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Edward Said: Orientalism

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ABSTRACT

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said addresses the idea that the way the Orient has (and still is) pictured and understood by the West is not only diminishing but closer to mythology than reality. Said argues that the desire to understand a different culture than our own in order to co-exist with it should have nothing to do with an exchange of power and dominance, as it too often happened and resulted in years of colonization, arbitrary drawing of frontiers and the over simplification of a multitude of civilizations and cultures under one stereotypical denomination: The Orient. This article will provide a conceptual analysis of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said to answer the question: How does Said's critique of the Orientalist discourse allowed for the development of a new way to interpret and represent the ideological conflict of perception between the Occident and the Orient? The characteristics of Orientalism such as: 'Orientalism as a discourse', 'the relations of power it implies', the creation of the 'Oriental other' as well as the notion of 'latent Orientalism' will be thoroughly examine. Then, this article will analyze, the criticism of Said's theory brought forward by Albert Hourani, Wang Ning and Daniel Martin Varisco. Finally, this article will provide insight as to why Said's Orientalism was at first a breakthrough when it came to understanding the effect XIXth century colonization, and vision of the Orient, had on modern society but that its own limitations restricts its impact. This article will focus on Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, rather than focusing on the additional comments made in *Culture and Imperialism* and in *Orientalism Reconsidered*.

INTRODUCTION

The term Orientalism was originally used to describe an occidental artistic and literary current, prominently featured within French and English culture during the XIXth century. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1935-2003) argues that the sphere of influence of this particular movement allowed for the oriental fantasy to be treated as a true representation of what constituted what the Orient and led to a recurring bias within Western societies in the way it was treated. Said goes further in arguing that the influences of this current transited to what he defines as the 'orientalist discourse', still influencing the way modern Europe perceives and treats its oriental counterpart. Edward Said was an Americano-Palestinian literary critique and intellectual who developed his theory of Orientalism in the book of the same name (published 1978) and furthered his argumentation in *Culture and Imperialism* (published 1993). The goal of this article is to provide a conceptual analysis of Orientalism in order to assess how Said's critique of the Orientalist discourse allowed for the development of a new way to interpret and represent the ideological conflict of perception between the Occident and the Orient. In order to do so, Said's critique of Orientalism will be looked at in

details, through the notion of the western construction of the Orient, Orientalism as a discourse, the oriental Other and the rhetoric of power present within. Counter arguments and critiques on Orientalism and on Said's perspective will also be analyzed. Finally, this article will demonstrate that while Said's theory of Orientalism provided for an unprecedented sphere of post-colonial criticism to be accurately analyzed, its own limitations restrains the global scope it intended to reach.

The method of Conceptual Analysis

The goal of a conceptual analysis is to understand how a particular concept functions through the study of its constitutive characteristics. (Nuopponen, 2011, p.4) In this article, the concept being put under observation is Orientalism as defined by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Notions such as 'the Orientalist discourse', 'the rhetoric of power in Orientalism', 'the oriental Other', 'latent Orientalism' as well as the various limitations of Said's theory, whether it be in its influences or rhetoric, will be discussed and clarified in order to serve as parts of the general analysis.

The Origins of Orientalism

The roots of Orientalism are found in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the interactions of pre-modern Europe (particularly France) with the Orient, through the first European explorations and crusades and was used as an artistic influence in currents such as Baroque and Rococo until the end of the XVIIIth century. Orientalism as an independent artistic and literary current emerged during the XIXth century in Europe and while not associated with any particular pictorial style, it is rather its themes, such as the search of exoticism, sensuality and fantasy of the Orient. Orientalism as an art form was not only a way of representation, it served as a mean for European to come in contact with worlds and cultures they had never encountered before which influenced the way westerners of those time pictured the Orient. Said derives his theory on Orientalism from those artistic and historical basis, transforming into an actual post-colonial discourse of oppression.

