



Said's Orientalism: A Vital Contribution Today

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Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism was a powerful critique that showed how a concept, elaborated in academic writings and popular discourse, achieved virtually hegemonic status although it was both wrong and supportive of relations of domination and exploitation on an international scale. His conclusion hardly needs demonstration today, when near Eastern policy at high ranks of United States decision-makers is challenged as being undertaken "to gain empirical evidence to test an assumption" that "the Arab-Islamic world is inherently allergic to democracy".¹ Said's *Orientalism* (1978), perhaps his most important book, is a striking model of engaged intellectual work, in which the link between deep scholarly effort and immediate political reality is ever present. We can learn much by trying to apply the same critical approach to other hegemonic concepts of our time. What follows is an initial attempt to do this with the concept of Globalism.

I want to argue that the richness of Said's approach can be extended quite directly to an analysis of the concept of Globalism, which in this sense is the inheritor of Orientalism's mantle. Just as "Orientalism" was used to describe and categorize a specific geographic region, its people and its culture, I want to use the term "Globalism" to suggest the way in which specific real processes at the international level, often lumped together under the term globalization, are discussed and portrayed in academic and popular circles.

Edward Said defined Orientalism as the hegemonic view in the "West" of the inferiority of the "East", a view both anticipating and justifying a colonial relation between dominant and subordinate, manifest in culture, language, ideology, social science, media, and political discourse. In Said's very influential book with that title, he lays out, in vibrant and often polemical prose, the minute details of the way in which Orientalism pervaded the world view of the leaders of European and United States societies, not as an intentionally malicious racism but rather as an often unconscious and sometimes

benevolently intended set of attitudes and preconceptions arising out of relations of power. While Orientalism preceded nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism by several millennia, its earlier expressions fueled its later direct use in support of imperial policies in England, France, and finally the United States. Said begins his analysis with a devastating look at a parliamentary speech of Arthur Balfour in 1910, in which the condescending treatment of “Orientals” and the unquestioned belief in “Western” superiority is explicit. He then goes on to trace the manifestations of those same views in an implicit and even concealed but nonetheless pervasive form in literature, movies, public speeches, and works of art. Said’s work is an outstanding example of what Pierre Bourdieu would call human capital in the service of power.

“Globalism” is an apt term for the latest manifestation of the infiltration of relations of power into the political and cultural understandings of our age. I use the term in a very specific and limited sense.

Globalism is the lens (trope, metaphor, set of implicit assumptions, world view, discourse) that underlies almost all current policies of most governments in the international arena. It sees the process of globalization as new, as the dominant feature of our time, a structural process independent of specific acts of choice, inevitable in its really existing form, and ultimately beneficial to all, although certain distributional inequities may be seen as needing correction. It is the lens through which a substantial portion of the scholarly and intellectual discussion of globalization sees its subject matter.

Globalization, in its really existing form, is the further internationalization of capital accompanied by and using substantial advances in communications and transportation technology², with identifiable consequences in cultural, internal and international political relations, changes in the capital/labor balance of power, work processes, roles of national government, urban patterns, etc.

Globalism is to really existing globalization as Orientalism is to colonialism. Globalism is the hegemonic metaphor through which the actual process of globalization is seen/presented. It views development in the “developing world” as inevitably following the superior path of development pursued by the “developed world”, just as Orientalism sees the “Orient” following (if it can) the superior form of development of the “Occident”. If we substitute the G7 for the Occident, and the Third World for the Orient, we can apply Said’s insight with profit, keeping in mind the different roles of racism, geographic coverage, and cultural distortions involved in the parallels.

Globalism accepts as obviously true and not requiring proof the inevitable domination of global interests—specifically, globally organized capital—over all spheres of life and all countries of the world. As Orientalism paralleled and legitimated colonialism and

imperialism and the domination of Western over "Third World" countries, so Globalism parallels and legitimates the priority of global capitalism over all forms of social organization, and the domination of capital over labor. As Said, in a nuanced discussion, concedes the significant contribution Orientalist scholars have made to accumulating facts and advancing knowledge about other little known societies to an audience in the West, so the contribution of globalist scholars to increasing the knowledge and understanding of the range and modes of operation of global capital must be conceded. Nevertheless, the underlying assumptions in both cases parallel the needs of established power. Orientalism and Globalism in fact overlap in critical ways: implicit racism/chauvinism and unquestioning acceptance of the value systems of the industrial and financial powerful nations (implicit in the acceptance of what "development" means³) fuel both, and serve to buttress domination both within nations and among them.

