmed by MacKenzie who proves himself as good connoisseur of the phenomenon produced by Said's book: "like most books that acquire 'epochal' status, 'Orientalism' has been seen both as merely enshrining a great truth and constituting a major polemic (1995:4).

Many critics such as Homi Bhabha largely embraced the idea of other's perception in the term of power through knowledge as a key for understanding the situation of Orient "despite the *play* in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise of power, colonial

discourse produces the colonised as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (1994: 101).

There were many critics that attacked Said’s notions of Western superiority, imperial revisionism and male superiority, claiming his lack of theoretical consistency and his tendency to oscillate between ideology and facts.

For instance, Andrew Rotter suspects Said’s lack of historical basis in his research that alters the epistemological relationship between cause and effect. For these reasons, the author reveals a potential trend in the theory of International Relation: *the Saidism without Said* (2000:1208). Practically, Andrew Rotter claims that the concept of Orientalism was used as a good practice in understanding the relation US-Middle East but rarely was mentioned any reference related to the author, Edward Said.

For Homi Bhabha it is clear the importance of Said’s concept, but however he remarks the slippages: “it is a static system of *synchronic essentialism*, knowledge of *signifiers of stability* such as the lexicographic and encyclopaedic. However, this site is continually under threat from diachronic forms of history and narrative, signs of instability (1994: 102).

However, Edward Said tried to explain and moreover answered to his critics in different articles such as ‘Orientalism reconsidered’ in the journal *Cultural Critique*, appeared in 1995. In this article, the author emphasizes the idea of orientalism by revealing its interconnected notion, orientalist and orientals “there could not be orientalism without on the one hand the orientalist and on the other hand orientals” (1985: 90).

In addition, the author repeats the problem of stereotypes so frequently used by Occident when referring to Orient “so saturated with meanings, so over determined by history, religion and politics are labels like *Arab* or *Muslim* as subdivisions of *The Orient* that no one today can use them without some attention to the formidable polemical mediations that screen the objects, if they exist at all, that the labels designate” (1985: 93).

Indeed, Edward Said bases his research on the ideology of the *alter ego* that contaminates the Occident. The author accuses the Western world of its incapacity to erase the colonial perception of Orient – a redundant competitor whose weakness is revealed and nothing can be done to recover and advance its civilisation – that remains predominant even in the post-colonial period.

Therefore, Edward Said labels Orientalism as “a science of incorporation and inclusion by virtue of which the Orient was constituted and then introduced into Europe (...) The Orient was, therefore, not Europe’s interlocutor, but its silent Other” (1985: 93-94).

Moreover, the author proves to be very analytic with his critics, revealing his enjoyment over the battle on the land of ideas. Indeed, Edward Said categorised his critics by the aim of their critique: “some attack Orientalism as a prelude to assertions about the virtues of one or another native culture: these are the nativists. Others criticise Orientalism as a defence against attacks on one or another political creed: these are the nationalists. Still others criticise Orientalism for falsifying the nature of Islam: these are *grosso modo*, the believers” (1984: 94-95).

Not ultimately, Edward Said attacks his critics on their presumed incapacity to self-represent the Islam. In this case, the author claims the idea of a European superiority through western civilisation and is more than confident that Islam can represent itself as long as this is permitted and not straightaway labelled.

Indeed, Edward Said brilliantly remarked this epistemological paradox in the Western world: “here, of course, the most familiar of Orientalism’s themes is that they

cannot represent themselves, they must therefore be represented by others who know more about Islam than Islam knows about itself" (Said 1985: 87).

### Conclusions

The concept of *Orientalism* as it was depicted by Edward Said has constituted a major revolution in the understanding of the relation empire-colonies in the context of post-colonialism. It is not only about the Orient as the concept transcends the relation Western-Middle East. It can be applied to all the zones of the Globe where the imperialism shaped the social consciousness of the colonies.

Inspired by the cultural hegemony of Gramsci and by the relation knowledge-power of Foucault, Edward Said offered a personal view over the imperialism whose success not late to appear, is proved as well by the big amount of articles written in favour or against his concept.

MacKenzie highlights that some of Said's critics tried to replace his Orientalist system-building with eclectic and fragmented structures of knowledge (1995: 7). However, their attempt to uniform other parts of globe through their own lenses was limited by their unilateral perception of values.

Indeed, Said succeeds in offering a possible theory for the way imperialism is still governing the social conscience of the dominated state. Concepts as cultural hegemony or power through knowledge were basic elements that were discovered or taken by Said and that were given some external and universal senses.

Nowadays discrepancy and stereotypes should be understood in the context of post-colonialism or moreover as a way a Western country is reporting to it. Due to his valuable contribution to the theory of international relations, Edward Said can be regarded as one of the most prominent IR author of the late twentieth century and as a possible guide in understanding the relation of the Occident with the Orient in the current century.

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