EDWARD SAID'S ORIENTALISM: THE ORIENT CREATED BY THE OCCIDENT¹

In the 2003 preface to *Orientalism*, Said expresses a desire to open up the range of debate and criticism of post-colonial discourses through a humanist perspective. By humanism, Said implies that in order to analyze more profoundly the conflicts within Orientalism, one must adhere to the idea that no domain of research and study through time can exist independently from another. Rather, Said argues that in order to break the chains of the mind, which restrain from a reasonable historical reflection, one must consider injustices and suffering through a broader historical, cultural and socio-economic reality (Said, 1978, p.13). Said describes Orientalism as being an occidental theory based on the perspective the West has of its oriental counterpart. This social construction is based on a fantasized perception of the Orient influenced by a perceived superiority of the West over its former colonies and other 'exotic' cultures as well as an inaccurate cultural perspective transmitted through clichés: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity 'a place of romance, exotic

¹ *Orientalisme: L'Orient créé par l'Occident*. All of the quotations by Said in this article will bear the page number of the 2015 French edition of *Orientalism*. All of the quotes are taken directly from the English version of the book. They do perfectly match in content, the page number were simply not available in the English version.

beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences”(Said, 1978, p.29). This cultural dogma then led to the creation of an orientalist discourse perpetuating the prejudices Westerners have of Orientals.

Orientalism as a discourse

A discourse is described by Michel Foucault as being a compilation of knowledge and thoughts regarding a common subject through similar methodology and present power relations as well as how it is talked about and perpetuated (Foucault, 1969, p.32). For Said, Orientalism is an occidental post-colonial discourse: “The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial style” (Said, 1978, p.30). Said asserts the idea that without embracing Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot understand the past and current relations between the West and the East and the systematic oppressive ways in which they are being implemented. This provides for the continuity of oppression and misrepresentation of the Orient as it gives authority and legitimacy to the perceived domination of Europe within the world.

Relations of power within Orientalism

The Orientalist discourse fully embraces the notion of power and cultural domination present in human societies, here with the West and the East: “Domination and inequities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society” (Said, 1993, p.19). Said states that “in a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationship with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand”(Said, 1978, p.38). A historical example of this rhetoric of power present in *Orientalism* is Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt and the derived cultural exploitation. All the knowledge brought back from the expedition not only allowed for the European public to cultivate themselves it also pushed for the power struggle between the French and the Egyptians to emerge as the former could use the knowledge they had of the latter to dominate them, while the opposite could not happen. The rhetoric of power within Orientalism uses knowledge to build domination, which is later translated into cultural relationship, the intrinsic importance of power being at the core of all social fields of study. Once the construction of Western dominance was established, this knowledge was transformed into a dogma, transmitted from generations to generations resulting in an everlasting cultural domination.

The Oriental Other

Representation is a crucial concept in the construction of the Orientalist discourse. The notion that the West is the dominant force in an exchange of power with the East relies on the construction of the dominated, the oriental other. ‘Us’ only exists if ‘Them’ is acknowledged as an entity of its own. The colonial ideology relied on the notion that those who lived in non-European territories were radically different and deserved to be colonized and exploited on the basis that they were inferior. This, added to the previously fantasized vision the Occident had of those who inhabited the Orient led to the construction of cultural myths. The oriental Other can be considered the perfect Other, not only because, in essence, its construction opposes the Western ideals but also because the same western ideals were constructed in opposition with this otherness: “By inserting the domination of the Other into the very construction of the West, Said identifies a deep fissure in the operation of Western hegemony. There, the West appeared both to reach its limits and to construct its dominance. For if the

West represented itself as autonomous and universal in the domination of the Orient, then the encounter with the “native” was the point of both the limit and the fabrication of such representation” (Prakash, 1995, p211).

Latent Orientalism

Edward Said considers Orientalism not only as a modern academic discipline but also as a latent form of expression. Latent Orientalism is defined by Said as being distinct from purely applied orientalist theories as it rather resides within a general unconscious certainty that the Orient is the way it has been described and pictured by Orientalists personalities: “ The distinction I am making is really between an almost unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity, which I shall call latent Orientalism, and the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth, which I shall call *manifest* Orientalism” (Said, 1978, p.354-355). In Said’s opinion, latent Orientalism is comprised of three broad characteristics: Racism, Ethnocentrism and Sexism (Varisco, 2007, p.58). Latent Orientalism therefore resides as an inherent part of the Orientalist discourse within society as it defines the popular vision the West has of the Orient.