Globalism, like Orientalism, is effective precisely because it pretends not to be an ideology, but just scholarship or description of the world as it is. As Pierre Bourdieu put it, "it goes without saying because it comes without saying" (1977:167).

Just as Said argues that "the Orient" is an artificial concept, one created, largely, by scholars and writers to describe a subject that does not exist in reality—or rather, to shape something that does exist in reality into a form that makes it manageable and manipulable by dominant powers located largely in the Western industrialized countries—so is "Globalism" an artificial concept, wrapping a set of developments whose real etiology is concealed into a single something that must be accepted as a "force", an actor, to which a whole range of results can then be attributed for which no one or group is responsible, which simply becomes part of reality, a given object to be studied and understood, described and quantified. But globalization is not *an* object, any more than eastern-located countries are *an* object; they are both names, concepts, artificially created in a particular social and political and historical context, and serving a particular social and political and historical purpose. There is no more a "force" of globalization than there is a "place" called the Orient.

The role that Balfour plays in Said's account is comparable to that played by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in Globalism's ascendancy, with policy advisers such as the early Jeffrey Sachs and institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and discussions such as those at Davos, playing a leading role. In the social sciences, the lineage that Said painstakingly traces could be followed, in Globalism's case, with W W Rostow as an early representative⁴ and Manuel Castells, in his current work, or Anthony Giddens, today,⁵ as one of its latest and most sophisticated; Francis Fukuyama exposes the world view in cruder fashion, as does Thomas

Friedman. The policies that Said tracks to the masters of the British Empire in the 19th century find their direct analogy in the masters of the Washington consensus at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st.

But the real contribution of Edward Said is not to document the explicit biases and stereotypes of the colonialists, but to trace the more subtle but pervasive and hegemonic parallels of colonialism in the language (see Marcuse 2000), the metaphors, the discourse, and the cultural production of their times. Indeed, language, metaphors, discourse, are points along an increasingly comprehensive spectrum of representation that is Said's underlying theme: a lens through which the world, or parts of it, are seen, is the simile he himself uses. Globalism deserves the same attention today, as the lens through which globalization is seen and represented. The problem lies not in the scholarship that examines the operations of global capital, as it was not in the scholarship that examined the history or culture of colonial societies. It lies rather in the unquestioning acceptance of the appropriateness of what is being examined, of the pervasiveness of its reality, in short of its inevitability. Granting the inevitability of the increasing domination of global capital over all other forms of economic and social organization contributes to that domination, just as granting the inevitability of imperial relations contributes to the continued domination of those relations.

The uses of Globalism are legion; they support and legitimate globalization, and defuse the opposition to it. Globalism is the answer emanating from the World Economic Forum at Davos to the challenge from the World Social Forum at Porto Alegre; where Porto Alegre's slogan is, "Another World is Possible," Davos answers, "TINA, There Is No Alternative: really existing globalization is inevitable". Globalism is the understanding that undergirds the World Trade Organization's response to Seattle and its successors, that frames the defense of NAFTA and the FTAA in the United States, that empowers employers in their bargaining with labor unions everywhere, that justifies low wages in developing countries. Globalism can also be used locally, supporting an odd coalition in which purely locally based interests, such as property owners, local political leaders, or locally attached residents, support a place marketing strategy that emphasizes a locality's key position in global exchanges.⁶ That global and local pressures as often complement each other as diverge has been often enough pointed out; they both rely on Globalism when it is to their advantage, and neither is internally homogeneous.

Said's nuanced discussion of Orientalism suggests similar caution in describing the scholarship having to do with globalization. In both cases, there is an underlying and important reality calling out for examination, and in both cases key figures in their exploration have

contributed much to knowledge of the subject. As Said praises Vico and the Napoleonic expedition writers, so scholars like Friedmann and Sassen contributed much to an understanding of new developments on the world stage. The issue is not so much the worth of that endeavor, but rather whether the undercurrent within it, here categorized as Globalism, has not undermined the very utility of the term. One thinks of a similar situation with the concept "underclass", which William Wilson used to describe real developments in the inner cities of the United States. After significant criticism, e.g. by Herbert Gans, and reflection, Wilson has dropped the term completely, substituting the less catchy but more delimited term "ghetto poor". In the same way, the term "globalization" might, in the absence of a hegemonic Globalism, slowly be abandoned in favor of the more accurate if also less elegant "internationalization of capitalism".

