

## Edward Said and the Culture behind *Orientalism*

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A decade after the passing of Edward Said, his legacy lives on. As an intellectual committed to secular humanism and at the same time a relentless critic of the Western colonial enterprise that perpetuated the notion that Western culture was the only vehicle for that humanism, Said wrote with passion about the discourse he labeled “Orientalism.” Said’s much debated *Orientalism* was published in 1978<sup>1</sup> on the cusp of a growing “Islamic” opposition to both the Soviets in Afghanistan and the Americans in Iran. His timely text was a polemic necessary for speaking a variety of truths to both the intellectual and political currents of the day. Whether one idealizes his text or recognizes its manifest faults, the force of his polemic sparked a debate that successfully challenged the rigid binary of East/West and inspired a wide range of critical scholarship across disciplines.

In 2007 I published *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*,<sup>2</sup> a critical survey of *Orientalism*, the text, and the extensive debate pro-and-con over both it and its author. As I stated in the “To the Reader” of my book, my intent was “to show why I think Said is at time prone to error, but I categorically reject the politically motivated ad hominem diatribe that ridicules Said because of where he was born, how he chooses to align himself politically, and how many pebbles he once tossed unphotogenetically at a border fence inside Lebanese territory.”<sup>3</sup> Because my survey documented the historical errors and theoretical problems with his use of Foucault’s “discourse” and Gramsci’s “egemonia” in his text,<sup>4</sup> some critics have assumed I am following in the curmudgeon mold of old-school historian Bernard Lewis. But my purpose in writing the book was to move beyond the personal jousting and crescendo of posturing in order to nudge forward serious scholarship on the Middle East and Islam.

The crucial point is not the importance of *Orientalism* as a catalyst to improving scholarship and inspiring young scholars, which is undeniable, but to the issue of what to do with a polemic that has served its purpose well but does not itself hold up well to critical scrutiny in the long run. Those who think Said’s scholarship in *Orientalism* is beyond criticism are welcome to read my analysis of the extensive debate over the text. I have since moved on to write about two genres of travel literature that Said did not examine: the Holy Land narratives<sup>5</sup> and Bible Customs texts of the 19th century.<sup>6</sup> I have also rewritten the entry for “Orientalism” in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*<sup>7</sup> and edited a set of reflections by several of the original reviewers of Said’s text in an online journal of the Middle East Institute.<sup>8</sup>

In 2004 I published a critical assessment of Said’s view of culture as a literary theorist from my perspective as both an anthropologist with fieldwork experience in Yemen and the Arab Gulf and as a historian. This article is currently being revised as a chapter in a book I am preparing called *Writ[h]ing against Culture*, which argues for the value of culture concepts in anthropology and the continuing importance of ethnographic fieldwork as the major contribution

cultural anthropologists make to the study of humanity. In *Orientalism*, Said barely mentions anthropology, apart from a brief nod of praise to Clifford Geertz, who was later attacked for daring to be critical in a review of Said's work. No major ethnographic work on the Middle East or Islam is cited as evidence for his critique of Orientalist discourse, apart from 19th century travelers like Sir Richard Burton. In his 1987 presentation at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association Said compounded his ignorance of what anthropologists do by assuming that they are perhaps destined to remain on the wrong side of the colonial divide, a partner in domination and hegemony.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Franz Boas, who founded the department of Anthropology at Columbia, was one of the most ardent critics of racism in the early 20th century.

In my 2004 article I contrast Said's view of culture, resurrected from Matthew Arnold's "best of the best" sense, to the modern anthropological view of culture proposed by fellow Victorian Edward Tylor of culture as a complex whole of all people and not just a so-called "civilized" few. In Said's *Culture and Imperialism*,<sup>10</sup> a title which resonates with Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*,<sup>11</sup> the paragon of the anthropologist is the fictitious Colonel Creighton of Kipling's *Kim* rather than real life anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski, a vocal critic of British colonial policy.

My article analyzes Said's view of culture as articulated in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*<sup>12</sup> and *Culture and Imperialism*, explaining why few anthropologists have been able to travel with Said's theory and methods. Despite the attraction of the metaphor "culture" as conceptualized by anthropologists, is not a "text" but a heuristic tool for understanding observable human behavior and the justification provided for it. The idea of "cultures" as

distinct, bounded entities has long been abandoned by the majority of anthropologists; even some of the earliest 20th century anthropologists were aware of the problems in trying to define artificial limits of cultural groupings. There is room for intellectual exchange between those of us who practice ethnography and colleagues who analyze texts, but this requires an appreciation for the sophistication of the methods each of us use.<sup>13</sup>

I close this brief essay with a quote from the conclusion of my article on Said's literary view of culture:

In critiquing the discourse of Orientalism, Said makes a powerful case for how discursive norms operate through a specific genealogy of texts. Yet, one of the historical strengths of modern anthropology, stemming back to Tylor, is the argument that, because humans all have the biological and social potential to be rational and to cooperate, the alleged differences based on religious texts and racial theories are arbitrary. Anthropological critiques of racism and ethnocentrism have, at times, transcended the categorization of distinct cultures, precisely because what evolving humans share is something species wide called culture. In theory even the most "exotic"

cultures in Western eyes can be approached as essentially human rather than categorically dismissed as inferior and uncivilized. The overriding anthropological view of culture allows for a brand of humanism, informed by scientific exploration of human evolution, quite distinct from the overt ethnocentrism of specifically Western classification schemes and textual renderings. This is what separates humans from the beasts rather than the best-of-the-best humans from their cultural inferiors.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

1. Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
2. Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2007. *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
3. Varisco 2007, xvi.
4. Varisco 2007, 237–266.
5. Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2011. “When Did the Holy Land Stop Being Holy? Surveying the Middle East as Sacred Geography.” In *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept*, ed. Michael Bonine *et al.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 119–138.
6. Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2013. “Orientalism and Bibliolatry: Framing the Holy Land in 19th Century Protestant Bible Customs Texts.” In *Orientalism Revisited: Land, Art and Voyage*, ed. Richard Netton. London: Routledge, 187–204.
7. Varisco, Daniel Martin. In Press. “Orientalism.” *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed. Independence, KY: Gale/Cengage.
8. Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2009. “Orientalism's Wake: The Ongoing Politics of a Polemic.” *Viewpoints* 12, The Middle East Institute. <http://mei.edu/Portals/0/Publications/Orientalism.pdf>
9. Said, Edward. 1989. “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors.” *Critical Inquiry* 15.2, 225.
10. Said, Edward. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf.
11. Arnold, Matthew. 1882. *Culture and Anarchy*. New York: MacMillan.
12. Said, Edward. 1983. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
13. Varisco, Daniel Martin. 2004. “Reading against Culture in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*.” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 45.2, 93–112.
14. Varisco 2004, 109–110.