CRITICISM AND LIMITATIONS OF SAID’S ORIENTALISM

Said himself expressed reserves and limitations when it came to his work in *Orientalism*. The physical and mental boundaries applied by Said were criticized by authors such as Wang Ning, Albert Hourani and Daniel Martin Varisco who looked at the different aspects of the orientalist discourse and deciphered its restraints, whether it be through Said’s own limitations or the broader understanding of what constitutes the Orient.

Geographical, Cultural and Literary limitations

In *Orientalism*, Said addresses three major limitations to his work, further criticized by Wang Ning in *Orientalism versus Occidentalism*. The first of those constraints is geographical. The way Said constructs his notion of the Orient is quite restrictive. He excludes from his vision, south Asian countries or even China and Japan. Ning argues that this derives from Said’s own family background as an Americano-Palestinian who only considers the Orient as being restricted to the Near-East and Middle-East (Ning, 1997, p.61). This limitation implies for an already biased scope of observation within Orientalism, limiting its reach as a global and humanist ideology. In fact, Said’s perception of what constitutes the Orient demonstrates a critique based on west-centrism, limiting his attempt of decentralization to a very reduced geographical spectrum. Said’s second constraint is cultural as he only perceives the Orient on a heterogeneous and unilateral form of culture, the one described and asserted by the West: “ As far as its ideological and cultural significance is concerned, the “Western” idea of culture that we usually deal with in effect refers to the ideology or cultural concepts based on the bourgeois value standard prevailing in Western Europe and North America [...] Among Oriental cultures, the “prominent form of this cooperation is the Confucian-Islamic connection that has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power”. (Ning, 1997, p.61) This cultural limitation is closely linked to the problem of literary representation in *Orientalism*. Said mainly takes into account texts written by western and most importantly, English writing authors while neglecting to present works from the third world or non-English background. Ning argues that “Comparative literature is not only cross-national and interdisciplinary but also cross cultural and cross linguistic.” (Ning, 1997, p.61) Here again, Said’s work retains a definite form of West centrism that cannot be overlooked in a discussion

about broadening the borders of a global post-colonialist discussion, heavily limiting the reach of its intended purpose.

The rights of the Arabs to construct themselves

In *History of the Arab people*, Albert Hourani addresses the construction of the Arabo-Muslim world. He puts forward the exchanges between the Occident and the Orient under a radically different light than Said did. He exposes the profound interest the West had over the East and the resulting influence, particularly visible in European art. Instead of theorizing that the oppression that Europe had implemented during the Imperial era lasted until the modern days, he rather argues that a global set of mind emerged from the constant exchanges between the West and the East (Hourani, 1993, p.402). Hourani also argues that the Arab world constructed itself not just in light of European domination but also according to its own values and merits and that if the way the westerners viewed the orient was biased, so was the perception of the West by the East (Hourani, 1993, p.404). Ultimately, Hourani is saying that, the idea that the Orient is constructed by the way the Occident perceives it, does a great disservice to the criticism of the ideology, as it once again reduces the Orient to its western counterpart. While Hourani does acknowledge the part played by the colonial empires during the XIXth and XXth century, he advocates for greater understanding of the part played by Arab nationalism and the presence of Islam within the construction of the modern day Orient.

The restriction of Orientalism as a concept

One of the main problem with Said's theory of Orientalism is that it is very much restrictive as he says it himself: "The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient [...] either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism" (Said, 1978, p. 31). This is a problem, Varisco notes, as it does not permit for individuality within a body of work to be distinguished from the rest. Said remarks that while he does agree with Foucault on a lot of part of the discourse, he would also advocate for an individual close reading of certain texts to determine their prevalence within the Orientalist movement (Varisco, 2007, p.45). This however, is a limitation when it comes to asserting Orientalism as a discourse of its own as it forces Said to "flip-flop on who is a good orientalist and who is bad." (Varisco, 2007, p.46). Furthermore, Varisco notes that the idea that the domination of the West essentially managed and produced the Orient is not only quite vague, it is also very much inaccurate as indicated by the absence of actual ground management in countries like China, Japan and most of the Middle East, an impression of superficial domination in time exemplified by the fall of the colonial powers after the second world war (Varisco, 2007, p.55-56).