A problem, in this account, both of Orientalism by Said and of Globalism here, is that both the world view being criticized and the material for its criticism come from similar, sometimes even identical, sources. Much of the material Said cites comes from Westerners, from the Western side of the lens of Orientalism. In the same way, much of the material that provides the most damning criticism of Globalism comes from writers and researchers and activists who are on the side of the victims of globalization. Their sympathies lie on the other side of the lens of Globalism, even as their "real" position is on the viewer side. So it is with Said: among the most trenchant material he cites is that which comes from acute Western observers, whose perspicacity he generously acknowledges. It is to be expected that the real representatives of the Orient would provide material for Said's indictment: why is so much that supports his position found in the work of Western scholars and leaders, from Christian writers of the eleventh century through Napoleon to the present? Franz Fanon one would expect; but the holders of endowed chairs at elite United States universities?

The answer perhaps lies in Said's use of the term "Orientalism" in some grammatical disjuncture with the term "Orientalist". It results from a differentiation I would wish to make explicit here. Much of the argument against Orientalism in fact comes from Orientalists; that term is rather used to denote those who study the discourse of Orientalism and the realities that are artificially subsumed under the term, rather than the exponents of the viewpoint of Orientalism. In the same way, many, including some of the most prominent writers on globalization, attack the implications of Globalism. One may, in both the Orientalist and Globalist case, distinguish three types of authors: (1) those who adopt the viewpoint of Orientalism or Globalism, the Balfours and the Rostows; while Said uses the term Orientalist more broadly, the term "Globalist" might be specifically applied to

this group in the case of Globalism—the legitimators of globalization, the Globalists pure and simple; (2) those who study, describe, document, parse the processes going on in “the Orient” or in “globalization”, who implicitly accept the tenets of the subject but may be critical of its results and may provide accurate and useful information for its understanding; also Orientalists in Said’s usage, perhaps (a bit more awkwardly) the “scholars of globalization” here; and (3) students, writers, and activists on issues raised by Orientalism and Globalism who devote themselves to its critique—the critics of Globalism who however often move in circles overlapping those of the scholars. Said would certainly consider himself also an Orientalist, but in the sense of a critic of Orientalism, an Orientalist in the sense of (3), not (1), but moving in many of the same circles as (2), the scholars of the Orient. And certainly many dealing with globalization consider themselves concerned with the same issues and moving in the same circles as the scholars of globalization.

The dividing lines here are not sharp. Globalists celebrate globalization, and have no doubts as to its existence, but their work may involve scholarly examination of aspects of the underlying reality. Scholars of globalization may expose one or another of its negative realities, but largely do not question its fundamental tenets in their work; and critics of Globalism often contribute to its scholarly analysis. But at the extremes, the roles are clear.

Said speaks of Orientalism as a view of the colonies from the outside, as a Western lens shaped to meet Western needs. If there is a reality to the difference between “the West” and “the Orient”—and there is⁷—is there any parallel with viewpoints on Globalism? It is Westerners that look through the lens of Orientalism from one side, seeing a distorted reality on the other; they are not on both sides of the lens. None of us, in “developed” or “developing” countries, are outside the reality of globalization that lies on the other side of the lens of Globalism, the reality of the internationalization of capital that does in fact infect all economies, all politics, all cultures, all languages, all ways of life, if in quite different forms. But the lens of Globalism is not a generalized one, created without actors, serving no particular purpose. It is a view from above, from those in power, able to dominate and exploit. They are active in “developing” countries as in “developed”, just as Orientalists are as often found in the countries of the East as of the West. The purpose it serves is to distort the reality of those who are dominated and exploited, the oppressed, those below. Theirs is a reality the proponents of Globalism do not share, do not know. As with Said’s Orientalism, this lens is one shaped well before the lens in its present form and use are perfected, well before the talk of some who are globalizers and some who are globalized. It builds on a view of the poor by the rich or their apologists that has

evolved over centuries: on the distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor, the pictures of slum life that Jacob Riis described as depraved, the lumpen proletariat characterizations of Karl Marx, the culture of poverty thesis of Oscar Lewis, the descriptions of the poor and of criminals that Frances Piven and Michel Foucault so accurately describe and that Bertold Brecht so tellingly limns. Were one as erudite as Said, one might go even further back and look at the representations of the poor in Victor Hugo, or in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, or perhaps even in Cicero; I do not believe it can be found in the classical Greeks, for here the poor, as slaves, were simply excluded from consideration. In any event, today, through the lens of Globalism, the representation of the poor is transformed into a discourse about the included and the excluded, the developed and the under-developed, the industrialized and the not yet industrialized, the rich and the poor—and thus, the global and the not-global or the globalizing.