The problem in the rhetoric of Orientalism

Ultimately, Varisco critiques the way Said perceives Latent Orientalism by asserting that the way it is described by Said in *Orientalism* is written in a rhetorical style so careful with the word it uses that it almost becomes void of any singular sense (Varisco, 2003, p.57). This implies that finding work where Latent Orientalism is very much difficult, as, the 'latent' characteristics of Orientalism are so broad and fixed in time that their specific application is difficult to properly discern: "The latent tendencies must transcend rather than define a specifically Orientalist discourse" (Varisco, 2007, p.58). Ultimately, because the Orientalist

discourse is so restrictive and authoritative as to its exact components implies that Said's critique of it is in turn confined within its own limitations.

ORIENTALISM: FROM A REVOLUTION TO A LIMITED IDEOLOGY

Said's *Orientalism* was an intellectual revolution in its time, there can be no doubt about it. It shifted the perspective the Western public had of not only the relation they had with the Orient but even their own vision of what constitutes the Orientalist Dogma. Said's choice to use Orientalism as a discourse is persuasive as it allows for all of the oriental myths and visions to be put under the scrutiny of a global and humanist lens: "It is difficult to ignore the breaks with the advent of 'humanism' and the way these issues entered into the public domain in the nineteenth century" (Pati, 1999, p.81). There can be no doubt that the Occident, at one point in its history used knowledge and stereotypes of opposing cultures in order to control them. Racism, sexism, eurocentrism and ethnocentrism were at the core of the Imperialist values of the XIXth century, along with the desire for exoticism and the idea of voyage and discoveries. The fact that there was a biased perception of the Orient and its Others within European (and American) societies cannot be disregarded when analyzing the history of relations between the West and the East.

However, it appears that Said's critique of the Orientalist dogma is very much, in itself limited by its own discourse characteristics. The way, he constructs his notion of the Orient is problematic because it not only secedes much of the Asian continent's population from being considered by the theory, it also implies that the Orient is a definitive geographical space from which a particular image can be extracted, whether that image is true or not: "It does seem to me that the Orientalism I was speaking of contains a unique set of attitudes, a kind of virulence and persistence that I haven't seen elsewhere" (Said in Varisco, 2007, p.49), this implies that what Said wishes to critic, this assumed dichotomy of the Orient, is indeed what he uses to justify his argumentation (Varisco, 2007, p.49). Secondly, Said's method in both his rhetoric and discourse is so broad that it is difficult to separate what can be considered 'Orientalist' and what can't, resulting in "polemical excess [which] might as well be an 'Orientalism in reverse', 'Occidentalism by detour', or even 'reverse-Eurocentrism.'" (Varisco, 2007, p62).

CONCLUSION

While it is undeniable that Said's work in *Orientalism* served as a major entry point world of analysis of post-colonial ideologies, the limitations of his work render it more complex than simply being a linear and universally accepted theory on how the Orient is perceived and treated. Orientalism as defined and supported by Said remains an excellent theory to understand the past relations between the Orient and the Occident. It allowed for great discussions to finally take place between the (former) oppressed and their oppressors but lacks not only a distinction between certain aspects of Orientalism, such as institutional versus social forms but also promotes parts of the ideology it is fighting against. Ultimately, Edward Said's work is crucial as a part of the argument and discussion surrounding Orientalism but should not be held as the absolute ideological truth. Edward Said himself admitted and corrected some of his limitations and broad ideology in both *Orientalism Reconsidered* and in *Culture and Imperialism*, engaging in an even more complex and broad analysis of the state of Orientalism and cultural power relations.

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