It would seem churlish to press the parallel further, and to say, of the students of poverty, that their aim is to facilitate the control of “the poor”, as the aim of the Orientalists (in sense 1) was to facilitate the control of “the Orient”. But there are parallels. In the Manhattan Institute's attack on homelessness, the approach is to categorize the poor in order to bring them under control by addressing the disturbing characteristics of each separately; not even a bow in the direction of housing market inequities or desperate poverty is visible. The same may be said of some early studies of poverty, and even of some projects, such as the settlement houses (certainly the almshouses)⁸ of the past. Loic Wacquant makes a slashing attack on some current studies of poverty along the same lines, although he fails to discriminate between intent or motive and objective effect. But then the motivations of many Orientalists were also benevolent. To the extent that the poor are portrayed as exotic, studied as strange objects in the early British studies and the Pittsburgh study, the parallel holds. But of course the critical view is also strong; thus Barbara Ehrenreich's recent book (2002) is directly aimed precisely at de-exoticizing the poor.

The projects of Orientalism seem quite clear, from the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt to the British actions in the near East at the beginning of the century. So do the projects of Globalism, from the Bretton Woods agreements to the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Oddly enough, the actions of the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq today seem closer to Said's Orientalism than to Davos' Globalism; Palestine policy even more so. Is the drive to Empire⁹ the successor to Globalism? Indeed, it seems in many ways to run counter to the earlier Globalist policies; its unilateralism, reliance on crude force, protectionism at

home, contradict what Globalists have long advocated. Is the drive to Empire merely a temporary aberration, or does it now represent a new constellation of forces, and if so, one within or supplanting the relations of Globalism?

Since the process is one connected with real historical movements, it is also one of counter-movements, exposure of distortion, and presentation of alternate representations. Said also played a vital role in this counter-movement.

One of Edward Said's signal contributions was to clarify the intellectual substructure on which the colonial relations between the "West" and the "East", the imperial and the colonial powers, have been (and are being) built. The Orientalist world view continues in the period of globalization; it is not replaced by Globalism, but rather supplemented by it. In the ongoing conflict between the forces of exploitation and domination, Edward Said's many-faceted contributions have been a potent weapon on the side of social justice and the struggle for a humane world. The struggle against Globalism, exemplified by movements such as those represented in the World Social Forum, are not a replacement but a continuation of the struggle in which Said played such a prominent role. We miss him already.

Endnotes

¹ Quoted by John W Dean in a review of Joseph Wilson's *The Politics of Truth* (2004:9).

² I have expanded on this definition in Marcuse (1997). Important is the setting of technology as a contributor, not a cause; in contradistinction to such views as those of Simon Head (2003) (which can be summarized as pointing to information technology as the prime cause of growing wage disparity; see also "Depoliticizing globalization: from Neo-Marxism to the network society of Manuel Castells" (Marcuse 2002).

³ See the discussion of Walt Rostow in footnote 4 below.

⁴ Rostow's "stages of development" argument is explicit in suggesting a uni-directional, linear development of all societies in the direction of the "advanced" industrial countries. The same content is implicit if not explicit, in subtitling *Third World Quarterly* with *Journal of Emerging Areas*, and often implicit in the language, if not the content, of development planning discourse and practice. See *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1971). Rostow indeed represents modernization theory, rather than globalization theory (see Roberts and Hite 1999), but for my purposes the lineage is of the world view that the international development of capitalism is in a new phase, that it is inevitable rather than a chosen process, and that it is in its really existing form ultimately beneficial for all. The lineage needs explication; in general, it sees the model of "Western" capitalism spreading around the world (as indeed Marx did too) but (unlike Marx) sees it as inevitable and not the result of conflicting interests but rather teleologically benevolent (if perhaps needing a few tweaks). Thus the lineage might go Orientalism-modernization-development.

⁵ See *The Third Way and its Critics* (Giddens 2000), and in cruder form in *The Runaway World* (Giddens 1999).

⁶ For interesting arguments along these lines, see Machimura (1998) and Wu (2003).

⁷ Just for purposes of clarity, it is useful to distinguish the term "reality" from the term "truth", taking truth to be the perception of reality. Then one may speak of an

objective reality, but not an objective truth; every perception of reality is colored by the perceiver's own situation, experience, knowledge, etc.

⁸ See Piven and Cloward (1971). But certainly Jane Addams would not be lumped into the same bag.

⁹ See *Empire* (Hardt and Negri 2000).

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